

GREAT AMERICANS



Editor's Notes.

Joseph W. Brooks, (above picture) promotion, advertising manager of Portland Inquirer compiled the material in this edition in honor of Negro History Week. Brooks is a product of Storer

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Frederick Douglass as an Orator

Twenty years before the Civil War, at an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, Mass., there was present a young Negro of powerful physique. Just three years previously he had made his way from slavery in Maryland to freedom in New England. He had acquired only the rudiments of an education but had a voice of remarkable compass. An abolitionist, William C. Coffin, who had heard him speak to the Negro people, sought him out in the crowd and asked him to say a few words to the convention. He afterward said that he could hardly stand erect or utter two words without stammering. The next speaker was William Lloyd Garrison, who took him as a theme and delivered an address of tremendous power. That occasion marked the introduction of Frederick Douglass to the people of America.

Douglass was born at Tuckahoe, Talbot county, Md., probably in February, 1817. His father was an unknown white man and his mother, Harriet Bailey, a slave. In his early years he was taken to Baltimore as a servant, but he learned his letters and became eager for an education. When about 13 years of age, he secured a book of speeches, *The Columbian Oration*, and the stirring appeals for liberty in it thrilled him with inspiration. At 16 he was sent to work on a farm where the lash was freely applied to the slaves. One day the stalwart youth resisted the attempt to punish him and never again was he punished. In 1836 he fled with some others to escape but was thrown into jail when the plot was divulged. His friends arranged for his release in Baltimore, where he secured the trade of a calker and was permitted to hire his time. In 1838, he escaped from Baltimore, being then 21 years of age. He was given a name, Frederick Douglass, by a white man, John Johnson, a publisher of a Negro newspaper in New Bedford, where it was thought that he was able to work at his trade. He was helpful in many ways. From a reading of *The Lady of the Lake*, he learned the name Douglas, which he spelled with a double s. The next three years the young man from Maryland worked around the docks of the city and before long he began to forward each week to the editor of Garrison's paper, *The Liberator*. He was still at work in New Bedford in the summer of 1841 when he decided to take a few days to attend the convention in Nantucket. Thenceforth his time was not his own; he belonged to his people and the course of the Civil War

Douglass often conferred with President Lincoln and assisted with enlistments for the 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments, his own sons being among the first recruits. After the war he spoke strongly for civil rights; from 1869 to 1872 he conducted in Washington another weekly, *The New National Era*, and later was United States marshal, Recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia, and Minister to Haiti. At the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 he was in charge of the exhibit from Haiti. In 1884, his first wife having died, he married Helen Pitts, a white woman, thus incurring much criticism. He died February 20, 1895.

Richard Allen & Absalom Jones

In the year 1793 a fearful epidemic of yellow fever swept over the city of Philadelphia. The catastrophe left its mark upon every activity in the growing city. One matter that came up in connection with it is of special significance in the history of the Negro.

Richard Allen was born a slave in Philadelphia in 1760. While still young he was sold to a farmer near Dover, Delaware. Later he was converted under Methodist influence and while still a young man began to preach. His master permitted services to be conducted in his home, was himself converted, and in general showed a helpful spirit. By cutting wood, working in a brickyard, and serving as a wagoner during the Revolution, Allen was at length able to purchase his freedom. He traveled through the eastern part of Pennsylvania, also the neighboring states, and after a while began to receive appointments from Bishop Francis Ashbury of the Methodist Episcopal church. Removing to Philadelphia in 1786, he occasionally preached at St. George's, an outstanding church of the denomination, had conducted prayer-meetings with the Negroes. In 1787, when there was trouble about the seating in St. George's, he and his friends withdrew and organized the Free African Society, which became the nucleus of formal effort by Negroes in both the Methodist and the Episcopal denominations. He was a man of strict integrity and indomitable perseverance.

Absalom Jones, 13 years older than Allen, was born a slave in Sussex, Dela. While still young, he was taken by his master from the field to work in the house, and even in those years had the good sense to save the pennies given him by visitors from time to time. He bought a primer, a spelling-book, and a Testament in the endeavor to use his leisure hours to advantage. When he was 16 years of age, his new master to Philadelphia, where his work was to help in a store and carry out goods. He got permission to attend night school and was so thrifty that he was finally able, with some assistance from the Friends, to purchase the freedom first of his wife and then of him-

self. Thenceforth his progress was rapid, and he figured prominently in the incident that caused Richard Allen and other Negroes to leave St. George's, as it was he whom an usher sought to pull from his knees during prayer.

These were the men who had to reply to the request made of the Negroes of Philadelphia. It was easy for them to say that the request should not have been made; that did not alter the fact that it had come or that upon the answer hung very largely the future of the Negro in the city. They thought prayerfully about the situation, about their own people and the public distress, and finally decided that it was their duty to help their fellow men.

When the sickness became general, several of the physicians died and most of the survivors were exhausted by their labors. Dr. Benjamin Rush, knowing that Allen and Jones could bleed, informed them where to procure medicine duly prepared and at what stages of the disorder to act. In the weeks that followed, when no physician was available, they were constantly on call and helped to save the lives of hundreds of those who were stricken.

Phyllis Wheatley

In the summer of 1773 a young Negro woman, 19 years of age, was in England as a guest of the Countess of Huntingdon. She was neat in appearance and bright in conversation. All who met her were impressed by her intelligence and piety. Many regarded her as a prodigy.

In 1761, when about seven years of age, she had been brought on a slave-ship from Senegal to Bos-

ton. Her bright eyes attracted the attention of Susannah Wheatley, wife of John Wheatley, a tailor, who desired to have a girl who might be trained as her personal attendant. Accordingly she was purchased, taken home, and given the name Phyllis. From the first she received unusual care. Assisted by Mary Wheatley, the daughter of the family, ten years older than herself, she learned to read, and soon was composing verses after the manner of Alexander Pope. In time she showed special ability in the study of Latin. In 1770, when 16 years of age, Phyllis wrote her poem "On the Death of the Reverend George Whitefield," the first of her pieces to be published. She now became "a kind of poet laureate in the domestic circles of Boston." By the spring of 1773, as her health was failing, the physician advised that she have the benefit of the air of the sea. A son of the family was about to go to England on business and it was decided that she should go with him. Mrs. Wheatley, not willing to have her go as a slave, saw to it that she was manumitted before she sailed.

Even the strange history of Phyllis and her ability to write verses could hardly account for the interest she awakened. To her unassuming courtesy she added a wit tempered by gentleness. Presents were showered upon her. Among others was a copy of the 1770 Glasgow folio edition of *Paradise Lost*, given to her by the Lord Mayor of London. This was sold after her death in payment of her husband's debts and is now in the library of Harvard University. At the top of one of the first

pages, in her own handwriting, are the words, "Mr. Brook Watson to Phillis Wheatley, London, July, 1773." Here as elsewhere she spelled her name with an i rather than a y.

Phyllis Wheatley gained from her reading of the greater Latin authors, but the writer who influenced her most was Pope. She used that poet's verse form, and the ease with which she chiseled the heroic couplet when only sixteen or eighteen years of age was amazing. The diction also—"fleecy care," "tuneful nine," "feathered vengeance"—is constantly in the eighteenth-century tradition. What one misses is the personal note. With the exception of the short juvenile piece, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," the only poem suggested by a Negro subject is "To S. M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works," and even in this the only reference to race is in the title. Emphasis is mainly on abstractions; seldom is there a genuine lyric. In all this Phyllis Wheatley was like most other writers of the time. If she had lived fifty years later, when the romantic writers had given a more natural tone to English poetry, she might have been considerably different; but even then, with her sense of the fitness of things, she would doubtless have exercised restraint.

Typical of the quality of the thirty-eight pieces in the book is the poem "On Imagination," in which the best lines are these: Imagination! who can sing thy force? Or who describe the swiftness of thy course: Soaring through air to find the bright abode, Th' empyreal palace of the thundering God, We in thy opinions can surpass the wind, And leave the rolling universe behind: From star to star the mental optics rove, Measure the skies, and range the realms above.

There in one view we grasp the mighty whole, Or with new worlds amaze the unbounded soul.

Crispus Attucks

About the early life of Attucks little is known. It seems that he was born in Framingham, Massachusetts, about 1723 and that he worked on a whaling-ship. At any rate, in his mature manhood he was almost a giant in stature and had the qualities of a leader. As one who spent much time about the docks in lower Boston, he knew well the public temper and the spirit of the British soldiers.

John O'Reilly, in his spirited poem looked not only to the past but to the future. Said he in part:

And honor to Crispus Attucks, who was leader and voice that day; The first to defy, and the first to die, with Maverick, Carr, and Gray.

Call it riot or revolution, or mob or crowd, as you may,

Such deaths have been seed of nations, such lives shall be honored for aye.

They were lawless hinds to the lackeys, but martyrs to Paul Revere;

And Otis and Hancock and Warren read spirit and meaning clear.

Ye teachers, answer: what be done just men stand in the dock;

When the caitiff is robed in ermine and his sworders keep the lock;

When law is a satrap's menace, and order the drill of a horde—

Shall the people kneel to be trampled, and bare their necks to the sword?

Oh, we who have toiled for freedom's law, have we sought for freedom's soul?

Have we learned at last that hu-

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