

DIVERSITY

The Trailblazers



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How far back to trace the emergence of a black architecture profession is a matter for debate. The first blacks arrived in America in late August 1619 and were identified as indentured servants. Little is known about who they were, their skills, or what craft they practiced.

In 1652 and 1654, two freed blacks were granted land—550 acres and 100 acres respectively in Northampton County on what is now the Delmarva Peninsula, Va.—in reward for importing servants, presumably indentured, as there was a great shortage of hands to perform useful work. The acres needed tilling and demanded the planning and construction of dwellings and farm buildings, no doubt patterned on the wooden salt box structures typical of the East Coast from Virginia to Massachusetts.

A more logical starting point is to fast forward by 100 years to an era when the big southern plantations were emerging, and when slavery in America had developed in its fullest form. Here more is known, because records kept by the plantation managers included facts, figures, and drawings depicting the contributions

of black carpenters, masons, painters, ironworkers, and glaziers to the design, construction, maintenance, and operation of the plantation houses, farm buildings, and slave quarters, as well as the few public buildings of that era.

For a more rigorous assessment of the status of the black architect and craftsman, one must fast forward another 100 years to Reconstruction and the years following, when many emancipated African Americans were able to make a living as skilled crafters and design professionals.

The status, roles, and contributions of African Americans may be grouped roughly into three phases—colonial and antebellum (1619–1863); emancipation, Reconstruction, and the rise of the professional architect (1863–1945); and post-World War II, civil rights, and post-civil rights (1945–present).

Colonial and antebellum (1619–1863)

The precise roles of blacks in the building of early America is blurred by the vagueness of most records in indicating whether a particular craftsman or builder was black or white. By the 18th century, opportunities to build were becoming available to—indeed, were being forced upon—blacks as

the phenomenal growth of the cotton, tobacco, and sugar-based economy of the Old South spawned a spate of construction activity.

This greatly affected the black bondspeople. The volume, scope, and variety of building types on and off the plantation—from the big house to storage and agricultural processing structures, slave quarters, and eventually churches, academic buildings, and large public buildings such as the commercial and government buildings at Williamsburg—all ended up embracing the design and crafts talents of the black slave population.

Until 1700, the concept of the separation of races had not yet hardened into the rigid racial lines that later came to mark American social attitudes. It seems that whites never even thought of themselves as white but rather as English or Dutch, and they did not consider Africans as blacks or Negroes, but as dark skinned people but otherwise racially indeterminate.

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Against this background, the role of the slaves as builders and craftsmen (there is no evidence that women engaged in the building crafts, as their principal roles were as field workers and mothers) is largely established. Toward the end of the slavery era, white planters increasingly sought formal credit for the design and construction of the myriad types of dwellings and work buildings that dotted the plantation. The reason, according to Ferguson, was that the white planters had to demonstrate their total superiority over their slaves in every possible way, and the credit for planning the plantations, peripheral buildings, and their furnishings was one talent they wished to air as their own.

In the event, the demands of running a community as large and complex as a plantation, and given the small minority of white people—especially in what became South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana—the preponderance of craft work fell upon the slave population. Those who practiced the trades most in demand—carpenters, coopers, masons, spinners, tanners, blacksmiths, shoemakers, distillers—were slaves.

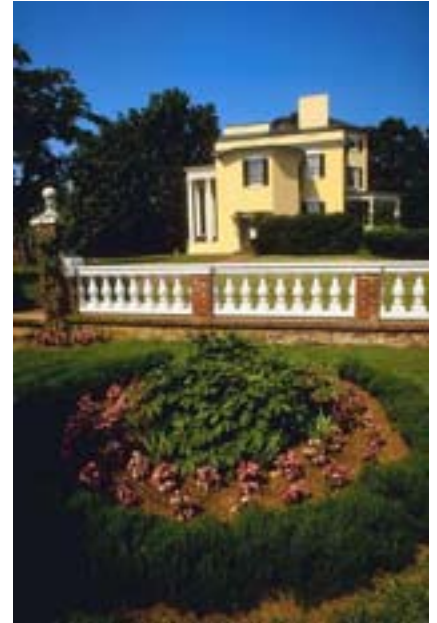
Since buildings in those years were largely the job of carpenters and masons, one must look at the customs that linked programming, design, and building on the estate. Contrary to the northern custom—dictated largely by cold weather, comfort, and convenience—of consolidating functions in a few large structures, the south was noted for doing the opposite. Every tub, as it were, sat on its own bottom. The estate was an array of free-stand-

ing outbuildings. These consisted of kitchen; smokehouse; dairy; icehouse; craft shops; storehouses; stables; barns; pig house; buildings containing production machinery for processing sugar cane, tobacco, cotton, and rice; clinics; dining rooms; chapels; the overseer's house; and, of course, the slave quarters.

Slave craftsmen learned their trade on the job. Some were sent off to trade schools and disseminated their skills on the plantation. No distinct style emerged during this long period covering the late 17th, the entire 18th, and a large part of the 19th centuries. Except for the Big House, the form, materials, and construction of the outbuildings and slave quarters were a straightforward expression of available materials, space demands, and craftsmanship. Glass was expensive, and most of the structures had small openings; even those were seldom glazed.

The role of slave craftsmen in building the Big House is not widely documented. The great mansions, such as Mount Vernon, Westover, Monticello, and Evergreen, were clearly patterned on English originals. Having one's own Robert Adam-like manor was considered, at least until Independence, as a sign of prestige, much like today when erecting a 16,000-square-foot trophy mansion in Southampton or an \$18 million pad in Malibu. Therefore, in its general outline, form, and ornament, the Big House tended to follow English prototypes, with some variations, such as the large porch and dog run breezeways to accommodate the hot climate.

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An occasional white craftsman from the old country provided guidance, but the substance of the Big House was slave-built. So was much of the furniture, although the most prosperous of the southern planters had some of their furniture shipped from England or France. Both white and slave communities considered black craftsmen an elite, and the planters gave them special treatment and privileges, among the most prized being the opportunity to practice their trades without the backbreaking toil of the fields.

As many as 10 percent of the slave community were of the craftsman class. The elite status extended into American independence. Historian John Michael Vlach gives this account of Thomas Hemmings, one of Thomas Jefferson's slave carpenters:

"Hemmings had prolonged his stay at a neighboring plantation, where he was engaged in a demanding series of repairs. Jefferson wanted him back at Monticello, but Hemmings deflected his demand, writing at the end of a lengthy description of the work he was

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doing: 'I hope by the nex to Let [sic] you no when I shul finech and when to send for me.'" A reply that was a heady mix of self-confidence, determination, and glibness.

But always remember that the same people who built the slave quarters, the smoke houses, and the barns and stables also built the Big House, a far more elaborate structure with complex forms, larger spans, and subtle detail. Here, too, slave craftsmanship came to bear, and although many of the larger, monumental plantation houses were derived from English patterns or models, there is no evidence that black craftsmen and artisans were excluded from work on the Big House. Witness the demand for the Thomas Hemmings of that era.

A curious aspect to bondsmen's contributions to design and construction is the role of black plantation owners—freedmen who ran their operations with the help of slaves just as did their white counterparts. The details, as described in two sources indicate that they built their Big Houses, outbuildings, and slave quarters to the same standards as did all landowners.

A neglected piece of evidence of black slave craftsmen's involvement in the construction of public buildings indicates that black craftsmen and laborers played a big role in building the original White House and U.S. Capitol, which, incidentally, were built contemporary with the key piece to the AIA headquarters in Washington, The Octagon. Before emancipation, pay slips uncovered in the U. S. Treasury Department by television reporter Edward Hotelling show that 400 of the 600 workers between 1792 and 1800 were black slaves whose wages were appropriated by their owners.

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Slaves in those years were paid five dollars a month. The Capitol was completed in the 1860s, and the degree to which black laborers worked on it after emancipation is not known, since slavery was not outlawed in Washington, D.C., for another two years after the 1963 Proclamation. Former Oklahoma Congressman J. C. Watts Jr., who is African American, called for a detailed study of the documents and eventually a memorial in the Capitol to recognize those contributions.

With the end of the Civil War, the opportunities for those craftsmen declined sharply due to the influx of immigrant carpenters, masons, metalworkers, painters, and other craftsmen; the import, from northern states and Europe, of manufactured building products such as bricks, pre-cut lumber, and miscellaneous metal products, which hitherto had been produced on site; and last not least the limitation some southern states placed on the right to contract with blacks for construction.

Reconstruction and the rise of the professional architect (1863–1945)

Despite passage of a battery of Reconstruction laws designed in part to establish guidelines for the rights and treatment of the newly freed African Americans, longstanding discriminatory attitudes held by whites towards blacks (and eventually enacted in Southern states in a series of so-called Jim Crow laws), and practices dealing with segregation of blacks in public places, schools, and vehicles held black architects and builders back well into the 20th century.

Yet, by the 1870s, a movement was under way, triggered mostly by black activists, to advance the intellectual underpinnings of a black society. This was linked to a growing emphasis on business and economic strength as the shortest road to acceptance of blacks by the majority. As John Hope, who would become president of Morehouse College, Atlanta, told the Fourth Annual Atlanta University Conference on the Negro in Business, advocating the founding and expansion of a black business class: "We must take in some, if not all, of the wages, turn it into capital, hold it, increase it."

Also in those years was born the stress on academic development to reverse centuries of intellectual suppression. The American Negro Academy was born in 1897, with W. E. B. Du Bois' backing. Black architects and builders fit into this framework marginally at first, held back not by lack of skill but by the spirit of the patron. The patron not only provided the capital to erect a new building, but would have to entrust the commission to a racial group whose performance was untried and whose members had to compete with the white architect who was part of the patrons' social circle.

Given these barriers, the years from the 1870s through the 1920s turned out to be surprisingly productive for the emerging black design professional. The reason is plain. African Americans, newly emancipated but suspecting with reason that the civil rights legislation passed by Republican post-emancipation congresses would soon flounder in a sea of state-passed segregation laws, decided on a line of attack of solidarity and self help.

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solidarity and self help, the result was a flowering of construction financed, designed, built, and occupied by blacks.

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New towns. The first was in the new towns and communities formed by freed blacks, placing upon the newly arrived inhabitants the task of building a community from the ground up. Among these communities were Nicodemus, Kan.; Boley, Okla. (plus more than two dozen other towns in what was a territory through 1907); Eatonville, Fla.; Mound Bayou, Miss.; and Hobson City, Ala. These so-called "Black Towns," later disappeared, weakened, ironically, by growing integration in the mid-20th century. Only a few, such as Nicodemus, have survived. But, in their heyday, these towns provided dignity, work, and self-expression to black families newly released from bondage.

Old neighborhoods. The other post-emancipation phenomenon was the concentration of black families in certain neighborhoods in some major cities of the South. Streets came to be associated in those cities with black populations, such as Memphis' Beale Street, Jackson's Farish Street, Chattanooga's Ninth Street, Richmond's Jackson Ward, and above all Atlanta's Auburn Avenue, which came to be known as Sweet Auburn, and contains among other monuments the old and new buildings for Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Reverends Martin Luther King Sr. was pastor and Martin

Luther King Jr. preached.

Writes Richard K. Dozier in *Spaces and Places*: "Located in these communities were the city's 'Negro' bank buildings (by 1912, 60 of the 64 Afro-American banks were in the south), hotels, theaters, fraternal lodges, and churches. Each city had its 'Afro-American Street,' with a collection of buildings, that to [the] Afro-American symbolized race progress as opposed to racial segregation."

Special category. A category unto itself was the African American community of Washington, D.C., centered on U Street. The black population in Washington had the peculiar position of living in a Southern city with a northern Republican government, along with a substantial black population. That, with its banks, insurance companies, churches, and fraternal lodges, gave black Washington the economic power, self-directed yet significant, to give birth to a flow of building construction unequalled since. As it flourished, it spawned a group of successful professional architecture firms.

These firms used the congenial environment of Washington as home base. From it they extended their practices all over the South. In his 1979 Catholic University doctoral dissertation, *Black Architects of Washington, D.C.*, Harrison Mosley Ethridge states that "even in the dark days of racial animosity at the dawn of the twentieth century, the black architect in Washington has practiced in a politically protected location."

He adds:

"The black community, increasingly segregated, urbanized, and more aware of the talent of the race, was in need of skilled men who could design churches, fraternal organization build-

ings, and college structures that were beyond the design capabilities of mere builders."

Reference:

In next month's episode, look for work by and interviews with three prominent contemporary African American practitioners.

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