

# **“A Brief History of African Americans and Forests”**

## **By R.L. Hendricks and James G. Lewis**

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On the Texas coast in November 1528, a violent storm washed ashore two small boats, the remnants of an ill-fated Spanish expedition. The sixteen survivors who made it ashore included Esteban, a black slave born in Morocco. Esteban was the first African to set foot in what would become Texas and the western United States.

From the very beginning of European exploration in the New World, black Africans have participated in every phase of the exploration, settlement, and development of North America. Thousands of Africans participated as explorers, adventures, entrepreneurs, servants, slaves, and free men. Nearly every step involved forests, from clearing woodlands for agriculturists, using forests as refuge, owning timber companies in a segregated society, to becoming professional natural resource managers. As we will see, however, over the last four centuries the African American experience with forests has changed from one of intimacy to one of disassociation. There are a number of theories for why this has happened. One is the inequitable distribution of recreation resources; another is social structural barriers of costs and inadequate information; and last is collective memories of the old Jim Crow days. The answer is probable a mix of all of them

**Colonial America** — Slaves lived closer to the land and understood the environment around them better than their masters. They had a knowledge that was both intimate and precise. They used the forest environment around them for sustenance and sometimes as a tool for sabotage. The importance of hunting and fishing as supplements to their diets is well documented. Southern doctors wrote medical texts that drew on slave knowledge of herbal medicines. The resulting cultural affinities are reflected in the stories, songs, and legends of the old South. The South Carolina Gullah word “Bur” as used in Bur Rabbit and Bur Bear, the well understood “tricksters” in the woods, remind us of these close relationships.

Africans were a part of forest industries from the earliest colonial days. Just forty years after Esteban arrived in North America, the Spanish of St. Augustine began importing slaves from Havana for sawing timber in 1565. The early sawmills were no more than huge pits where one man stood at the top and another at the bottom as they sawed great logs into planks. In the British colonies slave labor cleared, logged, sawed timber, and worked in the naval stores industries.

Enslaved Africans (Native Americans were also enslaved) cleared much of the forest for Southern agriculture. As woods workers, slaves worked as loggers and producers of naval stores. The eighteenth century saw turpentine (production of naval stores) emerge as a major industry in North Carolina and throughout the South, employing slaves in tasks which required a good deal of skill. Without these skills, the naval stores industry would not have grown and thrived.

Forests also became important venues for worship, spirituality, and escape. Former Africans tried to retain their own religious practices of which their Christian masters disapproved. To freely worship, they often slipped off into the nearby forests seeking freedoms otherwise denied them. Perhaps more importantly, forests provided a convenient means to escape. Slaves disappeared for days or weeks at a time so that they could reunite with family members. On some plantations, slaves would disappear

to prove their value, then negotiate concessions from their owners. These might include improved treatment of their families, visitation privileges, food, housing, clothing, etc. A famous example is Benjamin Montgomery who ran from Joseph Davis, the brother of Jefferson Davis, in 1836. When he was caught, rather than punishment, he and Davis reached a “mutual understanding” allowing him to learn to read and write, earn money, and manage a store.

Forests also provided safe haven for those wanting to permanently escape. Many left their homes and hid out in nearby forests, never leaving the immediate area. They hid in the woods in the day and moved about at night, visiting neighboring plantations to get food and other goods from helpful slaves. Spanish Florida, however, was a favored destination because the Spanish offered freedom. Free blacks established their own villages which served to attract more runaways from the Carolinas. As word spread about Florida, black migration increased, outraging the British colonists to the north. The colony of Georgia, established in part as a buffer between the Carolinas and Florida, initially banned slavery for fear of slaves running away to live in Florida’s forests. Later, in the 1800s some 100,000 slaves escaped to the North using forests to help hide their movements. Just prior to the Civil War this was called the Underground Railroad.

**United States, the first 130 years** — The temporary British acquisition of Florida in 1763 forced many blacks to evacuate fearing the British colonialists would again force them into slavery. Some blacks settled among the Seminole and Creek Indians in the forests and swamps of northern Florida that became known as Maroon communities. Marronage means “escape from slavery” and became a synonym for fierce, wild, and unbroken. The communities provided sanctuary for runaways before, during, and after the American Revolution. After the Revolutionary War, the new United States government viewed the several thousand blacks in Seminole country as a threat to slavery. By 1816, the U.S. military was attacking black and Seminole settlements driving the free blacks and their Indian allies from the area. Runaways established colonies in the woods and swamps of Louisiana that thrived throughout the antebellum period.

As an aside note, the Maroon communities in Haiti and Jamaica and the Guianas eventually formed the basis for these new emerging countries. Readers might be interested in this Smithsonian site on the [Maroon Cultures in the Americas](http://www.hsc.edu/museum/exhibits/exhibitmaroon.html)  
<http://www.hsc.edu/museum/exhibits/exhibitmaroon.html>

The Civil War and the Industrial Revolution brought the beginnings of change in African American perceptions of forests. Whereas forests once provided substance and sanctuary, after the Civil War they became something to be feared. The Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations that opposed black freedom took advantage of forest cover to mask their movements, and forests became the venue for lynchings. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, a black lynching occurred on average one every three and one-half days.

In the late nineteenth century, as farming proved increasingly unprofitable, African Americans found alternative sources of employment in the forests. Even at the height of segregation, African American entrepreneurs became managers and owners of timber companies. In 1910, there were 195 black owners of timber companies and 111 were foremen. African Americans comprised about twenty-five percent of all employees of forest industry, which now provided year-round employment, though always at lower wages than for whites. The chance for better wages and living conditions in the lumber and charcoal industries outside the South prompted many to move during and after World War I. Another force pushing forest workers and small operators from the woods was mechanization. It eliminated jobs and increased the amount

of capital required to operate a lumbering operation, capital not available to African Americans in much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There was another side of working in the woods, and turpentine is the example. Prior to and following the antebellum period, the rural South found the naval stores industry its third biggest employer. Over 80 percent of the labor force was African American. Turpentine was so much associated with African Americans that in the south the term “Turpentine Negro” was common. It was an industry very hard on those trapped in this company store system which was nothing more than a form of oppression. Multiple generations of families toiled in remote frontier areas of the South as turpentine workers. Whereas the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century American historian Frederick Turner argued wilderness promoted notions of democracy and the corruptive influence of cities, the black culture learned to associate wilderness with the worst kind of tyranny. Even within the African American community, turpentiners were considered the roughest and most ignorant of African Americans. This contributed to what Eldridge Cleaver said: “In terms of seeking status in America, blacks—principally the black bourgeoisie (middle class)—have come to measure their own value according to the number of degrees they are away from the soil.”

During the so-called era of the Indian wars in the West, roughly fourteen thousand African American men served in the segregated infantry and cavalry units in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. The Indians called them the Buffalo Soldiers. The cavalry and infantry expeditions, in order to find and capture non-reservation Indians, traversed (and explored) parts of the west never before visited by non-Indians. In 1903, the Buffalo Soldiers were assigned to patrol the national parks in California, including Yosemite, General Grant, Sequoia, and the Presidio. Captain Charles Young, the third black West Point graduate, was named Acting Superintendent of Sequoia National Park. The Buffalo Soldiers continued to patrol the parks until the National Park Service was created in 1916.

**The Modern Era** — The Great Depression prompted the federal government to establish many work relief programs, one of the more famous being the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC employed some 200,000 young black men who were out of work to carry out much-needed conservation work on national forests and other public lands. Although the law specifically banned racial discrimination, CCC Director Robert Fechner, a conservative southern labor leader, segregated the CCC and imposed restrictions. African American men would not be sent out of their home states, black camps would not be forced on local communities, and blacks would not be selected according to economic need, even though they were often in much more dire economic condition than their white counterparts.

The martial lifestyle of the CCC, however, readied men for military service during World War II and African American were ready to serve. As an example, the Army established the first all-black battalion of paratroopers, the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion known as the “Triple Nickles.” These men served as smokejumpers in the Pacific Northwest and northern California dubbed Operation Firefly. Their mission was to neutralize any of the 10,000 Japanese fire bombs launched by balloon and sent to the United States. Based in Pendleton, Oregon, and Chico, California, the Triple Nickles participated in thirty-six missions from mid-July to early October 1945 making twelve hundred jumps and pioneering methods of combating forest fires still used today. After the war, the battalion was sent back to North Carolina and absorbed into other airborne units.

Meanwhile, the migration of African Americans from the South to northern and western urban centers continued, hitting its peak in the 1940s. It was another contributor to the loss many African Americans feel for forests and the land. Those who remained in forest industry jobs saw employment conditions improve after World War II; although the number of African Americans in forest industries began to drop in the 1950s.

In the post-war era, “the disconnect” between African Americans and forests continued to grow. High school counselors, both white and black, dissuaded African American students from considering careers in agriculture. The future regional forester Charles “Chip” Cartwright was discouraged by his professors at Virginia Tech from entering forestry. Happily, he ignored the naysayers and joined the USDA Forest Service after graduating in 1970. One of the first African American foresters in the agency, in 1979 he became the first African American district ranger, the first African American forest supervisor in 1988, and in 1994 the first black regional forester. He was succeeded in 1998 by Eleanor “Ellie” Towns, the first African American woman regional forester.

In the 1970s and 80s, the Forest Service began diversifying its workforce to meet requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1970 by hiring social scientists, botanists, biologists, and other specialists from outside of forestry and engineering. At the same time, the agency was under pressure to hire more women and minorities. Despite these trends, relations between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and black “1890” land-grant colleges deteriorated (Congress established black land-grant schools in 1890 when southern land-grant schools refused to admit black students). In response, the USDA launched its “1890s schools” initiative providing millions of dollars to recruit minority students for summer and permanent employment. Several agencies within Agriculture have funded full scholarships for African American students interested in careers in natural resources. Although, only one “1890 college” has an accredited professional forestry program, most schools offer natural resource or environmental science programs.

In parts of the deep South, African Americans today control a significant portion of private forest land, although few studies have been conducted to understand the relationships of forests to minority communities. It has been observed, however, that minority landowners are in danger of being left behind in the changing economics of forest management and ownership. Minority land ownership is falling faster than white ownership.

Overall, the recruitment and retention of African Americans in forestry and the USDA Forest Service has proven difficult. The natural resource professions are not attractive to young urban African Americans. Young people from urban backgrounds sent to field offices often experience culture shock and isolation in predominately rural white towns. One African American lab technician working in eastern Oregon told then Chief Jack Ward Thomas (1993–96) that he enjoyed the work and had no complaints about the job or his fellow employees, but being the only black in town made it very hard.

As of 2002, African Americans constituted only 3.3 percent (about 1,300 of 44,000) of the total Forest Service workforce, compared with 6.1 percent for Hispanics and 3.9 percent for American Indians. Regardless of the numbers, in recent years African Americans could be found in all phases and levels of natural resource management. These include Janice McDougale as Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry, Gloria Manning as Associate Deputy Chief, National Forest System; Robin Thompson as Assistant Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry; Robert Lewis, who spent the last six years of his thirty-four-year career as the Deputy Chief of Research

and Development; and career National Park Service employee Robert Stanton served as that agency's director from 1997 to 2001.

**Reflections**—Perhaps more than with most histories, this “Brief History of African Americans and Forests” deserves to be put into context. Much of the literature in this area, and there is not much, casts the past in terms of explaining slavery, white versus black or the disparity of black versus white attitudes regarding environmental and natural resources. It is easy to unconsciously accept that something is lacking and needs explanation. The cultural framework of those who write the histories, whether white or black, presumes a reverence for natural values, wilderness experiences, and botany as the norm. It is probably not the norm in most societies around the world. As Cassandra Johnson, Josh McDaniel, and others suggest, western European and American environmental attitudes actually reflect a difference in core American values. Those values are rooted in a white America's frontier ethic, perceptions of the origins of American individualism, nation building, and romantic notions of exploring unexplored territories. These are in turn traceable to the European philosophers Rousseau, Voltaire and Hume. They are powerful notions that have shaped our notions of society, the corruptive influence of cities and the intrinsic rights of man. These ideas, new for their time, are written into the American constitution, ignited the French Revolution; provide one basis for the attraction of images such as Paul Gauguin's painting of South Pacific natives and the popularity of noble characters in white American literature such as Chingachgook in *Last of the Mohicans* and Moby Dick's Queequeg (and Tarzan). These are values are not shared by African Americans, and it might be argued, were prevented from sharing in them. And yet, the African American Audrey Peterman, recently writing in *National Parks and Conservation Magazine*, describes her life-altering passion of visiting the national parks. She has been amazed at how much of her heritage she finds in the parks but is saddened at how few other blacks she sees in the parks. She is concerned that this national “sterling legacy” cannot be sustained if the fastest growing demographic groups in America have no connection with them. The same can be said of all of America's forest lands.

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