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Teaching Africans' True History

By CAROLE BOSTON WEATHERFORD
Special to the Chronicle

"History," says Dr. John Henrik Clarke, "tells a people where they have been and what they have been, where they are and what they are, and most important, an understanding of history tells a people where they still must go and what they still must be."

A historian, educator and writer, Clarke laments, "So much of the history of Africa has been written by conquerors, missionaries and adventurers. For five hundred years, the history of African people has been mainly interpreted by non-Africans who had their own interest at heart."

Clarke's book, "African People in World History," aims to set the record straight. Clarke guides readers along a narrative journey spanning from antiquity to the present. In this easy-to-read lecture, he comments on some of the significant people and events that shaped African, African-American, and world history. The volume serves as an introduction to the history of Africans on the continent and the diaspora. "African People in World History" inaugurates the Black Classic Press Contemporary Lecture Series, which is devoted to publishing views expressed by leading contemporary thinkers and essayists.

Clarke qualifies as professor emeritus of both African and world history at Hunter College. He has dedicated his life to uncovering the identity and preserving the place of African people in world history.

Born in Alabama and raised in Columbus, Ga., Clarke admits, "I began to suspect at a very early age that someone had distorted the image of my people."

He reflects, "My journey to the classroom was long and hard. There were times when my classroom was the streets of Harlem and I taught from a stepladder."

He arrived in Harlem in 1933. His quest for knowledge and truth led him to the Schomburg Center and to New York University. His path crossed those of teachers, historians and bibliophiles like J.A. Rogers and Willis N. Huggins.

These men not only provided him with inspiration, they recommended the reference books by which he became self-educated. A voracious reader, Clarke offers a supplemental bibliography in "African People in World History." He also encourages the efforts of other African-American writers, endorsing their work as classroom texts.

Clarke says he firmly believes, "History is a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography." Thus, his work charts a course for descendants of Africans to claim their true identity.

The Sky's the Limit African Americans, Astronomy, Aviation and Aeronautics

Egyptian Sun Worshipers
Man has always looked to the heavens and been fascinated with the sky. Ancient cultures measured the length of the seasons using the sun and stars. Astronomer-priests supervised

the building of Egypt's Great Pyramid of Giza to make sure it faced exactly north, where the Egyptians believed heaven lay. The astronomer-priests used the stars of the constellation Big Bear (Ursa Major) to point the four sides of the Great Pyramid exactly north, south, east and west.

With vast knowledge of mathematics and the science, the Egyptians also built shrines to the sun god, Re, whom they worshipped for bringing warmth and light to the land. They thought the sun and moon gods traveled across the sky in a boat over the back of the sky goddess, Nut. During the night, temple priests prayed for the sun's return. Evidence of these beliefs was written in tombs, temples and monuments and on mummy cases.

Benjamin Banneker: Star Gazer

An astronomer, surveyor, mathematician and inventor, Benjamin Banneker was born in 1731 on a Maryland farm. He attended a Quaker school where he enjoyed mathematics so much that he often made up math problems just for the fun of solving them. At age 19, he saw his first pocket watch and was determined to make one himself. His wooden timepiece, the first clock built in the United States, kept perfect time for more than 40 years. By the time of the American Revolution, Banneker had begun to study astronomy. He quickly mastered the science and accurately predicted a solar eclipse for April 14, 1789. He later began publishing an almanac which listed eclipses and holidays, and predicted weather, sunrises, sunsets and high and low tides. His almanacs also included poems, medical information and anti-slavery essays. In 1791, President George Washington appointed Banneker to the civil engineering team to lay out the nation's capital. When Pierre L'Enfant, the head engineer, abruptly quit and took the plans with him, Banneker redrew the plans from memory.

Following Stars to Freedom

The Underground Railroad, a secret escape system, took runaway slaves through fields, swamps, woods and back roads by horse, wagon, train or foot. Runaway slaves fled north to free states and Canada, west to Mexico, and south to Florida and the Caribbean. Along the way, the slaves were helped by people who fed, sheltered and hid them. Human rights leaders Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Levi Coffin, Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Greenleaf Whittier were among those who helped the runaway slaves. America Indian tribes such as the Ottawa, Shinnecock and Seminole also aided in slave escapes.

Most runaway slaves had neither road maps nor compasses. So how did they know which way to run? They looked to the stars. The African-American spiritual "Follow the Drinking Gourd" refers to the Little Dipper, the constellation in the sky that includes the North Star. The



Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), an inventor, mathematician, publisher and astronomer.

North Star was a beacon that guided runaway slaves north to freedom.

Dreams Take Wing

The invention of the airplane ushered in a new age. And it awakened in many an urge to fly. Bessie Coleman was born in Texas in 1893. As a child she displayed mathematical ability and attended Langston Industrial College for one semester until her money ran out. She eventually became a famous manicurist. In the Chicago barber shop where she worked, World War I veterans told her how airplanes had helped win the war. Coleman longed to take flying lessons but could not find an instructor in the United States because she was black. So, she went to France to earn her pilot's license, becoming the first black licensed pilot. Back in the United States, she performed as a stunt pilot in air shows across the country. She died in 1926 when she was thrown from a plane during a rehearsal flight. In 1995, Coleman was honored with a U.S. postage stamp.

During World War II, the Army Air Corps set up an advanced flying program at Tuskegee Institute to prove that blacks could pilot aircraft in combat. The Tuskegee Airmen, as the pilots were known, flew on some of the most dangerous bombing missions during World War II. Their bravery helped lead to integration of the U.S. Armed Forces.

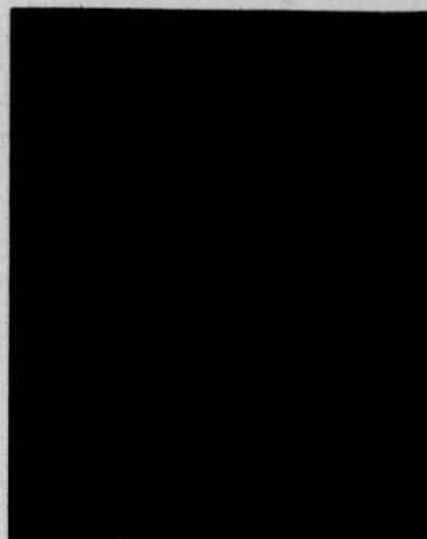
Countdown to History

Like Banneker and Coleman, African-American astronauts reached for the stars. They left their mark on the United States space program. Guion Bluford became the first black astronaut in space when he flew as a mission specialist on the space shuttle Challenger in 1983. Born in Philadelphia, Penn., he was a fighter pilot in the Vietnam War and an Air Force test pilot prior to becoming an astronaut.

Mae D. Jemison, the first African-American woman in space, was selected as an astronaut candidate in 1987, and in 1992 was a crew member aboard the space shuttle Endeavor. A physician, Jemison holds a medical degree from Cornell University Medical School.

Physicist Ronald McNair, the second African American to orbit the earth in a U.S. space mission, died in the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. At North Carolina A&T. State University, from which McNair graduated, the building which houses the College of Engineering bears his name.

McNair encouraged Howard University students in 1983, "Whether or not you reach your goals in life depends entirely on how well you prepare for them and how badly you want them. You're eagles! Stretch your wings and fly to the sky!"



"I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness of man's present nature' makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the 'oughtness' that forever confronts him."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. accepting the Nobel Prize, Dec. 11, 1964

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