

African-American History:
Significant People and Events in the
United States & Iowa

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Independent Study Paper

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For centuries, African-Americans struggled to gain the same rights and freedoms as European Americans. For a greater part of the last three centuries, African-Americans suffered many injustices that would scar them both physically and emotionally and would affect the lives of those who followed them. However, their strength and determination in the face of such tremendous adversity is proof of their courage and their willingness to fight for their rights, their beliefs, and their culture. In this paper, I will examine the African-American struggle for equality from the 17th century to the 20th century. The following topics will be covered in this paper: how the first people of African descent arrived to America, the slave experience, the Underground Railroad, the Emancipation Proclamation and Amendments to the Constitution, Black Reconstructionism, segregationist legislation, and the NAACP. I will then focus on the history and the African-American experience in Iowa and specifically, in Waterloo and the Cedar Valley.

The beginning of the history of African-Americans in the United States can be traced to the period of involuntary servitude from 1619 to 1860. The first permanent settlers were the twenty blacks deposited at Jamestown, Virginia in 1619, who had been captured in Africa and sold to the highest bidders. They were not considered slaves, but indentured servants. Many lower-class whites had been similarly captured or kidnapped and sold in Europe (Hornsby, 1991). In 1641, Massachusetts became the first state to make perpetual bondage legal, which then spread to the original thirteen colonies. White indentured servitude soon disappeared from the colonial labor market and African labor was accelerated. By the 1650s, Africans were commonly sold for life and in 1661, The Virginia House of Burgesses formally recognized the institution of African slavery (Lehman, 2003). One practical reason for this was that slaves of African origin could be

more easily detected than whites should they escape. Another common rationalization for the enslavement of Africans was reference to their non-Christian status. It was believed that Africans were primitive and savage and were fit for nothing better than a life of labor, even after they had been Christianized (Lehman, 2003).

In 1621, The Dutch West Indies Company began to provide labor to the American colonies. The influence of the Royal African Company within the English court and parliament contributed to William Penn's decision to permit slavery in Pennsylvania. The Royal African Company also drew the shipping industry into the slave trade, known as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (Rasmussen, 2001). The majority of Africans who were transported to the Americas as slaves came from the modern nations of Senegal, Gambia, Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Republic of the Congo. The number of Africans who reached the Americas was estimated around 10 to 20 million. However, an enormous number died in passage. Around 15 percent of those shipped to America died of disease on the overcrowded boats of the "Middle Passage" and another 30 percent died during the brutal training period in the West Indies before shipment to the American mainland. By 1700, African-Americans of New England numbered only 1,000 among a population of 90,000. In mid-Atlantic colonies, the population comprised a larger percentage as small slaveholdings employed slaves as farm laborers, domestics, and craftsmen. Most slaves, however, lived in the south, divided between the tobacco producing provinces of Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, and the huge rice and indigo plantations in the Carolinas and Georgia. The growth of plantation economy and concentration of African Americans in the southern states led Virginia and other states to form white militias. The terror of slave uprisings led many

slaveholders to institute harsher slave codes (Lehman, 2003). A slave could not own anything, carry a weapon, or testify against a white person. Murder, rape, arson and lesser offenses were punishable by death. Smaller offenses were punished by whipping, maiming, and branding. It was almost impossible for a white person to be convicted for the murder of a slave. Some slave codes were instated in the North, but were generally less severe than those in the south (Hornsby, 1991).

Slavery was a very brutal business, and the average slave lived a terribly grim life. More fortunate slaves lived on family-sized farms or had positions as house servants. Much of one's fortune depended on the kindness of the master. On the larger plantations, slaves were divided between the house and field hands. The house servants were in charge of caring for the grounds, maintenance of the rigs and appliances, house cleaning, and caring for the master's children. They were frequently allowed to practice trades, such as smithery, masonry and tailoring; some even became skilled musicians and doctors. Body slaves worked as valets and personal messengers and sometimes real friendships developed between them and their masters. However, field hands were confronted with hard physical labor without the prospect of change (Lehman, 2003). On large plantations, foremen or slave drivers inflicted physical cruelties upon slaves for insubordination, refusal to work, slave plots or revolts, and running away (Hornsby, 1991). In many places, slaves were given very little free time except on holidays and were forced to work 14 or 15 hours a day. Slaves lived with only the bare necessities of shelter, food, and clothing. Many slaves used English or European names for themselves and their children to satisfy the preferences of their masters. Yet, many African-Americans kept alive their sense of cultural independence and roots by choosing English

equivalents of African names. However, there were a few African slaves who used African names all their lives (Lehman, 2003).

A vast network of groups and individuals developed throughout the country to help African-Americans escape slavery, most notably, The Underground Railroad, which reached its height from 1835 to 1865. Abolitionists and free blacks provided slaves “stations” with food, water, shelter, and financial assistance. The “conductors,” many of whom were runaway slaves themselves, led slaves to freedom in Northern states. Two of the most famous of these “conductors” were Josiah Henson and Harriet Tubman (Lehman, 2003).

Between the years of 1861-1876, there were several changes that took place in the lives of black Americans. On January 1863, during the American Civil War (1861-1865), President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in the southern states at war with the North. The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1865, outlawed slavery in the United States. In 1868, the 14th amendment granted full U.S. citizenship to African-Americans. This was followed by the 15th amendment, ratified in 1870, which extended the right to vote to black males (Rasmussen, 2001). For the first time, large numbers of black men were given the opportunity to direct their own economic and social destinies and many were able to assert political freedom during the Reconstruction era. Southern blacks began to vote, were elected to the United States Congress, held local public office, established schools and built towns and businesses. However, there were still many struggles ahead. African-Americans would have to face intimidation, humiliation, violence, cross burnings, and

even public lynching brought on by the hatred of white supremacists like the Ku Klux Klan (Hornsby, 1991).

The 1880s entered with an enormous amount of segregationist legislation, especially in the South, which separated blacks and whites. These were called Jim Crow laws, after an 1830s minstrel show character, which portrayed negative stereotypes of blacks. Southern states began passing laws segregating blacks and restricting African American rights. In 1883, the Court declared the Civil Rights Law of 1875 unconstitutional. In a series of cases, the Court undermined the 14th Amendment's protection of black citizenship rights and narrowed federal protection of the right to vote guaranteed by the 15th Amendment. In 1896, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was legal (Lehman, 2003). In response to these disappointments, in the summer of 1905, W.E.B. DuBois and twenty-nine militant African-American intellectuals from fourteen different states met secretly at Niagara Falls, Ontario. They produced a manifesto calling for an end to racial discrimination and full civil liberties for African-Americans, which was called the Niagara Movement. In 1909, some European Americans joined the Niagara Movement and formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Under the leadership of DuBois, the NAACP mounted legal challenges to segregation and lobbied for political rights for black Americans. African Americans continued to create independent communities and lives for themselves by establishing schools, churches, social welfare institutions, banks, newspapers and small businesses to serve the needs of their communities (Asanti & Mattson).

(1991)

The largest internal population shift in U.S. history took place during the first half of the 20th century. During the Great Migration, over five million African-Americans moved from the South to northern cities, the West and Midwest in hopes of finding better jobs and greater equality (Rasmussen, 2001). African-Americans came to Iowa as early as the 1800s, hoping to find a better life. Unfortunately, laws known as “Black Codes,” were passed that prevented many African-Americans from settling in Iowa unless they could prove that they were not slaves. Black Codes also prevented African-American Iowans from voting, attending private schools, or testifying in court against whites. In 1867, African-American Iowans lobbied to have the Black Codes repealed. Some of them were, but most people ignored them for decades even with the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1884 by the Iowa Legislature. By 1900, thousands of African-Americans came to southern and central Iowa to work in the coal mines. For many African-Americans, this was the result of racial segregation, poverty, and loss of jobs due to the mechanization of cotton harvesting (Barnes & Bumpers, 2000).

Both World Wars brought African-Americans to Iowa for better employment opportunities. The 1930s found most of Iowa’s African-American population employed in meatpacking plants, coal mines, and service industries. By the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement was underway throughout the United States. Many African-Americans joined the demonstrations in Iowa for equal rights under the law. There were several other organizations set up to address racism, including: NAACP branches, the Congress of Racial Equality in Davenport and Des Moines, the Black Panthers in Des Moines, and the Catholic Interracial Council in Davenport and Waterloo (Silag, 2001). Though their population in Iowa is small, only about two percent of 2.8 million, African-

Americans have continued to push for recognition of their contributions to the social, political, cultural, and economic evolution of Iowa (Barnes & Bumpers, 2000).

African-Americans in the Waterloo and Cedar Valley area have a rich history. In 1845, William Sturgis built a cabin along the Cedar River, called Sturgis Falls, which was renamed Cedar Falls in 1847. Opposite the Cedar River, George Hanna established a site in 1845 that he named Waterloo. The Illinois Central Railroad reached the Cedar Valley area in 1861. Most of the early Black residents came to Waterloo as a result of this railroad, which had recruited and transported African-Americans to break a strike caused by white workers. These early African-American workers lived in boxcars, which were provided by their employers. When the men were later joined by their wives and children, the area near the Illinois Central Railroad shop, Sumner to Mobile Streets, became known as the African-American Historic Triangle. This twenty square block triangle was created because of a local housing covenant that restricted African-Americans and other ethnic groups from renting or purchasing homes in certain areas. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, African-Americans make up 12% of the Waterloo population (Barnes & Bumpers, 2000).

The African-American community's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement brought about growth in political freedom and economic advancement in Waterloo. Several organizations were formed by African-Americans that worked at lifting the standards of the community through literary, cultural, social, political, and economic advancement in Waterloo (Barnes & Bumpers, 2000). Ada Tredwell, a female unionist, fought bias at Rath Meatpacking Company in Waterloo and promoted improved race

relations through the NAACP. Anna Mae Weems joined this union, integrated several departments with previously all-white women, served as steward, was chair of the local human rights committee, and attended anti-discrimination committees. She also became a leading civil-rights figure in Waterloo by picketing, boycotting, and getting local businesses to open their doors to African-Americans. She also served as president of the NAACP (Silag, 2001). The Ad Loy Ho Club (Advancement, Loyalty, and Hope), founded in 1948 was the first Black women's organization to break the "color barrier" in Waterloo by holding its 1949 banquet at the Russell Lamson Hotel. Justus H. Rathbone founded the Knights of Pythias on February 19, 1864. Swingers Golf Club of Waterloo, which conducts a golf clinic for Black youth, as well as making various donations to community events to ensure increased interest in the sport amongst minorities, was started in the late 1960s (Barnes & Bumpers, 2000).

There were also many businesses and churches owned and operated by and for the African-American community in Waterloo. KBBG radio (88.1 FM) began broadcasting in 1978, operating on 10 watts of power. Jimmie and Lou Porter started this organization called the Afro-American Community Broadcasting Inc. It is one of the several Black-owned and operated community based education radio stations in the nation. The station has a motto, "Communicate to Educate" and provides skills and work experience for minorities in telecommunications, which can lead to jobs in the broadcast industry. Also, three African-American weekly newspapers were also published in Waterloo from 1950 to 1975. B.P. Steptoe was publisher/editor of *Waterloo Post* in the early 1950s. Rev. George T. Stinson served as editor of the *Waterloo Star* in the late 1950s. Harry Ceaser ran the *Waterloo Defender* in the 1970s. Antioch Baptist Church, one of the oldest Black

churches in Waterloo, has served the community for over 80 years. Rev. Samuel Bates, Rev. J.M. Reynolds, and Rev. Burton organized a 15 member band into this church in April 1913. In the 1960s, Antioch had approximately 1,400 worshippers and by the early 1980s, the membership had grown to make it the largest Black congregation in the state of Iowa. Antioch Baptist has also been instrumental in establishing the People's Community Health Clinic, which serves the health care needs of low-income people. Although no longer in existence, St. Peter Claver Catholic Church served the Black community for over 25 years (Barnes & Bumpers, 2000).

There have been several African-Americans who have contributed politically to the Waterloo community. James H. Jackson, a graduate of East High School in 1956 and the University of Northern Iowa in 1961 became the first African-American from Waterloo to be elected to the Iowa Legislature. In 1973, Mary Berdell won a seat as Fourth Ward representative on the Waterloo City Council after tying another candidate and winning a drawing, making her the first African-American and first blind person to win a seat on the city council (Silag, 2001). In 1988, Ruth Anderson became the first African-American to be elected to the Black Hawk County Board of Supervisors. She was a professor of social work at the University of Northern Iowa. She is also the author of *From Mother's Aid Child to University Professor: The Autobiography of an American Black Woman*, published in 1985 (Barnes & Bumpers, 2000).

There are several other important African-Americans to mention when talking about the history of Waterloo and the Cedar Valley. In 1952, Lily Furgerson became the first Black teacher to be hired by the Waterloo Community Schools. She taught for 19

years at Grant Elementary and was a member of the teaching staff when it became a Bridgeway school, a desegregation plan in the late 1960s designed to decrease the number of minorities in certain schools on the east side of Waterloo. Today, a child development center is named in honor of Lily Furgerson. Waterloo resident, Randolph Dean, songwriter of gospel and country music, is known for coauthoring an album entitled, *Hold On*. Vivert Norman worked in the foundry of the John Deere Waterloo Tractor Works before becoming a Harlem Globetrotter. Don Perkins, former running back for the Dallas Cowboys (1960-1967), grew up in Waterloo. In 1962, he was honored as an All-NFL player. Dr. Helen Walton became Waterloo's first African-American female administrator in 1979. Dr. Walter Cunningham became Waterloo's first African-American school principal, beginning as a math teacher and concluding as associate superintendent for Waterloo Community Schools (Barnes & Bumpers, 2000). Most of Waterloo's African-American community is still alive, but most of its history is still unwritten. However, through continuous efforts of those working on building Waterloo's African-American Historical and Cultural Museum, this history will live on for generations to come.

As you've seen in this paper, African-Americans have had a very tough and arduous journey to get where they are today. From slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, so many African-American citizens have achieved great things through hardship and adversity. The strength and determination of these individuals has served to strengthen their culture and to serve as an inspiration to future generations. African-Americans can look back on their past and be proud of what has been accomplished and look ahead to a future that will be even brighter.

Annotated Bibliography

Asante, M. K., & M. T. Mattson. (1991). *Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.

The authors of this book provide a comprehensive volume of visual and narrative African-American culture, heritage, and people. The book highlights contributions of the African-American population within regional, national, and international frameworks. This book also focuses on periods in African American history that have shaped the outlooks, lives, and hopes of African-Americans, from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. The book is sectioned into 13 chapters and examines African origins, the trans-atlantic journey, African resistance to enslavement, the slave experience, etc.

Barnes, C.J., & F. Bumpers. (2000) *Iowa's Black Legacy*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.

This book provides a history of African-Americans in Iowa. The book focuses on the heritage and especially on the ten Iowa cities with the largest African-American populations. The book shows that though African-Americans only make up a small minority of Iowa's population, there is a very rich culture throughout the state. The author shows that the African-American population in Iowa has made significant contributions to the state throughout history. Iowa's Black Legacy includes information on various subjects, including: early history, religion, culture, sports, recreation, education, health, law, business, and industry in ten Iowa towns.

Hornsby Jr., A. (1991). *Chronology of African-American History: Significant Events & People from 1619 to the Present*. Detroit, MI: Gale Research, Inc.

This book provides a collection of important facts related to the cultural experiences of African-Americans in the United States. The book provides information on those occurrences which have significantly affected the lives of black Americans, materially as well as emotionally. It is subdivided into eleven significant areas affecting African-Americans in the U.S. It also includes a selected bibliography and Appendix containing excerpts from court decisions, laws, speeches, and proclamations, as well as tables with demographic data.

Koslow, P. (1999). *The New York Public Library African American Desk Reference*. New York: The Stonesong Press, Inc.

This one-volume reference guide provides information on important aspects of black life and culture, beginning with the chronology of African American history. It surveys the story of the Africans in the Americas from slavery through contemporary

political and civil rights movements. It is filled with facts and data about African-American culture at the close of the 20th century from business, law, education to literature, music, and sports.

Lehman, J. (2003). *The African American Almanac*. 9th ed. Farmington Hills, MI:

Thomson Gale.

This almanac gives the reader insight into the history, growth, and achievements of African-Americans. The information appears in 29 subject chapters, which open with an essay focusing on historical developments or contributions of African Americans to the subject area. This is followed by concise biographical profiles. It also provides maps, illustrations, photos, and statistical charts which aid in understanding the topic and people profiled.

Palmer, C.A. (2006). *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture & History*. 2nd ed.

Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale.

This is an encyclopedia that includes biographical sketches of important individuals in the evolution of African-American societies, events, and institutions. It also identifies and addresses broad themes critical to understanding the cultures, achievements, problems, challenges, and triumphs of the people of African heritage in the 21st century. The book also contains biographies that range from the beginning of the 17th century to the end of the 20th century, from jazz great Louis Armstrong to basketball star Michael Jordan.

Rasmussen, K. *The African American Encyclopedia*. (2001). 2nd ed. Tarrytown, NY:

Marshall Cavendish Corp.

This ten volume reference set contains entries and topics on African heritage, U.S. states, African music and dance, the African diaspora, African-American activism concerning Africa, and the influence of African languages on American English. More than 1300 essays were compiled and grouped under 56 subject headings, such as baseball players, dancer, African-American film, etc.

Silag, B. (2001). *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa 1838-2000*. Iowa City:

State Historical Society of Iowa.

This book focuses specifically on the African-American experience in Iowa. The book contains 20 chapters, which focus on particular aspects of these experiences, including: legal and political rights, business and professional leadership, clubs and community organizations, churches and schools, etc. Three themes tie together the historical information: the struggle of black Iowans to claim their rights as citizens, the

pursuit of individual opportunity in Iowa's economy over the years, and the creation of community institutions to help families and individuals through good and bad times.

Smallwood, A.D., & J.M. Elliot. (1998). *The Atlas of African-American*

History & Politics: From the Slave Trade to Modern Times. New York:

McGraw-Hill.

This historical atlas covers the African-American experience in the United States and the rest of the world. It explains in detail the several stages through which African-Americans made their way from the Old World to the New World, from the 17th century to the present day. The book contains a collection of maps and narratives which chronicle African-American history and culture. The work acknowledges the contributions made by people of African descent to the entire world and those who befriended, harbored, or welcomed them into their communities.

Vernell, M. *Leaders of Black Civil Rights*. (2000). San Diego, CA: Lucent Books.

This book is a collective biography that offers information about the lives and personalities of important African-American figures who share a common struggle and cause. The key figures that are referred to in this book include: A. Philip Randolph, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Jesse Jackson. The book also focuses on historic moments of the Civil Rights movement and delves into issues that African-American citizens had to deal with during these turbulent times. Some topics that are covered are The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.