BACKGROUND BOOKS

BLACKS IN AMERICA

"I can't think there is any intrinsick value in one colour more than another, nor that white is better than black, only we think it so because we are so, and are prone to judge favourably in our own case."

Captain Thomas Phillips, the master of a slave vessel, made that assessment in 1694, and his opinion was not unusual for the time, according to historian Winthrop D. Jordan.

In **White Over Black** (Univ. of N.C., 1968, cloth; Penguin, 1969, paper), Jordan surveys the evolution over three centuries of Anglo-American attitudes toward blacks. He observes that the black man's complexion was considered a "marvel"—until slavery was introduced into North America, and theories of inherent black inferiority developed to justify it.

The first Negroes arrived in Jamestown in 1619, and they probably came as indentured servants, not slaves. Indeed, the slave system took several decades to develop according to John Hope Franklin in **From Slavery to Freedom** (Knopf, rev. ed., 1980, cloth & paper), a comprehensive survey of blacks in America through the 1970s. There were only 300 blacks in Virginia in 1650, and the colony did not countenance slavery in law until 1661.

But by the end of the 17th century, the London-based Royal African Company was bringing 1,000 slaves into Virginia every year. Victory in America's War of Independence did not end the slave trade. By 1790, roughly one of every five persons in the new republic was black. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick cover much of the same ground as Franklin in **From Plantation to Ghetto** (Hill & Wang, 1976, cloth & paper).

Congress outlawed the importation of African slaves in 1807, but the domestic slave trade continued to thrive. Slavery made good economic sense in the South, where slave agriculture was "35 percent more efficient" than free agriculture in the North. So write Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, arguing in their controversial **Time On the Cross** (Little, Brown, 1974, cloth & paper) that the slave was harder-working than the white farm hand.

According to Vincent Harding in **There Is A River** (Harcourt, 1981), the slaves never relinquished the hope that they would one day live as free men. The "river" of the title refers to the continuity of black struggle flowing from the shores of West Africa to the battlefields of the Civil War. Harding focuses on slave rebellions and the work of great abolitionists, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman.

Frederick Douglass (1817–95), the mulatto ex-slave and orator from the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, also figures prominently in this tradition. His **Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave** (Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Office, 1845; Penguin, 1982, paper only), describes the misery he suffered as a slave and condemns the "slaveholding religion," the "women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land."

Though slavery was everywhere dehumanizing, the formal legal regime varied widely from state to state. A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr.'s historical survey, **In the Matter of Color** (Oxford, 1978), provides examples aplenty. Whereas Georgia and

South Carolina permitted masters to execute disobedient slaves, Pennsylvania did not. Nor did Pennsylvania adopt a bounty system, which in Georgia reimbursed head-hunters for the return of a fugitive slave's "scalp with two ears."

Other significant works on slavery include Albert J. Raboteau's **Slave Religion** (Oxford, 1978, cloth; 1980, paper); Eugene Genovese's **Roll, Jordan, Roll** (Random, 1974, cloth; Vintage, 1976, paper), a social portrait based on excerpts from Negroes' diaries, letters, travelers' journals, planters' records, and other sources; and Lawrence Levine's **Black Culture and Black Consciousness** (Oxford, 1977, cloth; 1978, paper), which brings to life the "sacred world" of slaves, their folk tales and songs.

Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves on January 1, 1863—those slaves, at any rate, in states that had taken up arms against the Union. As James M. McPherson points out in **The Negro's Civil War** (Pantheon, 1965, cloth; Univ. of Ill., 1982, paper), the Union abolished slavery in the rebellious states mostly to create chaos in the South, where slave labor supported the economy in general and the war effort in particular. "My paramount objective in this struggle," Lincoln wrote to New York *Tribune* publisher Horace Greeley in 1862, "is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery."

Congress passed four Reconstruction Acts in 1867–68 that reconstituted the 11 Confederate states as federal territories. To gain readmission to the Union, the territories had to adopt constitutions giving black adult males the right to vote. Territories also had to ratify the U.S. Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibited states from denying to any persons "life, liberty, or property without due process of law."

But the progress of blacks during this period was short-lived, as Kenneth Stampp reminds us in **The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–77** (Knopf, 1965, cloth; Random, 1967, paper). Lincoln's successor was Andrew Johnson, a Union Democrat from Tennessee who believed that "white men should determine the way of life that was to be led in the Southern states."

Still, black political representation did soar between 1865 and 1877. During that period, 22 Southern blacks, many of them former slaves, were elected to Congress. On the state level, the statistics are even more surprising. In **Black Over White** (Univ. of Ill., 1977, cloth; 1979, paper), Thomas Holt points out that "of the 487 men elected to the various state and federal offices in South Carolina between 1867 and 1876, more than half were black." But many of these black politicians were scions of the old free black elite, who "oftener than not failed to act in the interests of black peasants."

Other significant works on the Reconstruction Era include Leon F. Litwak's **Been in the Storm So Long** (Knopf, 1979, cloth; Vintage, 1980, paper) and Howard N. Rabinowitz's **Race Relations in the Urban South** (Oxford, 1978, cloth; Univ. of Ill., 1980, paper).

In retrospect, the Reconstruction Era was a tragic saga of missed, squandered, or compromised opportunities. But in the field of education, blacks continued to make substantial progress, thanks, in part, to the efforts of Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), the former slave and founder-director of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama. Louis R. Harlan tells Washington's story in two volumes, **The Making of a Black Leader,**

1856–1901 (Oxford, 1972, cloth; 1975, paper) and **The Wizard of Tuskegee** (Oxford, 1983).

Washington urged blacks to seek advancement through vocational education and small business enterprises and not to antagonize white authorities. "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation on questions of social equality is the extremest folly," he told Southern whites in his famous "Atlanta Speech" in 1895.

But many blacks criticized Washington's leadership. Among them was W. E. B. Du Bois, a privileged, free-born black, who sported a top hat, white gloves, and cane as a graduate student at Harvard. (He was the first black ever to earn a Harvard Ph.D.) Du Bois, who eventually embraced Marxism, opposed Washington's "Gospel of Work and Money" because it overshadowed the "higher aims of life."

Du Bois urged "a Talented Tenth" of blacks to attain a broad education and help guide the race to "a higher civilization," even as he condemned segregation in Dixie. The South needed "discriminating and broad-minded criticism," he wrote in **The Souls of Black Folk** (McClurg, 1903; Kraus, 1973), "for the sake of her own white sons and daughters, and for the insurance of robust, healthy mental and moral development."

As black partisans of competing strategies quarreled among themselves, white Americans in the South finished spinning a web of legal restrictions that disenfranchised blacks and mandated racial segregation in everything from schools to factories, hospitals, restaurants, and funeral homes.

These "Jim Crow" laws—probably named after a song-and-dance routine of the 1830s—"lent sanction to racial ostracism" and reminded blacks of their inferior position, according to C. Vann Woodward's **The Strange Career of Jim Crow** (Oxford, rev. ed., 1974, paper only).

Ironically, while "Jim Crow" is usually associated with the South, Woodward observes that segregation laws first appeared in the North, where slavery had been effectively abolished by 1830. As slaves there became freedmen, whites sought legal means to keep the races apart.

Black enclaves, such as "Nigger Hill" in Boston and "Little Africa" in Cincinnati, had long existed in Northern cities. Few of these communities achieved either growth or prominence prior to the black migration from the South during World War I. But by 1920, there were 152,000 blacks in New York City, according to Gilbert Osofsky in **Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto** (Harper, 1966, cloth; 1971, paper).

As the new immigrants replaced upwardly mobile Italians and Jews, Harlem became "a Negro world, unto itself." Ninety percent of Harlem blacks, Osofsky says, were "menials and laborers."

In **A Ghetto Takes Shape** (Univ. of Ill., 1976, cloth & paper), Kenneth Kusmer paints a less gloomy picture of Cleveland between 1870 and 1930, when many blacks made real economic progress. World War I "broke down the color barrier in Cleveland's heavy industries," Kusmer says, where they received double or triple the money they had earned in the South. While most blacks did not get rich, Kusmer emphasizes that the black ghetto was not an "undifferentiated mass of slum-dwellers."

Whatever their economic condition, Northern black communities, especially in New York City, experienced a cultural revival during the

1920s. A new crop of black artists (e.g., poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, musicians Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong, sculptor Richard Barthé) gave rise to the "New Negro Movement." Nathan Huggins tells their story in **Harlem Renaissance** (Oxford, 1971, cloth; 1973, paper). David Lewis's **When Harlem Was in Vogue** (Knopf, 1981) covers the same material in greater depth.

American blacks made some economic and social progress during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. But it was the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* that "severed the remaining cords of a de facto slavery." So writes Richard Kluger in **Simple Justice** (Random, 1976, cloth; Vintage, 1977, paper), a comprehensive history of the social, political, and legal turmoil that culminated in the *Brown* decision on May 17, 1954.

Ironically, Kluger writes, the decision came unexpectedly, catching official Washington unawares. At the Supreme Court, most reporters were downstairs in the press room, when at 12:52 P.M., Chief Justice Earl Warren began reading the Court's opinion in *Brown* in a "firm, clear, unemotional voice."

Warren's opinion took only minutes to read, but the decision would take years to enforce, as civil-rights groups and their foes clashed in the North and South during the late 1950s and 1960s. This period inspired a sizable crop of books on civil rights and the condition of blacks in America.

Some of the better works include Clayborne Carson's **In Struggle** (Harvard, 1981, cloth & paper), which chronicles the rise and fall of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; August Meier's and Elliot Rudwick's **CORE** (Oxford, 1973, cloth; Univ. of Ill., 1975, paper), which does the same for the Congress of Racial Equality; David Lewis's **King** (Praeger, 1970, cloth; Univ. of Ill., 1978, paper), a biography of the slain civil-rights leader; and Alan J. Matusow's comprehensive **The Unraveling of America** (Harper, 1984).

Amid the scholarly analyses, the memoirs and fiction of black writers have conveyed the experience of being black in America in vivid and convincing detail. These include Richard Wright's **Native Son** (1940), James Baldwin's **The Fire Next Time** (1963), and **The Autobiography of Malcolm X** (1964).

Ralph Ellison's **Invisible Man** (1952), the story of a young black man's search for his own identity in white America, arguably deserves the top spot on any list. Perhaps no one has evoked in more powerful terms the historic predicament of the Afro-American, who "took on the complex symbolism of social health and social sickness [and] became . . . symbolic of America's hope for future perfection."

—*Neil Spitzer*

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Neil Spitzer is senior researcher of* The Wilson Quarterly. *Several of these titles were suggested by James M. McPherson, professor of history at Princeton. Other books worthy of note are cited elsewhere in this issue in the essays by William Julius Wilson and Terry Eastland. Readers may also wish to consult* WQ*'s Background Books essay on Reconstruction (Spring 1978).*