



Newsletter

USCT Civil War Digest

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United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research

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USCTI & ASFD Address the Controversial Term 'Colored' at Mini-Conference

When the *AARP Bulletin* published in its **October 26, 2011, issue**, an article titled "Civil War Reenactor Keeps History of the U.S. Colored Troops Alive: African-Americans Relive Role," a controversy was ignited among some readers. It focused upon whether the identity term "colored" is an insult to African Americans. Unexpectedly, the young Howard University student who wrote the article, Macy L. Freeman, was placed at the center of the controversy. The controversy has erupted during the beginning of the commemoration of the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War and no doubt will continue as African Americans give primary attention to important aspects of the Freedom Journey that led to the ending of slavery in this country. Of lesser importance will be attention to battles, while the issue of identity, anti-slavery actions, and the Underground Railroad will be at center stage. The enlistment and heroics of 200,000 black soldiers, fighting for their freedom and that of 4 million darker brethren and sisters, will certainly be an honored topic, but it will collide with the hot topic of racial identity.

Many readers of Freeman's article assumed the controversial term was inflicted upon black people in America by white citizens who were determined to degrade the sons and daughters of Africa. Those who felt that way lambasted Freeman as a "traitor of the race."

As one respondent expressed, "Colored" is a very racist term today. Use African American or even black but NOT Colored."



Fortunately, there were other readers who understood the falsehood of the accusation and provided positive feedback and supportive encouragement to Freeman, who, after all, simply used the historical term of identity that was associated with the military groups comprising most black soldiers during the Civil War. One such respondent expressed the idea that the term was a part of the identity of black people in America and should be used in proper context to survey history. More specifically, **The Bureau of Colored Troops** was created by the United States War Department on May 22, 1863, under General Orders, No. 143, during the Civil War, to handle "all matters relating to the organization of colored troops."

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Addressing the Term “Colored”

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The controversy spilled over onto the Internet and was soon being shared at sites throughout the country. The controversy found itself among discussions at the USCT Institute and the American Society of Freedmen Descendants Mini-Conference, held November 4-5 at Hartwick College.

The conference was attended by 30 participants, including ASFD Fellows and Senior Fellows, USCTI members, and students of the Harriet Tubman Mentoring Project at Hartwick College. It provided a rare opportunity for six descendants of early Africans in America to share their various research findings and preservation efforts to commemorate the contributions of African Americans during the slavery and reconstruction period.



Source: *Chariot in the Sky*, Arna Bontemps, 1951

Courtesy: The Matthews Collection

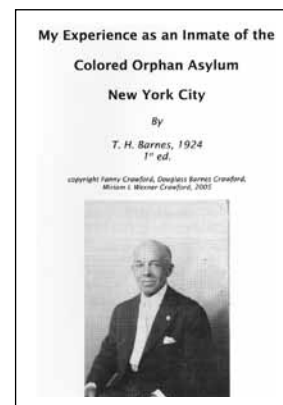
A common thread among the six was lineage from black soldiers and early leaders of the 1800s. Thus, the identity term of colored was very relevant to their heritage. The topic also was relevant to participants who either lived through the segregation period in the South or were taught by elder relatives regarding racist placards that were used to identify which restrooms, bus seats, and other items were to be used respectively by coloreds or whites. The discussion also was quite enlightening to the younger participants, who had an equal chance to share their thoughts.

The outcome of the discussion was similar to the initial reactions when the AARP article was first published. One could say the discussion ended as a stalemate. Surprisingly, not one of the participants at the USCTI & ASFD mini-conference urged that the name of the USCTI be changed. All the participants knew that while

the acronym includes the controversial identity term, it is done so within a historical context, similar to Ms. Freeman's article. The group meeting at Hartwick College knew that the identity term of colored had been formally selected by free black people in 1837 to identify their ethnic group as one of multiple racial mixture.

Further, Eric Williams, in his 1942 book, *The Negro in the Caribbean*, pointed out that "It is difficult for the American Negro to realize that the term 'colored' signifies a distinct group in the Caribbean. It is an old definition, dating back to the days of slavery. The English islands spoke of the 'people of color'; in the French, they were 'gens de couleur'; in the Spanish, 'gente de color.'" In addition, the term was used interchangeably with such other identity terms as Ethiopie, Africo-American, Afro-American, Anglo-African, and yes, even the identity of African. All of the latter terms continued to be used by early Africans in America throughout the Civil War period and even through World War II.

Two important American references regarding the latter are "The Title of This Journal," which appeared in the March 4, 1837, issue of *The Colored American*, and a letter of response from Julius C. Morel, a black freeman of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Within a year, James W.C. Pennington's 1841 book, *A Text Book of the Origin and History of the Colored People*, further explored the ethnic identity.



Courtesy:
Madeline O. Scott,
great-granddaughter of
T. H. Barnes

HARRISBURG, September 19, 1837

Your kind favor of the 29th of last month came safe to hand, and found us, through mercy, all well. I had received your communication in the "American," through the kindness of some unknown friend, before the arrival of your last letter. I have also received several communications from other friends (white as well as colored), asking my views on the subject, which you have, in my opinion, so ably treated. After carefully reading what you and others have written and after much reflection upon the subject, I have been led to conclude that the principles advocated by you and your colleagues are correct and proper in all their bearings. Doubtless you will understand me then to be in favor of retaining the term "colored man," in all our proceedings,

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Mini-Conference Sets Milestone

During the weekend of November 4, 2011, the USCTI and ASFD Mini-Conference brought together some of America's leading scholars in African-American genealogy and preservation. Six presenters convened at Hartwick College and joined forces with more than 20 other participants to explore research findings in slave genealogy and the broader Freedom Journey. The conference began with an afternoon reception at the U.S. Pluralism Center, which is the home of the United States Colored Troops Institute, a recently selected "facility" of the National Park Services' National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. Sheri Jackson, northeast regional coordinator of the NPS National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, was the special guest at the reception and opening dinner. She and other participants were welcomed to the affair by Michael G. Tannenbaum, Hartwick College's Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs.

The opening dinner included the ceremonial libation to the ancestors that was led by Sylvia Cooke Martin, retired chief of staff of training and development at the Library of Congress and current board member of the Society for the Preservation of Maryland Antiquities. Martin and four other participants were officially inducted as Fellows and Senior Fellows of ASFD. They included Darlene Colón, Ruth Perry Hodge, Sylvia Cooke Martin, Harry Bradshaw Matthews, and Madeline O. Scott.

Left to right:
Darlene Colón,
Sylvia Cooke
Martin, Madeline
O. Scott, Ruth
Perry Hodge,
Sheri Jackson,
Harry Bradshaw
Matthews.



Others receiving the distinction, but not present, included Roland Barksdale-Hall, Cherry R. Baylor, Charles L. Blockson, Agnes Kane Callum, Gerald R. Hunter, Sr., ZSun-nee K. Matema, and D.Gail Saunders. Each honoree was presented with the ASFD medallion as evidence of their selection to the highest ranks of the society based upon scholarship.

Workshops were held on Saturday, led by the ASFD Fellows and Senior Fellows. Matthews, the founding president of the USCTI, shared the research process that led him to the documentation of a mother, her six children, and her half-sister escaping from Virginia to Oneonta, New York, in 1860.

Colón, a member of the Pennsylvania Past Players of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Tourism, provided an instructive

presentation about the historic Christiania Riots of 1851, in which her ancestor played a role in assisting an escaped slave.

Martin provided a presentation about records at the Library of Congress that pertain to the research of African Americans. Her topic also shared insight into community preservation, with a focus upon the restoration of The Colored School in Ellicott City.

Scott, who served two terms as president of the Afro American Historical Association in Buffalo, New York, provided an insightful presentation about her great-grandfather, T.H. Barnes, and his brothers' experience in the Colored Orphan Asylum in New York City during 1863. Barnes also was one of the primary sponsors responsible for the erection of the Frederick Douglass Monument in Rochester, New York.

Ruth E. Hodge, retired archivist at the U.S. Military History Institute at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania State Archives explored in her presentation the use of documents in locating the burial sites of people in African American history.

During a break from workshop presentations, participants had an opportunity to examine materials in the privately owned Matthews Collection that support the work of the USCTI and ASFD.

“Understanding the ancestors requires an attempt to walk in their shoes and appreciate their words and actions without using contemporary values and perceptions.”

—Harry Bradshaw Matthews



Norma M. Williams, Millicent Reid '12, Edythe Ann Quinn, Sheri Jackson, Madeline O. Scott, Lauren Fortson, Kennequa Carlton, Harry Bradshaw Matthews.



NATIONAL
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
NETWORK TO FREEDOM

Other participants at the conference included guests, students of the Harriet Tubman Mentoring Project at Hartwick College, and USCTI members. They were George Betts, Regina Betts, Daven Barnett '15, Catherine Clase '13, Stephanie Pointer Brunetta, David Chebbet, Lorna Ruth Elmore, Adia Ferris '12, Laureena Harris '13, Marcus Hodge, Pamela L. Matthews, Tedra Morant '13, Kemi Omotosho '13, Linda Patterson, Monet Rothenberg, Robert Simmons, Michael G. Tannenbaum, and Jami Zahemski '13.



Harriet Tubman Mentors and presidents, respectively, of SOSU/BU and PALS Millicent Reid and Catherine Clase.



Harriet Tubman Mentors Kemi Omotosho, Josephine Ndema, and Tedra Morant studying at the U.S. Pluralism Center.



Main research room, U.S. Pluralism Center.

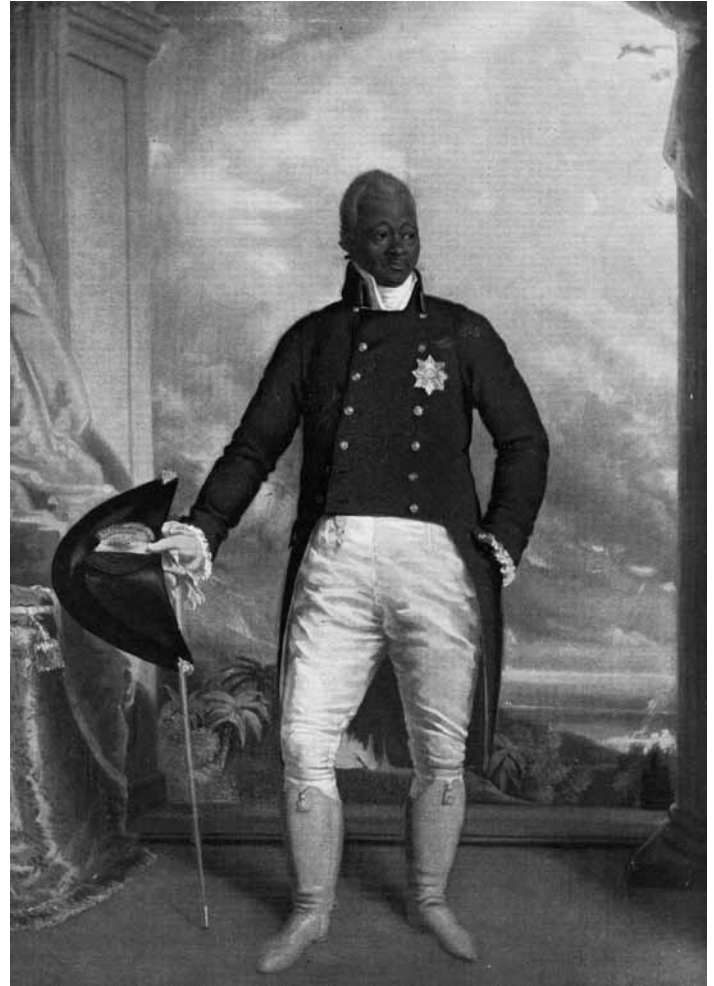
“Colored”

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particularly in such as aim at our improvement. To be designated as a *colored man* carries no inherent degradation simply with itself; it does not necessarily imply a thief, a felon, or a monkey, neither does it indicate such to be “non compos mentis”: or that in the order of creation, any of the great natural rights to Liberty and Equality were curtailed or withheld, on account of the color it had pleased the creator to bestow—nor yet does it imply or indicate that any of the faculties of the mind or body, whether they be mental or physical, are in the least impaired by the individual being called a *colored person*. No—no mental inferiority is indicated by it—no alienation of comprehensive powers, or moral worth, merely because the color of the skin may be above or below the standard, which a corrupt public chooses to place it at. And, in my opinion, the moment we entertain the view that color is a disgrace to us, that moment we admit the cruel and proscriptive dogmas of the enemies of human rights to be true. The moment we admit the standard created by them—to suit their own selfish views—to be the point of moral worth, then we countenance and give existence to the horrid principle of *caste* among ourselves. We then virtually admit that, as we approximate to that standard, we are improved—and in the same ratio, as we recede from that *shade of caste*, we are debased. What destructive consequences are threatened to our whole social and moral union, in admitting or entertaining such principles but for a moment! But we have lived long enough to know that *principle* makes the man, and want of it the fellow. The Society of Friends appears to me to have decided wisely, when somewhat similarly situated, in that they were called *Quakers* by way of reproach, they incorporated it with their title, they never stopped to pass resolves that they would not be called by the graceful name of Quaker; but what did they do? The same as in the present day—they are known far and near as the ‘People, called Quakers;’ and to day I would rather possess that meek spirit, and be known by that humble name, than be called the son of the most potent prince on earth, and decked out in all the finery that regal dignity can bestow.

Suffer me to go back a little farther. What does the page of History tell us. ‘He that runs may read.’ —Adam, the red, Cush, the black, and Laban, the white man. There is a precedent enough that show that the ancients were accustomed to indicate the color by the name,—a very sound custom, I believe—and to me there appears no disgrace attached to it, as I apprehend that the opponents to our measures would have no objection to be called white men, yet where is the difference in sound? They are equally harmonious. Write them they look equally as fair; ask them, are they not alike pleasant? Tis true, one is a positive, and the other a negative color. What of that—I can see nothing except that one is positively wrong, and the other negatively assenting thereto.

Again, I, like you, am unwilling that in the present day, the ‘Colored American’ shall be merged in all the guilty oppression, and hypocrisy of his pale face brother. Tis meet the name should show the difference between the sinning, and the sinned against. I thank our Father that it has pleased Him, in wisdom, to order our color just as he has. To



Haitian Emperor Henri Christophe

Source: The Matthews Collection

me it is like the mystic blood sprinkled at the door of Israel in Egypt, and which the destroying angel had respect to, and passed over when on his mission of vengeance. But when the page of *our* history shall be complete, when the tale of our sufferings is told, and we are delivered from the house of bondage,—then, and not till then, can I consent to drop the distinguished term *COLORED MAN*; and until then, let our exertions to be free, our struggling after knowledge, our patience in adversity, our almost super-human efforts to ascend the hall of science, unaided and alone, our throes of sorrow, and our shrieks of bitter anguish, and our stand and unimpaired confidence in the providence of God. Let them!—yes, I say, let them be written and read as the Chronicles of the *Colored Man*.

The eyes of the civilized world are turned towards us; the sympathies of the wise and good; in all nations, continue to be favorable excited; and earnest enquiries are made as to our actual condition. Let us stand then, unmasked on the eminence of our own erection; and be seen of the whole world as we are ...

Sincerely thy friend, Junius C. Morel



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