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YESTERDAY'S NEWS

JERSEY JOURNEYS

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African American Stories

Sometimes we can learn so much more about a time and place by focusing on the lives of individuals. Often when we study history we learn about broad sweeping events that involved hundreds or thousands of people. Or we focus on laws and government actions that affect a state or a whole country. But individual stories have the ability to teach us in ways that factual statistics cannot.

We can better identify with a single person's story of his or her life. These individual stories give us a greater appreciation for what their lives were like, what they faced, why they did what they did, and how they came to view their world. For example, what was life like for an African American growing up in the 1960s in the suburbs of New Jersey or for a man whose dedication to social equality was informed by being an African American living in America earlier in this century.

This issue of *Jersey Journeys* touches upon the lives of several New Jersey African Americans. Their stories tell us something not only about them but



Family of Moses Wood, West Orange, New Jersey around 1880. *The Collections of the New Jersey Historical Society.*

about the times in which they lived. We focus on Oliver Cromwell and Cyrus Bustill, two men who in different ways took part in this nation's fight for independence; the life of Paul Robeson, an amazingly gifted individual who spoke out against injustice and discrimination as well as moved people with his song; and the story of Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, a teenage African American girl moving

from Newark to the almost exclusively white suburbs of New Jersey in the mid-1960s. ★

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New Jersey's Paul Robeson

Paul Robeson was one of the best-known and respected African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s. He was a man of extraordinary talents — singer, law school graduate, actor, civil rights activist, athlete, author, and scholar. This year marks the 100th anniversary of his birth.

He was born Paul Leroy Bustill Robeson in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1898. His father was a runaway slave who became a pastor and his mother was a school teacher who came from an abolitionist Quaker family and whose great-grandfather was Cyrus Bustill (see page 4). As a youngster, Robeson excelled in both academics and athletics. In 1915, he received an academic scholarship to Rutgers University. He was chosen valedictorian in his senior year, earned varsity letters



Robeson in a scene from the 1940 film *The Proud Valley*. The Collections of the New Jersey Historical Society.

from him. Sensing that this was the attitude he would probably face in the legal profession, he left the practice of law. Robeson went on to use his artistic abilities in theater and music. His performances in *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* were critically acclaimed. His stage

great family of mankind." With his powerful baritone voice, he started singing black spirituals and learned languages and folk songs of other countries. Nathan Irvin Huggins wrote in *Nation* magazine "Robeson's genuine awe of and love for the common people and their music flourished throughout his life and became his emotional and spiritual center.

Robeson sang for peace and justice in 25 languages throughout the U.S., Europe, the Soviet Union, and Africa. He became known as a citizen of the world. During the 1940s, Robeson continued to perform and speak out against racism. While he disagreed with some principles of communism, he admired and praised the Soviet Union's apparent lack of racial prejudice. This outspoken stance during the Cold War made Robeson's popularity fall. His U.S. passport was revoked in 1950, which began an eight-year battle to resecure it and travel again. He was blacklisted both by the U.S. government and the entertainment industry, and was unable to perform until 1957. During those years, Robeson studied Chinese, met with Albert Einstein to discuss the prospects for world peace, and published his autobiography. In spite of his ill treatment, he continued to fight for dignity and equality for all humans. He died on January 23, 1976, at the age 77.

Can you think of any of today's musicians, actors, and artists who like Paul Robeson lend their voice or talents to social causes? ★

The artist must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery.
I have made my choice. I had no alternative.
— Paul Robeson

in four sports, and was named Rutgers' first All-American in football.

Robeson then went to Columbia University to earn a law degree and supported himself by playing professional football on the weekends. At Columbia, he met and married Eslanda Cordoza Goode, who was to become the first African American woman to head a pathology laboratory.

He took a job with a New York law firm but left after a white secretary refused to take dictation

presence was undeniable and with his work in *Show Boat* and *Othello*, his fame grew internationally. Robeson, realizing that he would be limited in the types of roles available to him as a black actor, turned to singing full time. Robeson wrote in his autobiography, *Here I Stand*, that in England he "learned that the essential character of a nation is determined not by the upper classes, but by the common people, and that the common people of all nations are truly brothers in the

Respectable People: Growing Up Black in the New Jersey Suburbs

The following excerpt is from the *New Jersey Historical Society's* exhibition catalogue *Teenage New Jersey, 1941-1975*, edited by *Kathyn Grover* and published by the *New Jersey Historical Society* in 1997. This essay was written by *Gretchen Sullivan Sorin*.

In 1965, when I was 13, my parents moved from Newark to Colonia, primarily because of the schools. To my parents, education was everything—the route to success and acceptance. My experience did not match either of the stereotypes of the African American experience: my family was neither mired in poverty nor completely subsumed by white suburban culture.

When I was young, my parents bought a three-story Victorian house on Beverly Street on Newark's Clinton Hill. Our block on Clinton Hill included black and Italian families, a family of Russian immigrants who spoke very little English, and a Polish family. In those days in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I thought everyone lived in neighborhoods like mine.

My parents decided to leave the big house in Newark after my father had had a heart attack that made a house with two flights of stairs a peril for him. The suburbs offered single-story, modern ranch houses.

My parents bought a house that was located on the town line between Colonia and Edison in an area that seemed more rural than suburban.

My family shared its middle-class American values with other residents of Colonia. Students in the junior and senior high schools

defined themselves by clothing and hairstyles, and appearances reflected attitudes, values and allegiances. None of the black students at Colonia Senior High (50 out of 1700) chose to distinguish their dress by wearing natural, "unprocessed" hair, such as African-style clothing as headwraps or dashikis, or anything combining red, green, and black—the clothing of the black power/black nationalist movement.

The personal pride I felt in knowing my past and my people and seeing their social justice concerns advanced in the national media was compromised by the feeling that my choices in clothing and hairstyle as well as my "proper" speech meant that I was not black enough within some black communities. Although my politics were quite different from those of many of the white students, my clothing looked no different. All the black students in my suburban area looked like average middle-class teenagers.

Perhaps to help me feel connected to a broader African American community, my mother took me back into Newark every six weeks. My parents' friends in Newark would invite me to a party where I could meet and dance with boys. At these all-black parties I learned the latest dances. Later, I'd share these dances with my white friends in Colonia. For me, these trips provided an opportunity to feel at ease in an environment of complete acceptance.

In high school, I compensated for my discomfort and my difference by being as outgoing and involved in school as I could.



Gretchen and Gary Sullivan before church, Easter Sunday, around 1960. Courtesy Gretchen Sullivan Sorin.

I ran on the track team, sang in the school choir, and had small roles in the annual musical performances. I was a young volunteer for the local Democratic Party. I ran for student office and in my senior year was elected student council president. My parents were incredibly proud their African American daughter could become president in an almost all-white community. I was pleased to see that there were some areas where color didn't seem to matter. Although there were some incidents in which race was the issue, teachers were incredibly fair and color blind, and I have fond memories of good friends.

Looking back, I understand that my parents gave me a great gift. Growing up in Newark and the New Jersey suburbs, I had the opportunity to meet and learn from people of different cultural backgrounds, and I learned the tools to use to adapt to and cope with difference. My life today is richer for that experience. ★

TWO STORIES FROM REVOLUTIONARY WAR TIMES

In 1752, an African American named Oliver Cromwell was born near Burlington City, New Jersey. He was raised to be a farmer but when the Revolutionary War broke out, he went to fight. He served in a number of companies of the Second New Jersey Regiment between 1777 and 1783. He saw action at the battles of Trenton and Princeton in 1776 and 1777, respectively, Brandywine in 1777, Monmouth in 1778, and Yorktown in 1781. When he left the army at the end of the war, George Washington personally signed Cromwell's discharge papers, and also designed a medal that was presented to Cromwell.

After the war, Cromwell went back to live in Burlington. He was unable to read or write, but local lawyers, judges, and politicians came to help him when he applied for a veteran's pension. He was given a pension of \$96 a year. He bought a 100-acre farm outside Burlington and started a family. He had 14 children and lived to be 100 years old (outliving eight of his children). His grave is in the cemetery of the Broad

Street Methodist Church in Burlington. His descendants live in the city to this day.

Another Burlington African American who helped during the Revolutionary War was Cyrus Bustill. Bustill was born in 1732, the son of an English attorney and an African slave. He was taught to be a baker by a local baker and member of the Friends Meeting named Thomas Prior. Bustill gained his freedom in 1768 at the age of 36.

During the Revolutionary War, he was commended for supplying American troops with baked goods at the Burlington docks, and was reportedly given a silver piece by General George Washington. Bustill and his wife, the daughter of an Englishman and a Delaware Indian, later moved to Philadelphia and raised their eight children. He was a member of Philadelphia's Free African Society, started in 1787. After retiring from baking, he started a school in Philadelphia. He died in 1806. Cyrus Bustill was the great-great-grandfather of Paul Robeson, who is discussed on page 2. ★

THE OLIVER CROMWELL BLACK HISTORY SOCIETY

The Oliver Cromwell Black History Society was formed in 1983 for the preservation and research of Black Heritage in the City of Burlington and throughout the United States. The Society meets each month at the Afro-Male Institute on high Street, and holds an annual Black Heritage Historical Art and Essay Contest for students in Burlington City and Burlington Township. The Society's efforts were also instrumental in the designation of the William Allen School as a historic site on both the National and State Historic Registers. The Society and the Institute work together to encourage young men to represent African American soldiers in Revolutionary War re-creations at the Old Barracks Museum in Trenton. ★

DID YOU KNOW . . .

that the Society has a 1943 Playbill for the play *Othello* at the Sam Shubert Theater in New York? Paul Robeson starred in the title role.

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT THE SOCIETY

Come visit the New Jersey Historical Society at its new location at 52 Park Place in downtown Newark. See our three new exhibitions, *Teenage New Jersey, 1941-1975*; *History's Mysteries*; and *By Industry We Thrive* and participate in free Saturday Family Programs and School Vacation Programs. These programs are designed for children ages 5 and up accompanied by an adult.

Sat., Feb. 7, 1998, 12:30-3:30 p.m.
Identity Collages—Who are Anna Hilton Monroe and the Wood Family? Their identities and others are revealed in the exhibitions *History's Mysteries* and *Teenage New Jersey, 1941-1975*. Design your own identity collage to let everyone know more about you.

Sat., Feb. 14, 1998, 12:00-4:00 p.m.
Performances 1:00 and 2:30 p.m.

Black History Month Festival—Bring someone you care about this Valentine's Day and enjoy stories and songs by the Newark-based teenage performance group SOUL. Participate in art activities relating to the history and contributions of African Americans to our great state. Seating for performances is limited and on a first come, first serve basis.

Sat., Feb. 21, 1998—Available all day at the front desk

Discover NJHS—Self-guide booklet for families.

Sat., Feb 28, 1998—Available all day at the front desk

Family Game Box Testing—Help the Society develop and try out activities and games to play in the galleries.

Schedule subject to change; for updated information, call (973) 596-8500, and press "3."

NJHS Hours:

Office hours:
Mon.-Fri., 9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
Public hours:
Tues.-Sat., 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
Closed Sun. and Mon.

Admission to the Society is free.

For more information on Education Programs for grades Pre-K-12, after school and scout groups, family and adult programs, and Teachers Services at the Society, please call the Education Department at (973) 596-8500.

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

New Jersey: The African American Experience. New Jersey Historical Society, reprinted 1991. Primary source materials including diary entries and newspaper accounts about slavery, abolition, suffrage, civil rights, and cultural achievements of African Americans in the state. Questions and activities suitable for grades 5 and up.

To order a subscription to *Jersey Journeys* call 973-596-8500 and press "0."

Costs: Large classroom subscription (35 copies per issue, one Teacher's Guide) \$65. Small classroom subscription (25 copies per issue, one Teacher's Guide) \$50. Annual resource packet (2 copies per issue, mailed at year-end) \$25. Individual subscription (1 copy per issue) \$10.

AFRICAN AMERICAN STORY WORDS

- Ab•o•li•tion•ist** one who wants to end slavery
- Da•shi•ki** a usually brightly colored loose-fitting pullover garment
- Qua•ker** a member of a Christian sect; also known as Friend
- Val•e•dic•to•ri•an** the student usually having the highest rank in a graduating class



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