

Harry A. Butowsky

# Passing the Baton

## Preservation of African-American History

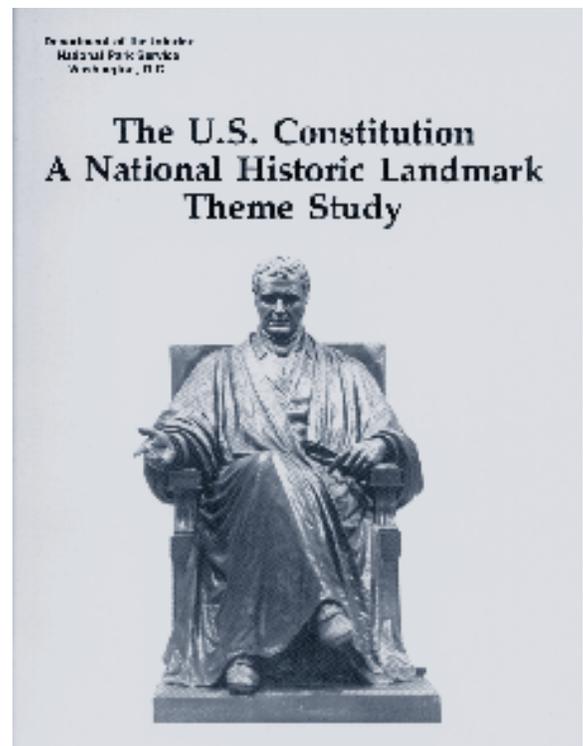
This issue of *CRM* is devoted entirely to African-American history. Millions of Americans recently marked African-American History Month, taking time to remember and reflect on the nearly four centuries of achievement and participation by African Americans in the history and culture of the United States. African-American History Month owes its origins to Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the father of African-American historiography. A prolific writer and founder of the Association for the Study of Negro History and Life, Woodson made numerous contributions to the study of African-American history and culture during the early years of this century. In 1921, Dr. Woodson established Associated Publishers, which published the *Journal of Negro History*. In 1926, he proposed and established an annual observance, "Negro History Week," which eventually evolved into African-American History Month.

In planning for this issue of *CRM*, the editors had intended to focus on the issues and history surrounding the famous school desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954. It soon became apparent that the scope of this issue would have to be expanded to cover many other areas of interest and importance within African-American history to accommodate the intersections between the preservation programs of the National Park Service and this history. The result of this effort is a series of articles published on the following pages. We hope that these articles reflect and indicate the true scope and depth of this history that involves the many parks, programs, and people of the National Park Service.

These articles are by no means to be seen as a comprehensive series for all aspects of African-American history. They are designed to bring about a greater awareness of and attention to this important aspect of American history and the cultural resource management issues faced by the National Park Service in the interpretation and preservation of this history.

The editors of this issue wish to thank Ray Harper, Superintendent of *Brown v. Board of*

Education NHP, and Cheryl Brown Henderson, Executive Director of the Brown Foundation, for their efforts to make this issue a success. We hope that this special issue will stimulate other articles of related interest for publication in future issues of *CRM*.



My personal association with African-American history began on March 13, 1984, when Chief Justice Warren Burger; Howard Westwood, senior partner of the law firm of Covington and Burling; and Edwin C. Bearss, Chief Historian of the National Park Service, met in Washington, DC, to discuss a proposed National Historic Landmark Theme Study of the Constitution of the United States as part of the commemoration of the Bicentennial of the Constitution, to be celebrated in 1987. At this meeting, the participants agreed that the purpose of the study was to identify sites associated with the Supreme Court's landmark decisions that have resulted in the growth of the

Constitution and have had such a tremendous effect on our nation, particularly in defining the powers of the branches of the federal government and the rights and responsibilities of the states and the people. The study was also to identify and recognize sites associated with the giants of the court. Shortly after this meeting, I was asked by Bearss to take charge of this study.

In my work on the Constitution National Historic Landmark Theme Study, I learned that a significant number of cases concerned issues involving African Americans within the context of the Civil Rights Movement. The most important of these cases, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, was generally recognized by historians and the American people to be one of the most important decisions issued by the Supreme Court in the history of this nation. The questions posed by the Brown decision concerned issues relating to the exercise of the sovereign power of the people of the United States to protect their natural rights from the arbitrary restriction and limits imposed by state and local governments. The purpose of these restrictions was to maintain a system of segregation of the races that predated the founding of the United States as an independent nation. As such, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* is important not only for the history of African Americans in their struggle to achieve basic guarantees of full civil rights but is also important for the interpretation of the constitutional history of the United States.

As I worked on the Constitution Theme Study, I realized that the interpretation of the history related to the Brown decision needed to be placed in a coherent framework within the context of the larger story of the striving for fundamental human rights. The central question in the Brown decision was the sharing of the American dream of equal justice and opportunity for all and the belated recognition of the pluralistic character of American society. As such, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was related to the history of the civil rights movement, women's liberation, immigration, ethnics and other minorities, and the evolution of the American Constitutional systems.

In its essence, the Brown decision reaffirmed the original intent of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution, which stated that "No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

The case also illustrated the struggle of the American people to achieve basic guarantees of full civil rights for all citizens of the United States.

The decision was a product of social and legal history, of the evolution of public attitudes and beliefs, and of the local and regional dynamics of communities such as Topeka.

In addition, the Brown decision was a culmination of the actions and commitment of ordinary citizens as well as leaders and jurists. Many individuals have joined the struggle for civil rights; it is an effort continued by innumerable individuals and organizations today. Their stories are examples of citizen participation in democratic processes that lead to better opportunities for all.

In this special issue of *CRM*, the articles by Jim Horton, "Roberts, Plessy and Brown"; Marty Blatt on the Slavery Conference at Lowell NHP; and Barbara Tagger and Sharon Brown on the Underground Railroad, tell us that the struggle for equal rights began long before 1954. Connie Slaughter in her article, "African Americans in the Civil War," reminds us of the participation of African Americans in the Civil War and the struggle to end slavery. The articles by Angela Bates, "The Kansas African-American History Trail"; and Marsha Starkey on the Niagara Movement, detail the continuing history of struggle and achievement by African Americans in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Ray Harper's "Beyond Black and White," Cheryl Brown Henderson's "The Brown Foundation Story," Jean Van Delinder's article on oral histories, and Rachel Franklin Weekly's article "Beyond Image and Icon..." bring the struggle for civil rights into the middle of the 20th century. Finally, the many other short articles, opinion pieces, and news notes illustrate the depth and commitment of the National Park Service and other public and private preservation agencies to bringing this history, in its rich complexity, to the American public.

These articles remind us that through the preservation programs of the National Park Service, state and local governments, and the private sector, we are connected to this history. In visiting our national parks and other historic sites, we learn about our past and of the history and events that commemorate our journey through the centuries as a free and sovereign nation. Through the preservation of historic sites, the baton of knowledge is passed from one generation of Americans to the next. Through the preservation of sites reflecting the full diversity of our history and culture, we ensure that our children will *remember* and *cherish* their birthright to liberty and equality, and justice for all.

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