Black Baltimoreans helped shape city

By James M. Abraham
AFRO Staff Writer

Baltimore City owes its founding and development to what is still the most predominant commercial and industrial sector of the city, its harbor.

If a case can be made for the above statement, then one can go further to claim that black Baltimoreans, from the city's inception, played a predominant role in Baltimore's success.

In the beginning

From the slaves who rolled the heavy barrels of tobacco to the wharfs of eighteenth century Baltimore to the caulkers, shipwrights, and longshoremen, who met them at the docks, blacks played a large role in fostering Baltimore's reputation as the busiest southern port of the antebellum period.

Both Frederick Douglass and Crispus Attucks worked on the docks of Baltimore, Douglass as a caulker, (which was an exclusively black trade until 1850), and Attucks as a longshoreman and sailor.

But Baltimore's position as a major seaport also created another occupation, one in which blacks participated, but not as willing partners That was the institution of slavery

Slave market

By 1835, there were twelve major slave dealers in the Baltimore area, all of whom had offices and facilities located strategically near Baltimore's bustling marketplace near the harbor

For example, Hope Slatter, acknowledged as Baltimore's biggest slave dealer during the period immediately before the Civil War, displayed his slaves at a yard on Pratt and Howard Streets, at the site of the present Convention Center Others had headquarters on Pratt and Fremont, Light and Montgomery and Albemarle and Water Streets, all a stone's throw from the harbor

Men were sold at prices ranging from $500 to $650, women from $300-$500, field hands were auctioned off at prices of $300 to $400, according to advertisements in various newspapers of the period.

But the depletion of Maryland's soil, brought about by poor agricultural methods, plus a general evangelical movement of the early nineteenth century, moved many slaveholders to free their property so that, by 1831, the large amounts of free blacks had begun to outnumber enslaved men of color

This moved the Maryland legislature to introduce several anti-black laws, several of them almost amusing from a twentieth century perspective. For example, in 1831 a law was passed which stated that all blacks freed after that date had to leave Maryland after three months or go to jail.

Another law stated that any free black who entered the state of Maryland had to face a whipping and a fine of $50 a week after their first ten days in the state.

However, through the efforts of the sizeable free black Baltimore population, these laws were subsequently modified.

Baltimore's free black population continued to increase, in spite of legislative and social restrictions, and by 1860 it numbered 25,680 free persons along with a slave population of 2,218, which gave the city the largest percentage of free blacks in the nation.

These early Baltimoreans were an extremely vigorous and active group, which took it upon themselves to establish mutual aid societies, independent schools (blacks were denied public education and a number of all-black churches

For example, in 1838 the Negro Caulker's Association, a union as well as a benevolent society, was formed. The union was one of the first black such organizations in the country In 1829 the Oblate Sisters of Providence, a Catholic order of black nuns, founded the St. Francis Academy for Girls, which was later expanded to include a boy's school

Daniel Coker a prominent black Baltimorean of the period, founded The Negro Academy in 1812, and in 1835 Nelson Welles, a wealthy black businessman, offered a $10,000 endowment to a fund for the establishment of a black public school. By 1859 there were six black schools in the city.

Black Baltimoreans also looked after their own spiritual welfare. As early as 1794 black Methodists denied the opportunity to pray with whites of the same order, organized the Sharp Street Methodist Church.

In 1817 the omni-present Daniel Coker and others organized the first Baltimore branch of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which, by the Civil War had 1,400 members.

The Civil War brought mixed blessings to Baltimore blacks. Although Union troops roamed the city, freeing all slaves, Maryland did not grant freedom to its slaves until 1864, a year after the Emancipation Proclamation.

With the end of the Civil War came the Fifteenth Amendment, which brought the vote to the nation's blacks. By 1870 there were over 8,000 black voters in Baltimore, who voted overwhelmingly for the party of Lincoln, the Republicans.

After the black vote proved to be a power to reckon with, in 1890 blacks elected their first City Council member, Henry Scythe Cummings), and blacks had actively participated in the Republican party, the Democratic party began its ascendency.

Between 1900 and 1912 the Democratic party made three unsuccessful attempts to disenfranchise Maryland blacks. By 1912, a series of literacy requirements and grandfather clauses had been enacted, which effectively eliminated the black vote.

This was the period immediately following reconstruction when the South was embarking on a political policy of white supremacy and Maryland quickly followed suit, enacting so many Jim Crow laws that all facilities except streetcars were segregated by 1916

Post Civil War

Although the years of the First World War brought some relief for Baltimore's black community in the field of employment by 1940 blacks made up one fifth of the city's population, yet occupied only one and a half square miles of city property.

Restrictive covenants and gentlemen's agreements had effectively limited black settlement to a small sector along Washington Street in East Baltimore.

But the boom years were coming and with them the greatest rejuvenation both politically and economically, that the city would ever realize.

With the advent of World War Two, blacks in large numbers flocked to Baltimore, as well as other Northern cities, seeking the high wages of the defense plants and war support industries.

They were forced into three main areas, which quickly became so crowded, one home-owner was reported to be living in his bathroom and renting the rest of his house out.

Sixty-six percent of area blacks were squeezed into an area in West Baltimore along Fremont Avenue, another twenty percent still lived in the Washington Street ghetto and the remainder lived in small shacks and dilapidated houses in

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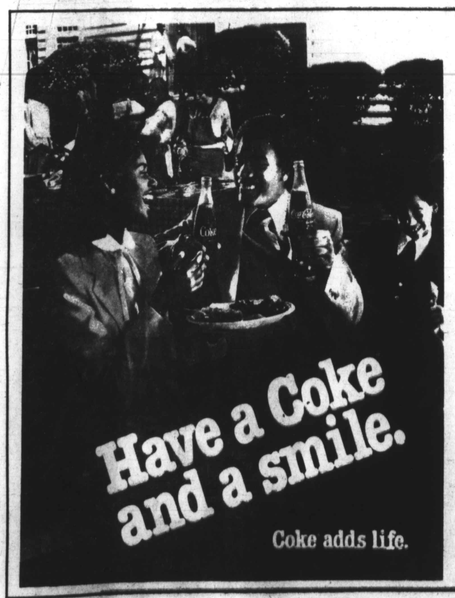

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—Baltimoreans

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South Baltimore; a total of three square miles.

The black population, by 1943, was 174,778, up from 165,000, an indication of the skyrocketing black presence in the city.

By 1944 the population had increased 25 percent since 1940. The burgeoning numbers of blacks would prove, in later years, to be instrumental in changing the complexion, literally, of the Baltimore political and socio-economic scene.

In 1949, a black woman attempted to gain admission to the University of Maryland's Nursing School. The president of the university, H. C. Byrd, objected strenuously, stating that the school would pay her expenses to attend Meharry instead, a black southern medical school.

She was refused admission, but the following year, a young sociology student, Parren J. Mitchell, sued the University of Maryland for admission to its College Park campus and won the suit, thus making him the first black to attend the campus.

By 1954 blacks finally gained majority in a legislative district, the fourth, and elected a black, Harry A. Cole, to a state Senate seat. He was accompanied by two black House of Delegates members, Emery Cole and Truly Hatchett.

In 1954 the city school board officially terminated its policy of racially separate schools and espite sporadic outbreaks of violence, integration as a whole proceeded rather smoothly, in contrast to the states and cities of the deep South.

But another kind of integration was also going on, one which rocked the entire state, and led to the abolishment of all segregation in state and city public accommodations.

In 1961, the State Department notified area dining establishments along Route 40 that they had received a series of complaints from African diplomats who had been refused service because of their race. After several racially mixed groups continued to be harassed for attempting to eat in the diners, the

Gains of the 60's and 70's

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) threatened to send one thousand "freedom riders," or racially mixed groups through the area.

Governor Millard Tawes pleaded with CORE, but they remained adamant. Finally, a compromise was reached when 35 restaurant owners decided to allow integrated groups to dine in their establishments.

This experience led in 1963, to the passing of the Public Accommodations Act which forbade discrimination in any public facility. Until this period, blacks were not even allowed to try on clothes at the leading department stores in downtown Baltimore.

The Sixties brought black Baltimoreans a renaissance of achievement. By 1968 Parren J. Mitchell had become the first black ever sent to Congress from Maryland. Joseph Howard was nominated to the city's Supreme Court. In addition to the achievements, storm clouds were gathering.

The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in April of 1968 sparked the largest riot Baltimore had seen since the Civil War. Scores of blacks, frustrated by their continued neglect at the hands of the city fathers, looted and burned throughout the small living sections of the city in which they were confined. Although the unrest was of course tragic, the resulting community interest in the plight of black Baltimoreans proved unprecedented.

Suddenly, black faces started appearing in banks, department stores, which were places where black presence was confined, at one time, to janitorial and maintenance positions. Black political strength began to solidify in places such as East Baltimore, where once there was disunity.

In 1971, Milton B. Allen was elected state's attorney, the first black ever to hold that office. Baltimore almost ex-

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