



INDEPENDENCE DAY

(Honoring those who helped gain our independence)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, July 6, 2008

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I. Historical Background and Documents

The biblical text for this cultural moment (Exodus 13:17-22), reveals two cultural commonalities of Jews, African Americans, and Americans in their respective quests for independence from oppression. First, there is the canonizing of the date when independence was gained:

Verse 17 begins: “And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go. . . .” These liberated Israelites initiated the annual observance of Passover, the Jewish holiday celebrated in March or April in commemoration of the Hebrews’ liberation from slavery in Egypt.

Juneteenth began when African American slaves in the state of Texas initiated their annual observance of June 19, 1865, the date that United States Union General Gordon Granger and a troop of Union soldiers landed in Galveston, Texas, and read a statement

officially emancipating all slaves in the state. Juneteeth celebrations are still observed by the descendents of these emancipated slaves.

Americans continue to observe the signing of the Declaration of Independence from the British on July 4, 1776; and

Verse 19: “And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him: for he had straitly sworn to the children of Israel saying, God will surely visit you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you.” Just as the Jews continue to honor Joseph, the patriarch of the Israelites, so, too, do African Americans continue to pay reverence to our patriarch Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave who joined the abolitionist movement, and Americans continue to revere such signers of the Declaration of Independence as Massachusetts’ John Hancock, Samuel and John Adams, Pennsylvania’s Benjamin Franklin, and Virginia’s Thomas Jefferson as American patriarchs. The manifesto of independence from England that these American men announced to the world begins with words that many American citizens and school children have committed to memory:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

And concludes:

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of free people. . . .

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these united Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States, that they are Absolved from all

Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved. . . .¹

II. Statements on Independence by Black Americans

On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave and African American abolitionist, spoke for African American slaves and freemen when he gave this scathing denouncement of the Declaration of Independence and the July 4th celebrations that it had spawned, when he delivered an Independence Day Speech at Rochester, New York. His conclusion, much like the opening section of the Declaration of Independence, has been memorized by countless African American school students and recited in oratorical contests and Negro History Week observances. Douglass' condemnation begins with a rhetorical question:

What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy--a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States at this very hour.²

III. Poetry and Prose

A. On July 4, 1895, Katharine Lee Bates (1859-1929) published her patriotic poem, "America the Beautiful,"³ in The Congregationalist, a weekly religious journal. Samuel Ward wrote the music. Ironically, African American school choruses regularly performed this song during the era of Segregation. Ray Charles, the Genius of Soul, made reference to singing this song as a Florida schoolboy:

America the Beautiful

Oh beautiful, for heroes proved,
in liberating strife,
who more than self, our country loved,
and mercy more than life,

America, America, may God thy gold refine,
till all success be nobleness
and every gain devined.

"And you know when I was in school,

we used to sing it something like this, listen here:

Oh beautiful, for spacious skies,
for amber waves of grain,
for purple mountains majesties,
above the fruited plain,

But now wait a minute, I'm talking about
America, sweet America,
you know, God done shed his grace on thee,
He crowned thy good, yes, he did,
in Brotherhood,
from sea to shining sea."⁴

B. In 1995, one hundred years after Katherine Lee Bates' poem was published, Miriam Theresa Winter published a version of "America the Beautiful" entitled, "How Beautiful Our Spacious Skies," in the United Church of Christ's The New Century Hymnal, p. 594. Winter's version adds universal sisterhood to the brotherhood extolled by Ray Charles:

Indigenous and immigrant, our daughters and our sons
O may we never rest content till all are truly one
America! America! God grant that we may be
A sisterhood and brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

C. Finally, in one of those memorable moments of the American experience, David Walker, the author and publisher of David Walker's Appeal,⁵ expresses an attachment to America, much like those expressed in the poem, "America the Beautiful." Writing in opposition to the "Colonizing Plan"⁶ espoused by Cassius Marcellus Clay (1810-1903), the Kentucky politician and abolitionist for whom Muhammad Ali, the former World Heavyweight Boxing Champion was named.

"Now we have to determine whose advice we will take respecting this all important matter, whether to adhere to Mr. Clay and his slave-holding party, who have always been our oppressors and murderers, and who are for colonizing us, more through apprehension than humanity, or to this godly man [Bishop Richard Allen] who has done so much for our benefit, together with the advice of all the good and wise among us the whites. Will any of us leave our homes and go to Africa? I hope not. Let them commence their attack upon us as they did on our brethren in Ohio."⁷

IV. Traditional Songs

One Negro Spiritual (Go Down, Moses) and an anthem (Lift Every Voice and Sing) commonly acknowledged as the "Negro National Anthem" forcefully express African

American's appreciation for independence from the lingering cultural and legal legacies of American slavery.

Go Down, Moses (Let My People Go)

Exodus 8:1

“And the LORD spake unto Moses, go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Let my people go, that they may serve me.”

When Israel was in Egypt's Land,
Let my people go,
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.

Chorus
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's Land.
Tell ol' Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go,
If not, I'll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go.

Chorus
No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go,
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go.

Chorus
O let us all from bondage flee,
Let my people go,
And let us all in Christ be free,
Let my people go.

Chorus
We need not always weep and mourn,
Let my people go,
And wear these slavery chains forlorn,
Let my people go.

Chorus⁸

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Lift every voice and sing

Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the
Slaughtered,

Out of the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee;
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;

Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand.
True to our God,
True to our native land.⁹

V. Possible Program Illustrations

Picture of Frederick Douglass
Flag of the Thirteen Colonies
A broken slave chain

Notes

1. Declaration of Independence. Created by: Independence Hall Association, Philadelphia, PA: Online location: <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.htm> accessed 18 March 2008
2. National Juneteenth Observance Foundation (NJOF) and National Juneteenth Christian Leadership Council (NJCLC) Online location: <http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:4gWIofZSwh4J:www.juneteenth.us/douglass/index> accessed 18 March 2008. Rev. Ronald V. Myers, Sr., M.D. Founder & Chairman Online location: <http://www.19thofjune.com/founder/index.html> accessed 18 March 2008
3. Lyrics for America the Beautiful located Online location: National Institutes of Health, Department of Health & Human Services. <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/lyrics/america.htm> accessed 18 March 2008
4. Ray Charles' version of "America the Beautiful" at Brownielocks Online location: <http://www.brownielocks.com/americatebeautifulWAVE.html> accessed 18 March 2008
5. Walker, David. David Walker's Appeal. Boston, MA: 1829. Online at: Documenting the American South. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Online location: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/walker.html> accessed 18 March 2008.
6. Crumrin, Timothy. "Back to Africa?" The Colonization Movement in Early America. Online location: <http://www.ConnerPrairie.org/HistoryOnline/colon.html> accessed 18 March 2008
7. Grant, Joanne. Black Protest: History, Documents, and Analysis 1619 to the Present. 1968. A Fawcett premier book, Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1974. p. 89.
8. United Church of Christ. The New Century Hymnal. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995. p. 594.
9. Ward, Jerry Washington. Trouble the Water: 250 years of African-American Poetry. New York, NY: Mentor, 1997. pp. 75-76.