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African American Baptist Church

The religious revivals of the 1730s collectively known as the first Great Awakening transformed the spiritual climate of British North America by the mid-eighteenth century. Church membership grew and evangelical religious ideas, which emphasized a person's own relationship with God, began to acquire hegemony over the religious values propagated by the established churches. Among those people who embraced evangelical ideals were African American slaves, who often found attractive the notion of a personal God, the hope for salvation, and the less formal style of evangelical worship. This was especially true in the South, where African Americans benefited from a practice among some white evangelicals of allowing blacks to preach to other blacks and where African Americans were the targets of white missionary activity.

The Baptist Church

Many African Americans were particularly drawn to the Baptist faith, especially in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Some white Baptists, themselves often among the poorest in southern society, actively recruited African Americans. Furthermore, Baptists did not require formal education as part of ministerial training, and what learning they did encourage centered on mastering the contents of the Bible. Even African Americans held in bondage and denied opportunities for formal education could fulfill these expectations, and more than a few became ministers. African American slaves not only joined biracial Baptist churches but also fashioned their own fellowships, where they blended the traditional folk religions they brought from Africa with the evangelical nostrums of the Europeans, thus creating a hybrid African American religion.

In the Savannah River Valley, which connected the hinterlands around Augusta, Georgia, with the port city of Savannah, Georgia, evangelical revivals among whites and blacks bore organizational fruit among African Americans, who formed their own Baptist church at Silver Bluff, near Augusta, in 1773.

About that time, a slave named George Liele heard a sermon preached by the Reverend Matthew Moore, a white minister, and became convinced that he needed to respond to the gospel. Baptized by Moore, Liele became a preacher and began to exhort other slaves in the vicinity of Augusta to become Christians. Liele's master temporarily had to flee Georgia for his life and freed Liele. For the next several years, Liele and a colleague, David George, preached regularly at the Baptist church in Silver Bluff. George, who was born a slave in Virginia and had run away from a cruel master before coming to the Deep South as the slave of George Galphin, was converted after hearing sermons in the mid-1770s by several African American preachers, including Liele. George and Liele organized other churches,

African American Baptist Church, Sliver Hill Plantation, Georgetown County, South Carolina. By Frederick D. Nichols.

including the congregation at Yama Craw, outside Savannah, in 1777.

Among those who heard Liele preach at Yama Craw was Andrew Bryan, a South Carolina slave baptized by Liele in 1782. Bryan eventually purchased his freedom and devoted himself to his ministry. Although whites who feared an unshackled black man whipped Bryan twice and imprisoned him once, he continued to preach to ever-larger congregations, which often contained both blacks and whites. In 1788, his congregation constituted itself into the Savannah Georgia First Colored Church, commonly called the Savannah Church. At the time, it boasted 575 members, and it would grow to more than 800 by the time of Bryan's death.

A Fusion of Beliefs

The religious teachings of Liele, George, and Bryan fused the African concepts of a unitary universe where the sacred and profane are not segregated, the European mythologies of Heaven, Hell, and redemption, and their present reality of slavery. God would help Africans through their travail of slavery and would one day lead them out of bondage. In this melding process, certain African religious practices were proscribed. The church covenant of Liele's Yama Craw Church specifically banned the consumption of blood and strangled meat of animals offered to idols, which had been a part of some West African religious rituals. Other African practices were given an important place, such as moaning as part of religious singing. This practice originated in ecstatic African religious rituals, and moaning and wailing have been preserved in southern gospel music. This hybrid religious ritual did not confine itself to African American communities. The emotional shouts and ritual cadences of African worship affected the rhythms of white discourse as well, especially the sermon form, in which the preacher and congregation engage in something of a dialogue.

Both Liele and George eventually fled the South for the British Empire, seeking to continue their ministerial work without the specter of slavery hanging over them. Liele went to Jamaica, establishing the first Baptist churches there. George went to Canada, where he worked with both blacks and whites before organizing a Back-to-Africa movement, in which a thousand Canadian blacks went with George to Sierra Leone in 1792. Bryan, however, remained in the South, calling upon African Americans to lead better lives and, sometimes stealthily, urging whites to live out the Golden Rule in dealing with blacks. By establishing churches that counseled patience while teaching a theology of ultimate deliverance, African American leaders like Liele, George, and Bryan helped African Americans survive slavery by encouraging them to expect freedom soon.

——*Edward R. Crowther*

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African American cowboys

Despite the predominantly white portrayals in television and film Westerns, many cowboys were African American. Attracted by the high wages and the pull of the open range, the cowboys were a diverse lot that included former Civil War soldiers, former African American slaves, Mexicans, and American Indians. Evidence suggests that perhaps as many as 25 percent of cowboys were African American.

Most of the African Americans were unable to read or write, so few records of their daily life exist, but like their peers, they spent as many as four months in the saddle, working the long drives. The cowboy's job was dangerous, hard, and lonely. Because the cowboys had to work together to herd the cattle up the trail, segregation was impractical, but African American cowboys were constantly reminded of the inequalities of the time. Pay for African American cowboys was frequently less than for their white counterparts, and segregation was common in cattle towns along the trail. Despite the discrimination they faced, however, the contribution of the African American cowboy to the westward movement and the settlement of the western United States is indisputable. Some, most notably Nat Love, even gained lasting fame for their exploits, and later research helped bring recognition to those long overshadowed by their white counterparts.

——Donald C. Simmons, Jr.

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African American-American Indian relations

Since the 1960s, revisionist historians have shown great interest in the histories of American Indians and African Americans. The study of the history of the contact between these two groups has been a logical development, and much new evidence has emerged. For example, significant contact between American Indians and Africans occurred in Europe at the time of Portuguese encounters with Africans. In the sixteenth century, American Indians were traded for West African slaves, who were needed to work on Brazilian plantations.

The Spanish were the first major users of African slaves in the New World. An initial function of Africans, because of their knowledge of Indian culture, was to aid in exploration as guides and interpreters. The first African in the New World known by name was Estevanico, a Muslim native of Acamor. He accompanied the expedition of Pánfilo de