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Rhett S. Jones

Brown University

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Book Review Essays

Black New England: Building on The Work of Lorenzo Johnston Greene

by
Rhett S. Jones
Brown University

The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era by Robert J. Cottrol (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982)

Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth Century New England by William D. Piersen (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988)

With the death this spring of Dr. Lorenzo J. Greene, Professor Emeritus of History at Lincoln University (Missouri), historians of blacks in New England have lost one of their pioneers, a man who continued to support the scholarly study of Afro-Americans in the region throughout his life. Dr. Greene, who was 89 at his death, was best known as the author of *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (1942). Benjamin Quarles wrote of the book, "To it we are indebted for three things, if not more—for filling a gap in the literature of American colonial history, for portraying a hitherto neglected aspect of the Negro's role in our country's past and, finally, for presenting us with as fine an exhibition of the historian's craft as one could wish." Dr. Greene served for nearly half a century on the faculty of Lincoln, one of the nation's historically black colleges, and while in Missouri was in the vanguard of that state's civil rights movement. While much of Dr. Greene's scholarship in later years was centered on blacks in Missouri and in the nation as a whole, he continued to interest himself in New England blacks. He was actively involved in the work of the Parting Ways Museum of Afro-American Ethnohistory, based in Plymouth, Massachusetts, over the course of the early 1980s, and this work has helped to forge better understanding of black culture in southeastern Massachusetts.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of Dr. Greene's work is the continued interest in the history of blacks in New England. Two recent books make important contributions to knowledge of black life in the region prior to the mid-point of the nineteenth century. The authors of these books, Robert Cottrol and William Piersens, agree that there were basically two patterns of black life in late colonial and early national New England. In one pattern black Yankees lived in isolation from one another on small farms and in tiny

villages where there might not be other blacks for miles around. In his studies of blacks in Maine, Randolph Stakeman (forthcoming) has shown that perhaps as much as a third of black Mainers lived largely in isolation from all other blacks. But the other pattern of black life reflected the tendency of whites to concentrate blacks in certain areas, employing them at similar tasks. Stakeman found a sizeable concentration of Afro-Yankees in Portland, Maine, with other concentrations located in Maine's coastal towns. Cottrol found early eighteenth century Rhode Island blacks concentrated in Newport and on the plantations of the Narragansett Country. Following the American Revolution, as Providence surpassed Newport as a center of trade and began to industrialize, it became the center of black life. In Massachusetts, Boston was the home of the largest number of blacks, while in Connecticut on the eve of the Revolution blacks were concentrated in such coastal towns as New London, Stonington, and Lyme.

These concentrations of black people, as Cottrol and Piersen clearly demonstrate, made it possible for black people to come together, to create a social life, and to form, establish, and support black institutions. Before black Yankees could move to create organizations, however, they had to doubly emancipate themselves from white folk. They first had to win their freedom; but even when that was accomplished, Afro-Yankees still had to escape from white households. For all of the colonial period and into the early national period, blacks tended to live with white families, as domestic servants, as apprentices to a trade, or as employees. Data gathered by Cottrol in *The Afro-Yankees* show that as late as 1800 only 38% of Providence blacks lived in households headed by blacks. In other words, despite the concentration of blacks in such commercial centers as Providence, they did not live in separate black communities. This fact made it difficult for New England blacks to escape the influence of white folk and to construct separate institutions of their own. Recent studies of slavery (Gary A. Puckrein, *Little England: Plantation Society and Anglo-Barbadian Politics*, 1984; David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antiqua*, 1985; Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake*, 1986; Mechal Sobel, *The World they Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth Century Virginia*, 1987) reveal that even in those areas where blacks made up a large percentage of the population the construction of a separate black culture and black institutions was more difficult than the historical scholarship of the 1970s suggests.

One of the most effective barriers to black acceptance of white ideology was the attitude of white folk themselves. As Robert Twombly and Robert H. Moore show in their 1967 article, "Black Puritan:

The Negro in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts,” white residents of the Bay Colony; increasingly uncomfortable with blacks as the seventeenth century drew to an end, gradually began to pass laws aimed at better controlling black behavior. Piersen points out that black Yankees developed a derisive folklore that mocked what blacks saw as pompous pretension among whites in their attempts to dominate Afro-Americans.

Other aspects of white life, Cottrol and Piersen agree, blacks found less amusing. While many black Yankees became Christians, others objected to the growing eighteenth-century tendency among New England’s whites to segregate the Lord’s House. Blacks were relegated either to the rear of churches or to balconies specially constructed for them. According to Cottrol, some Providence blacks scornfully referred to these separate seats as “pigeon holes.” Later, Providence blacks were to term the section “Nigger heaven” and refuse to attend segregated churches. Cottrol offers detail on the evolution of Providence’s black churches, formed for the most part by black Christians who would

accept neither segregation nor exclusion from the governance of their congregations. Piersen argues that Christianity was not in harmony with the emotional and intellectual needs of black folk. As Piersen sees it, even those blacks who were born in New England continued to be influenced by West African religious beliefs. Rhett Jones’ 1986 article, “Plantation Slavery in the Narragansett Country of Rhode Island,” concludes that while many blacks attended church in southern Rhode Island, many others did not and were believed by whites to practice non-Christian rituals.

In addition to exploring such issues as black Yankee demographics, community formation, folklore, and family life, Cottrol and Piersen also examine the roots of black political thought in the region, the election of black officials, the meaning of slavery, and black mastery of the rhetoric of the American Revolution. Together Cottrol and Piersen make excellent contributions to the expanding knowledge of Afro-Yankees, contributions in the finest tradition of scholarship established by Lorenzo Greene.

Tri-Racial Enculturation: Red, White, and Black in The South

by
Rhett S. Jones
Brown University

The Cherokee Ghost Dance: Essays on the Southeastern Indians, 1789-1861 by William G. McLoughlin (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984)

White Society in the Antebellum South by Bruce Collins (New York: Longman, 1985)

Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage by William Loren Katz (New York: Atheneum, 1986)

In an essay published in *The Western Journal of Black Studies* (1977) I pointed out that while for many years the study of relations between blacks and Native Americans had been neglected by historians and other scholars, recent studies had acknowledged that red folk and black often influenced one another. What I did not point out was that, for the United States, studies of tri-racial contact were almost nonexistent. Things were quite different in studies of Latin America where the realities of social and

sexual contact among all three races were reflected not only in works by historians but in those of anthropologists and others. Unfortunately, students of the United States and the 13 colonies that preceded its formation have, until recently, tended to focus either on black/white relations or on relations between whites and Amerindians. Seldom have they coped with the complex reality that all three races were present from the seventeenth century English settlements on. To discuss only one race or the relations between any two is to distort the past.

Each of these recently published books is notable for three reasons. First, each has approached southern history by recognizing that three races were present, each conscious of and influenced by the other two. Second, in very different ways, each author is influenced by the values, normative expectations, and behavior of the other two. Third, each traces the evolution of tri-racial enculturation through time. All conclude relations among the three and their mixed blood offspring races were quite different in the mid-nineteenth century than they had been 200 years earlier.

Beyond that the works are quite different. William McLoughlin, a long-time student of relations between the Cherokee, their black slaves, and whites, perhaps offers the most balanced account. McLoughlin, who has published three other book-length works on the slaveholding Cherokee, places their changing relations with their black bondsmen