# 'HERE I STAND'

**To understand the Paul Robeson of 1958, it is necessary to look at Paul's father and the Underground Railroad of 1860.**

**The senior Robeson became a scholarly Presbyterian minister in the Jim-Crow town of Princeton, N.J. Circumstances reduced him to an ash man and a coachman after he became a Zion pastor.**

**Motherless at 9, Paul was raised by his father, his brothers and sisters.**

**The telling of the struggle and the victory over New Jersey poverty and prejudice constitute brilliant pages in this Robeson series.**

**Part Two**

*(Of a series of five articles taken from "Here I Stand," by Paul Robeson, published by Othello Associates, Inc., N.Y. Copyright 1958 by Paul Robeson. All rights reserved.)*

"MY FATHER"—Rev. William D. Robeson, pastor, ashman, coachman, Paul said, had one of the greatest speaking voices I ever heard.

BROTHER BEN—Rev. Benjamin C. Robeson, pastor Mother AMEZ Church, N.Y., six years older than Paul.

1925—First New York concert. He wears a gold football, won at Rutgers, and Phi Beta Kappa key.

The glory of my boyhood years was my father.

I loved him like no one in all the world. His people, among whom he moved as a patriarch for many years before I was born, loved him, too. And the white folks—even the most lordly of aristocratic Princeton — had to respect him.

Born a plantation slave in Martin County, N.C., my father escaped at the age of fifteen, in 1860, and made his way North on the Underground Railroad.

In 1876, after working his way through Lincoln University, he married my mother, Maria Louisa Bustill, a school teacher in nearby Philadelphia.

Following a brief pastorate in Wilkesbarre, Pa., he was called to be pastor of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in Princeton, N.J., where I was born on April 9, 1898.

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**I WAS** the youngest of Rev. Robeson's children, and there were four others living at the time of my birth: William D., Jr., age 17; Reeve, 12; Benjamin, 6; and Marion, my only sister, who was 4.

In later years my father was pastor of AME Zion churches in the nearby towns of Westfield and Somerville, until his death in 1918, at the age of seventy-three.

An editorial in the Somerville newspaper made this comment at the time:

**"The death of Rev. W. D. Robeson takes from this community one who has done a quiet but successful work among his own people for the past eight years.**

**Mr. Robeson was a man of strong character . . . he was very familiar with the characteristics of his race and was always interested in their welfare.**

**He quickly resented any attempt to belittle them or to interfere with their rights.**

**He had the temperament which has produced so many orators in the South and he held his people together in the church here with a fine discernment of their needs. He has left his impress on the colored race throughout the State and he will be greatly missed here."**

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**GO TODAY** to the towns in that part of New Jersey and you will find his memory still warm in the communities he served.

As you drive down on the highway past New Brunswick you may see the William D. Robeson Houses, a government project named for him.

In Princeton, the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church still stands, with one of the stained-glass windows glowing "In Loving Remembrance of Sabra Robeson" who was my father's slave mother on the Carolina plantation.

Many of the older church members and other long-time residents you might meet on the shady lanes of the colored community nearby — Green Street, Hulfish Street, Quarry, Jackson, Birch, John — will tell you with quiet pride of my father's devoted labors, his wisdom, his dignity.

And they will tell you, too, about my mother, Maria Louisa: how she moved, so strong and tender, in their midst — comforting the sick, mothering the orphaned, collecting food and clothing for the hungry and ragged, opening to many the wonders of book learning.

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**I CANNOT** say that I remember her, though my memory of other things goes back before her tragic death.

I was six years old when she, a near-blind invalid at the time, was fatally burned in a household accident.

I remember her lying in the coffin, and the funeral, and the relatives who came, but it must be that the pain and shock of her death blotted out all other personal recollections.

Others have told me of her remarkable intellect, her strength of character and spirit which contributed so much to my father's development and work.

She was a companion to him in his studies; she helped compose his sermons; she was his right hand in all his community work.

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**MARIA LOUISA ROBESON,** born on November 8, 1853, in Philadelphia, was a member of the noted Bustill family.

The history of the Bustills, who are of mixed color, Indian and white Quaker stock, goes back to the earliest days of America.

My great-great-grandfather, Cyrus Bustill, who baked bread for Washington's troops, became a leader of colored people in Philadelphia; and in 1887 he was a founder of the Free African Society, first mutual aid organization of American colored people.

Through the years the Bustill's produced many teachers, artists and scholars, and, in the Quaker tradition, took part in running the Underground Railroad by which so many, like my father, escaped from bondage.

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**I DON'T** know if the custom is still observed, but when I was a boy the Bustill Family Association held annual reunions to which all of the relatives from far and near would come.

I find in my college scrapbook a printed program of the reunion of 1918, held at Maple Grove in Philadelphia.

My aunt, Gertrude Bustill Mossell, is listed as vice-president of the association.

On the program of the day was a reading of the family history by my cousin, Annie Bustill Smith, and speeches by various other members, including an address by "Mr. Paul Roberson." (Though this spelling of my name was a printer's error, it is likely that "Roberson" was the ancestral name of the slave-holding Robesons from whom my father got his name.

The county seat of his birthplace, Martin County, N.C., is Robersonville.

One of the earliest colored freedom petitions on record is that of a slave, Ned Griffin, who, in 1784, from Edgecombe County which adjoins Martin County, urged the state government to grant him the freedom that was promised for his services in the Revolutionary Army and which was being denied him by his owner, one Abner Robeson.

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**I CANNOT** recall anything I said in my speech on that occasion, though I did jot down in my scrapbook its title — "Loyalty to Convictions."

That I chose this topic was not accidental, for that was the text of my father's life—loyalty to one's convictions. Unbending. Despite anything. From my youngest days I was imbued with that concept.

This bedrock idea of integrity was taught by Reverend Robeson to his children not so much by preachment (for by nature Pop was restrained of speech, often silent at home, and among us Robesons the deepest feelings are largely unexpressed in words) but, rather, by the daily example of his life and work.

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**THOUGH MY** father was a man of ordinary height, he was very broad of shoulder and his physical bearing reflected the rock-like strength and dignity of his character.

He had the greatest speaking voice I have ever heard.

It was a deep, sonorous basso, richly melodic and refined, vibrant with the love and compassion which filled him.

How proudly, as a boy, I walked at his side, my hand in his, as he moved among the people!

There was a wide gap in years between us — he was fifty-three when I was born, near sixty when my mother died — but during many of his years as a widower I was the only child at home and his devoted care and attention bound us closely together.

It was not like him to be demonstrative in his love, nor was he quick to praise. Doing the right thing — well, that was something to be taken for granted in his children.

I knew what I must do — when to come home from play, my duties in the household, my time for study—and I readily yielded to his quiet discipline. Only once did I disobey him.

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**I WAS** ten years old at the time, and we were then living in Westfield. My father told me to do something and I didn't do it.

"Come here," he said; but I ran away. He ran after me. I darted across the road. He followed, stumbled and fell. I was horrified. I hurried back, helped Pop to his feet. He had knocked out one of his teeth.

I have never forgotten the emotions — the sense of horror, shame, ingratitude, selfishness — that overwhelmed me.

I adored him, would have given my life for him in a flash — and here I had hurt him, disobeyed him!

Never did he have to admonish me again; and this incident became a source of tremendous discipline which has lasted through the years.

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**I HAVE** said that the white families who dominated Princeton recognized my father's dignity and accorded him respect.

GRADUATION PICTURE—Paul Robeson in 1919 as valedictorian of his class at Rutgers University.

Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson at the time of her marriage to Paul in 1921.

How remarkable that was, and what a tribute to his character, can be appreciated fully only when one recalls that the Princeton of my boyhood (and I don't think it has changed much since then) was for all the world like any small town in the deep South.

Less than fifty miles from New York, and even closer to Philadelphia, Princeton was spiritually located in Dixie.

Traditionally the great university — which is practically all there is in the town — has drawn a large part of its student body and faculty from below the Mason-Dixie Line, and along with these sons of the Bourbons came the most rigid social and economic patterns of White Supremacy.

And like the South to which its heart belonged, Princeton's controlling mind was in Wall Street.

Bourbon and Banker were one in Princeton, and there the decaying smell of the plantation Big House was blended with the crisper smell of the Countinghouse.

The theology was Calvin: the religion—cash.

Rich Princeton was white: the colored were there to do the work. An aristocracy must have its retainers, and so the people of our small colored community were, for the most part, a servant class — domestics in the homes of the wealthy, serving as cooks, waiters, and caretakers at the university, coachmen for the town and laborers at the nearby farms and brickyards.

I had the closest of ties with these workers since many of my father's relatives — Uncle Ben and Uncle John and Cousin Carraway and Cousin Chance and others — had followed him to this town and found employment at such jobs.

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**PRINCETON** was Jim Crow: the grade school that I attended was segregated and Negroes were not permitted in any high school.

My oldest brother, Bill, had to travel to Trenton — eleven miles away — to attend high school, and I would have had to do the same had we not moved to another town. No colored students were admitted to the university, although one or two were allowed to attend the divinity school.

Under the caste system in Princeton the colored, restricted to menial jobs at low pay and lacking any semblance of political rights or bargaining power, could hope not for justice but for charity. The stern hearts and tight purses of the master class could on occasion be opened by appeals from the "deserving poor," and then donations, small loans or cast-off clothing might be looked for.

The colored church, center of community life, was the main avenue through which such boons were sought and received and, in fact, the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church was itself largely built by white philanthropy.

The pastor was a sort of bridge between the Have-nots and the Haves, and he served his flock in many worldly ways — seeking work for the jobless, money for the needy, mercy from the law.

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**IN PERFORMING** these Christian duties my father came to know and be known by all of the so-called "Best People" of the town.

But though the door of the university president might be open to him, Reverend Robeson could not push open the doors of that school for his son, when Bill was ready for college.

The pious president, a fellow Presbyterian, said:

No, it is quite impossible.

That was Woodrow Wilson—Virginian, graduate of Princeton, professor there for a decade, college president from 1902 to 1910, then governor of New Jersey, elected President of the United States in 1912, re-elected in 1916 because "he kept us out of the war" into which he led the nation one month after his second inaugural, Nobel Peace Prize winner apostle of the New Liberalism, advocate of democracy for the world and Jim Crow for America!

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**HE WHO** comes hat-in-hand is expected to bow and bend, and so I marvel that there was no hint of servility in my father's make-up.

Just as in youth he had refused to remain a slave, so in all the years of his manhood he disdained to be an Uncle Tom. From him we learned, and never doubted it, that the colored man was in every way the equal of the white man. And we fiercely resolved to prove it.

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**THAT A** so-called lowly station in life was no bar to a man's assertion of his full human dignity was heroically demonstrated by my father in the face of a grievous blow that came to him when I was still a baby.

After more than two decades of honored leadership in his church, a factional dispute among the members removed him as pastor. Adding to the pain was the fact that some of his closest kin were part of the ousting faction.

A gentle scholar and teacher all his adult life, my father, then past middle-age with an invalid wife and dependent children at home, was forced to begin life anew.

He got a horse and a wagon, and began to earn his living hauling ashes for the townsfolk. This was his work at the time I first remember him and I recall the growing mound of dusty ashes dumped into our backyard at 13 Green Street.

A fond memory remains of our horse, a mare named "Bess," whom I grew to love and who loved me.

My father also went into the hack business, and as a coachman droye the gay young students around town and on longer trips to the seashore.

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**ASHMAN,** coachman, he was still the dignified Reverend Robeson to the community, and no man carried himself with greater pride.

Not once did I hear him complain of the poverty and misfortune of those years.

Not one word of bitterness ever came from him. Serene, undaunted, he struggled to earn a livelihood and see to our education.

Soon after the tragedy that took his wife from him, Pop sent my brother Ben away to prep school and Biddle University (now Johnson C. Smith) in North Carolina, and my sister Marion to Scotia Seminary, a school for colored girls in the same state.

Bill, the oldest, was then at Lincoln University — the school my father had attended — and for a time Reeve (or Reed, as we called him) was at home, working as a hack driver.

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**SOME MIGHT** say that Reed did not turn out as well as the other Robeson children, and it is a fact that my father was sorely disappointed in this son and disapproved of his carefree and undisciplined ways.

Yet I admired this rough older brother and I learned from him a quick militancy against racial insults and abuse.

Many was the time that Reed, resenting some remark by a Southern gentleman-student, would leap down from his coach man's seat, drag out the offender and punish him with his fists.

He always carried for protection a bag of small, jagged rocks — a weapon he used with reckless abandon whenever the occasion called for action.

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**INEVITABLY THERE** were brushes with the Law, and then my father, troubled in heart, would don his grave frock-coat and go down to get Reed out of trouble again.

But this happened once too often, and one day I stood sadly and silently by as Pop told Reed he would have to leave—he must live his life elsewhere because his example was a dangerous one for his young brother Paul.

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**REED IS** dead now. He won no honors in classroom, pulpit or platform. Yet I remember him with love. Restless, rebellious, scoffing at conventions, defiant of the white man's law — I've known many colored men like Reed.

I see them every day. Blindly, in their own reckless manner, they seek a way out for themselves; alone, they pound with their fists and fury against walls that only the shoulders of the many can topple.

"Don't ever take low," was the lesson Reed taught me.

"Stand up to them and hit back harder than they hit you!"

When the many have learned that lesson, everything will be different and then the fiery ones like Reed will be able to live out their lives in peace and no one will have cause to frown on them.

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**BECAUSE** I was younger, my own days in Princeton were happier ones. Mostly I played.

There were the vacant lots for ball games, and the wonderful moments when Bill, vacationing from college, where he played on the team, would teach me how to play football.

He was my first coach, and over and over again on a weed-grown lot he would put me through the paces — how to tackle a man so he stayed tackled, how to run with the ball.

Then there were the winter evenings at home with Pop: he loved to play checkers and so we two would sit for hours in the parlor, engrossed in our game, not speaking much but wonderfully happy together.

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**MY FATHER** never talked with us about his early years as a slave or about his parents, Benjamin and Sabra, though long afterward I learned from others that before his mother died, Pop made at least one, and possibly two, dangerous trips back to the plantation to see her.

I'm sure that had he ever spoken about this part of his life it would have been utterly impossible for me as a boy to grasp the idea that a noble human being like my father had actually been owned by another man — to be bought and sold, used and abused at will.

Not old enough to work for them, I had very little connection with the white people of Princeton; but there were some white children among my playmates.

One of these was a boy, about my age, whose father owned the neighborhood grocery a few doors from our house. We could not go to school together, of course, but during the long summer days we were inseparable companions at play.

Once — and I don't remember why — the two of us got into a small-boy fight. After much crouching and circling and menacing gestures, we each got up enough courage to land a blow on the other's nose and then, wailing loudly, we ran away to our homes. Next day we were friends again.

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**THERE MUST** have been moments when I felt the sorrows of a motherless child, but what I most remember from my youngest days was a abiding sense of comfort and security.

I got plenty of mothering, not only from Pop and my brothers and sister when they were home, but from the whole of our close-knit community.

Across the street and down each block were all my aunts and uncles and cousins — including some who were not actual relatives at all.

So, if I were to try to put down the names of all the folks who helped raise me, it would read like a roster of colored Princeton.

In a way I was "adopted" by all these good people, and there was always a place at their tables and a place in a bed (often with two or three other young ones) for Reverend Robeson's boy when my father was away on one of his trips to the seashore or attending a

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ATHLETE—Paul, wearing basketball uniform, played center on the varsity team, was catcher on the baseball team, and was twice all-American football end.

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I might mention here, in passing, that many years later in New York I met one of the family that had held my father in bondage.

I had gone to a down-town night club to hear a friend who was singing in the place, and there I was accosted by a man who introduced himself as one of the Robesons of North Carolina.

He said he was sure that I'd be pleased to hear that his mother was quite proud of my accomplishments in life, and that she had carefully kept a scrapbook of the various honors that I had won for the family name.

Then the stranger went on to say that he would like to get together with me for a chat some day soon.

"You see," he confided proudly, "your father used to work for my grandfather."

As politely as was possible under the circumstances I assured the Southern gentleman that it was undoubtedly true that the colored people who had come by his family's name had added a bit more distinction to it than did any of the original owners or their descendants. "You say my father 'used to work' for your grandfather. Let's put it the way it was: *Your grandfather exploited my father as a slave!*"—That ended it; and *this* Robeson never did have a chummy get-together with *that* one.