

PROFILE of The Week

By **Dr. DHANPAUL NARINE**

The Black Mothers of America

...No more, America, in mournful strain
Of wrongs, and grievances and unredress'd
No longer shall thou dread the iron chain
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand
Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the
land. - *Phillis Wheatley 1772*

We hear a great deal about the founding fathers of America. But how about the Black mothers of America and the role they played in shaping the destiny of the nation? Phillis Wheatley's verses lamented the institution of slavery in America. Wheatley was an accomplished poet who wrote her memoirs and published a number of poems on a variety of subjects. Her history is most interesting. Wheatley was born in Senegal and was captured and taken to the shores of America when she was seven years old. She was purchased by John Wheatley as a gift to his wife and they gave her the 'Wheatley' title.

It was observed that the young lady was talented and she was encouraged to read and to write. Wheatley received lessons in the classics and she wrote her first poem at thirteen. In 1773 she published her book of poems and created a number of records. She was the first slave in America to publish a book of poems and only the third woman to do so at the time. In 1776 Wheatley accepted an invitation to visit George Washington and she read a poem that she had written for him. Wheatley even traveled to London to publicize her poems.

Who has ever heard of Mammy Kate and Daddy Jack? Are they included in the history curriculum in schools? Mammy Kate was a slave that gave birth to nine children. She went about her chores with her husband Daddy Jack for the Heard family. Stephen Heard was the Governor of Georgia. He wanted to take part in the Revolutionary War and got his chance in 1779. In February of that year Governor Heard and 22 other patriots were captured by the Loyalists during the Battle of Kettle Creek.

After a trial Governor Heard was sentenced to

hang. It was at this point that Mammy Kate decided to act. She put together a brilliant plan. She traveled to Augusta some fifty miles away on horseback and was able to get a job as a cleaner at Fort Cornwallis. This brought her in contact with Governor Heard. Mammy Kate was able to place the Governor in her basket and smuggle him out of the prison, the day before he was to be executed. Daddy Jack was waiting in the woods and they made good their escape. Mammy Kate won her freedom and was given some land as well. In 2011 she was honored as a patriot of the American Revolution.

Elizabeth Freeman is one of the unsung heroes of America. She was born into slavery in 1742 and served the Ashley family in Massachusetts. Elizabeth was married on the plantation and took pride in raising her daughter, Betsy. In 1780 an incident occurred that would change her life and that of Massachusetts. Mrs. Ashley became incensed and attempted to hit Betsy with a heated shovel. Elizabeth raised her arm to shield Betsy and was cut in the process. But this was not the end of the story.

Elizabeth heard at a public gathering the words of the Massachusetts constitution that stated, 'all men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights...' These words struck a chord with Elizabeth and she sought to apply them to her situation. She requested attorney Theodore Sedgwick to help her fight for her freedom. The case was *Brom and Bett v. Ashley* and it was heard in August 1781. The court made a historic ruling. Since 'all men are born free and equal' there was no reason why Elizabeth should remain a slave. The judge ruled that Elizabeth should be set free. This meant that in keeping with the constitution all slaves in Massachusetts had to be freed.

Elizabeth took the name 'Freeman' after the verdict

and said, 'Any time, any time, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told that I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it.' She could not read or write but Elizabeth struck one of the biggest blows for Black freedom in America.

One of the most contradictory Presidents in the United States was Thomas Jefferson. This learned man wrote brilliantly about the inalienable right to liberty while he owned more than 100 slaves. He believed that if slaves were ever freed they



Sojourner Truth

should be sent to Africa to prevent a mixing of the races. But Jefferson practiced racial mixing. There are well known accounts of his relationship with a slave, Sally Hemings.

According to historical records Sally's mother, Elizabeth, bore 12 children; the father one of the children was John Wayles, the father-in-law of Thomas Jefferson. Sally Hemings was a slave at Monticello in 1776 and traveled to Paris with Thomas Jefferson when he was a minister there. In 1802, a journalist James T. Callender, wrote in a newspaper that Thomas Jefferson had kept for many years 'as his concubine, one of his slaves. Her name is Sally.' Callender added that Jefferson 'had several children by her.'

Jefferson neither confirmed nor denied the reports and they were published in several newspapers at the time. Sally Hemings gave birth to six children and it is widely believed that Jefferson was the father. However, his daughter Martha denied the reports. But the evidence at the time suggested that it was more than likely that Jefferson was the father. The children strongly resembled Jefferson

and there are no records to show that Hemings had a relationship with anyone outside of Monticello. It is also suggested that Jefferson was present at the births of the children and one of the children Eston Hemings added the Jefferson title to his name.

Sally left no records but the debate has raged on 200 years after her death. Did Jefferson father any of the children? The New York Times on November 1, 1998 reported that, 'DNA tests on the descendants of Thomas Jefferson's family and of Jefferson's young slave, Sally



Harriet Tubman

Hemings, offer compelling evidence that the nation's president fathered at least one of her children.' This evidence was presented as a result of analysis of Y chromosomes by Dr. Eugene Foster. The Y chromosome of a descendant of Eston Hemings was a perfect match to that of Jefferson's but it was no surprise to some family members who knew all along that they were related to Jefferson.

Sally Hemings went to Monticello as a slave when she was fourteen. In today's society Jefferson would be on the child abuser list. He used his position to preach the message of equality while in his private life he abused Hemings. After Jefferson's death Sally Hemings left Monticello and died in obscurity.

Sojourner Truth was one of the earliest human rights fighter and she did it with style and attitude. In 1844 an angry mob threatened to shut her down and Sojourner calmly walked in their midst and put them to flight. Sojourner was born in New York into slavery 1797 and she was known as Isabella Baumfree. She was separated from her

family at the age of nine and was sold several times into slavery before she ended up working for John and Sally Dumont.

Sojourner described incidents in which Sally Dumont was terribly cruel to her and not knowing better Sojourner believed that slavery was ordained by God. In 1827 she threw caution to the winds and walked away from the plantation with her infant daughter. But her son Peter was sold into slavery and Sojourner waged a prolonged legal battle to get him out of slavery.

In 1828 she sued to get Peter out of slavery and won, becoming the first black woman to take a white man to court and win. She would win again in 1835 to clear her name in a slander suit.

Sojourner joined a religious revival movement and became a charismatic speaker advocating for women's rights.

In 1850 she set her thoughts on paper and with the help of a friend she wrote her 'Narrative.' A year later she went on a nationwide tour and delivered her famous 'Ain't I a Woman?' speech in which she called for women to be treated as equal as men. Sojourner met with Abraham Lincoln and asked that segregation be abolished. She collected thousands of signatures for a petition for newly freed slaves to be given land but Congress took no action.

One of the most celebrated women in the struggle for African freedom is Harriet Tubman. She was born around 1820 into slavery but subsequently escaped. Her mission was to help other slaves escape as well. Tubman organized what came to be called the 'Underground Railroad.'

This involved leading hundreds of slaves to freedom and Tubman never 'lost a passenger.' Tubman guided slaves to the North using a series of safe houses. She was honored for her work and she remains one of the most admired women in American history.

These are only a few of the Black mothers that have made a lasting impact in America. Their legacy will live as long as people value freedom and justice.