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IN COLONIAL AMERICA

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AMERICA'S FIRST BLACK GOVERNORS

EVEN IN COLONIAL TIMES, SOME
AFRICAN-AMERICANS COULD ELECT
THEIR OWN OFFICIALS. BY DAVID LANDER

DERBY, THE SMALL CONNECTICUT CITY where I was born and raised, was home to two celebrated white men. Gen. David Humphreys was aide-de-camp to Gen. George Washington and served as his personal secretary in the first year of the American Presidency. Capt. Isaac Hull earned his reputation in the War of 1812 while commanding the USS *Constitution*; in our first victory of the war, he and his crew destroyed the British frigate *Guerrière*. Derby's now-defunct movie theater was named in Hull's honor, and Humphreys's house still stands, so, as a teenager in the late 1950s, I felt their presence, but it wasn't until recently that I learned there were also prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African-Americans—both enslaved and free—from Derby.

A few library visits revealed they were part of a fascinating story. In accordance with a New England tradition that began in the early- to mid-1700s, those men had been selected by their fellow blacks to serve as governors. By the late 1800s, the custom had died out. In his book, *Hartford in Olden Time*, a nineteenth-century local historian named Isaac Stuart succinctly summarized the qualifications for America's earliest black governors. The man most likely to win office, he wrote, "was usually one of much note among [African-Americans], of imposing strength, firmness and volubility . . . quick to decide, ready to command, and able to

flog." If he had "a master of distinction" willing to treat black celebrants to a lavish election-day spread, so much the better. "Still it was necessary he should be an honest negro, and be, or appear to be, 'wise above his fellows.'"

Derby's governors included the formidable African-born Quosh and his son, Roswell Freeman. Members of another Derby dynasty, Governor Tobiah and his son, Gov. Eben Tobias, were reportedly direct descendants of an African prince. Eben Tobias's son, Hon. Eben D. Bassett, maintained the family's aristocratic tradition; after working to enlist African-Americans in the Civil War, he served as minister to Haiti during the Grant administration. In a June 1892 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* article, Jane De Forest Shelton quoted Bassett's tribute to the town she, too, called home: "My success in life I owe greatly to that American sense of fairness which was tendered me in old Derby."

The historian William D. Piersen speculated in his 1988 book, *Black Yankees*, that the custom of electing Negro officials, in some places called governors and in others designated kings, "probably began in the capital cities of the charter colonies. Slaves who accompanied their masters into town for the colonial elections decided to use their free time together to elect leaders and hold celebrations of their own." From Salem,

ILLUSTRATION BY N. ASCENCIO

Massachusetts, Newport, Rhode Island, and Hartford, Connecticut, the practice seems to have spread outward to nearby areas where most blacks lived.

A proclamation published in Hartford in May 1766 proves that black leadership was a fact of life in Connecticut well before the Revolution. It also indicates that black governors weren't necessarily chosen in what we would consider elections. "I, Governor Cuff of the Niegro's in the province of Connecticut," it reads in part, "do resign my Governmentship to John Anderson, Niegro man to Governor Skene. And I hope that you will obey him as you have Done me for this ten years' past." Cuff issued this order after being told that his handpicked successor could never win an election because, as the slave of Phillip Skene, a British officer, African-Americans considered him a Tory. Most New England blacks backed the patriot cause.

At times, black gubernatorial contests may have been no more than athletic competitions. The Connecticut historian Samuel Orcutt, whose *History of the Old Town of Derby* was first published in 1880, described one such event held at the town's Hawkins Point. The candidates—there were "four or five" in all—raced up a "steep and long sand-bank which . . . was almost impossible for mortal man to ascend." The winner, Eben Tobias, "came off with flying colors, for he was caparisoned with gay feathers, flowers and ribbons of red, white and blue, which gave a most laughable and imposing character to the whole ceremony."

The revelry that surrounded black elections tended to go on for days and foreshadowed today's national political conventions. The celebrations exerted so strong a pull on African-Americans that a Salem, Massachusetts, minister, writing at the time of the infamous witch trials, went so far as to call election day's influence on African-Americans "bewitching." He complained of being "obliged to in-



dulge [a young black girl from his household] in going to election as she was too restless at home to be of any use till these days were over. Such as have no eccentricities at any other time have them in these," he grumbled.

OTHERS IN THE WHITE community willingly abetted celebrants. Slaveholders loaned fancy garments to African-Americans of both sexes. (Black women, like their white counterparts, were denied the vote, but they did actively campaign for favorite candidates.) Some whites supplied horses, swords, and even guns to what was sometimes an entire retinue of color—a governor and various deputy officials along with the other revelers, all of whom participated in boisterous inaugural processions.

Merrymakers expected refreshments, including alcohol, which the governors' owners were obliged to provide. Since blacks generally conferred a master's social status on his slaves, most African-American governors were associated with whites of high standing. This was the case with the governors Jubal, Nelson, and William Weston, a father and his two sons, all of whom belonged to David Humphreys, one of Derby's two white favorite sons.

The man who would become Derby's first African-American governor, Quosh, arrived here enslaved sometime before the American Revolution. Like General Hum-

phreys, he participated in that war and was encamped at Danbury, Connecticut, before New York's Tory governor, Gen. William Tryon, set fire to the city. He served as bodyguard to a white officer, one Isaac Smith, also of Derby.

Like many African-American kings and governors, Quosh was physically imposing, "a man of herculean strength, a giant six-footer," wrote Samuel Orcutt, "and it is said of him that he could take a bull by the horns and the nose and

at once prostrate him to the ground. No one ever dared to molest or tried to make him afraid, and when he was approaching from a distance he awakened the sense of a coming thunder cloud." My noted fellow townsman was apparently formidable in other ways as well. Family members of his owner, a wealthy Derbyite named Agar Tomlinson, remembered him as "bossing" his master. Jane De Forest Shelton wrote that, after his election, Quosh's "dignity and self-importance were so sensibly affected that it was commonly said that 'Uncle Agar lived with the Governor.'"

Inevitably, some whites scoffed at black governors. The nineteenth-century author of a Norwich, Connecticut, history, for example, belittled one "sham dignitary . . . puffing and swelling with pomposity" as he rode in his post-election procession "with a slow, majestic pace, as if the universe was looking on."

Quite to the contrary, the historians Shelton and Orcutt both displayed ample respect for Gov. Quosh. Agar Tomlinson showed similar regard when, in his will, which was probated in 1800, he ordered that Quosh and his wife, Rose, be freed. Tomlinson bequeathed the man who had supervised his fellow slaves a "little house, the use of a certain tract of land, [where] a barn was to be built . . . a yoke of oxen, a good cow, and necessary farming implements. Quosh then took the name of Freeman, but as 'Governor Quosh' is best remembered," Shelton reported.

As for Gov. Roswell Freeman, Quosh's

son, Shelton showered him with praise in her *Harper's* piece, which appeared in June 1892, 15 years after he died at the age of 74. Roswell, she recalled, "was very tall, very thin, and very dark, by profession a fox-hunter, therefore called 'the farmers' benefactor,' and the board on which he dressed the fox-skins shows a record of 331 foxes killed. . . . As a sportsman, Roswell was always a welcome companion to the gentry of similar tastes. He was a man of principle, living quietly and soberly, and it is said, was never in a quarrel with any one. . . . No one had a higher standard of right, better principles, kinder instincts as friend and neighbor, was more respected in his position, or more worthy the good esteem of his contemporaries."

Roswell and his wife, Nancy, who survived him and lived into her nineties, had 13 children. Orcutt mentioned one of them, a sturdy daughter who "developed the muscle of her grandfather, Quosh, having repeatedly, it is said, lifted a barrel of cider into a cart or on a wagon."

In 1766 Cuff had described himself as governor of African-Americans "in the province of Connecticut," but other black

officials almost certainly presided elsewhere in the state by the time the Derby governors were in office. William Piersen concluded that the jurisdictions of the 31 African-American governors and kings he identified in his 1975 doctoral dissertation had contracted as black elections began to proliferate. While no election records exist, a phrase in Orcutt's book supports that view: Quosh "was probably the strongest and largest man that ever shared the gubernatorial honors of this commonwealth."

In many instances, African-American governors were officials in title alone, but the duties of some crossed ceremonial boundaries into judicial territory. These men played the role of arbiter in matters where blacks were the accused. When judging cases that involved their constituents, black governors had the last word. They could order punishments, which were sometimes severe, and the fact that judge and accused alike were black made the rulings all the more meaningful.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black governors drew no salaries, but self-respect is its own reward, and there's govern-

ment in the fact that African-Americans were able to confer a prestigious official title on members of their own communities during the slave era.

A combination of social factors ultimately ended the tradition of black elections. The historian Joseph P. Reidy blamed changing demographics, dislocations caused by the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, and shifting attitudes toward both slavery and the propriety of raucous public celebrations. In a sense, Reidy concluded, African-American society had outgrown a well-worn custom that, even with the prerogatives it offered, served whites by being "a safety valve for the blacks' pent-up frustration."

Black elections were far more, of course, if only because the widespread merriment surrounding their festivities showed a community of men, women, and children undaunted by a bitter fate. That alone elevates these now largely forgotten ceremonies to a significant place in American history. ✽

David Lander's article on Phillis Wheatley ("The Prodigy") appeared in the Summer 2002 issue.

THE GOVERNOR'S WIFE

The June 1892 issue of Harper's New Monthly Magazine included a conversation between Nancy Freeman (the widow of Roswell Freeman and the daughter-in-law of Quosh Freeman, both Derby governors) and the author, Jane De Forest Shelton. Mrs. Freeman was about 90 years old at the time.

Jane De Forest Shelton: How long have you lived in this house, Nancy?

Nancy Freeman: Ever since I come here a bride, 67 year ago.

JS: Were you born in slavery?

NF: No, I never was a slave; my parents were, but not in my memory. . . . My father's name was Daniel Thompson, and my mother's name was Tamar Steele; they took the names of the people that

owned 'em. When I was nine years old I went to live with Mr. Truman Coe, up in Coe's Lane, on Derby Hill, an' if I stayed till I was 18 I was to have a cow, an' if I stayed till I was 19 I was to have a cow an' a feather bed.

JS: And you stayed?

NF: Yes; but the way of it was, when I was 16 Roswell come an' asked if I would accept of his company, an' I accepted of it! But I stayed till I was 18, an' I got my cow, an' then I stayed another year, an' I got my feather bed. I don't think you'll find many girls now, white or colored, that'll wait two year, let alone three, as I did.

JS: Were you married at Mr. Coe's?

NF: To be sure! I tol' Miss Mabel

—that's Mr. Coe's sister, that lived there—that she'd better git that dress o' mine she was a-makin' finished by Monday by two o'clock, for I guessed I should need it, an' I thought they'd better git a couple o' loaves o' cake made, for there might be some folks a-comin', an' they'd like to have some to give 'em.

JS: Didn't they expect you to be married then?

NF: Oh, I guess they thought somethin' about it, but when they see Priest Swift a-comin', then I guess they begun to think.

JS: Were you married in the parlor?

NF: Of course! An' my folks was there, an' Roswell's, an' we had

some cake and currant wine. I'd helped pick the currants, an' squeezed 'em, an' I'd stirred the cake, an' I was awful proud to marry the Gov'nor's son.

Nancy Freeman around 1890.

