

INTRODUCTION:
A CONSIDERATION OF
NEW JERSEY AFRO-AMERICAN
HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

BY CLEMENT ALEXANDER PRICE

For two generations historians of the New Jersey Afro-American experience have examined the problems posed by racial injustice in an evolving democracy. Beginning with the pioneering work of Marion Thompson Wright in the 1930s, scholars reconsidered the state's history from the vantage point of African enslavement and the years of racial injustice which followed that profound ordeal. As a result of their work, we know that New Jersey's legal traditions, labor systems, communities, and political behavior were deeply influenced by racial intolerance. We know, too, that long after Africans settled the state, they were treated with a disdain largely unknown to recently arrived European immigrants. Their story, at once tragic and poignant, is one that many students of the past easily recognize as an enduring metaphor for the larger history of the American nation.

Nonetheless, historians tell us that the wrongs fostered by racial injustice were often tempered by episodes of individual and group uplift by those of African ancestry, demonstrations of the mettle of a proud and resourceful people. Mindful that slavery was wrong, and seeking to minimize the horrors of bondage, blacks survived it. As free men and women, they protected the integrity of their culture, laid the foundation for their communities, contributed to the wartime defense of the Republic, and, in spite of cycles of white racist reaction, became as much an American people as those who despised them.

This following study by L.A. Greene of Seton Hall University is a synthesis of the major developments and themes in New Jersey Afro-American history, a unique and timely contribution to our understanding of the susceptibility of an ostensibly democratic society to racial intolerance and the role that New Jersey blacks played in expanding the concept of freedom for themselves and others. It continues in the tradition of Afro-American historical scholarship which has always reminded the nation of the irreconcilable differences that exist between its democratic ideals and

its treatment of Africans. The study of the struggle by blacks to redefine themselves in a hostile environment and force the nation to expand the meaning of democracy is one of the most compelling historical constructions of the twentieth century.

New Jersey has been an important theater for the unfolding of the drama of racial injustice and black uplift. Greene demonstrates that this northern state with a history marked by extraordinary achievements attendant on modern industrial and social development was long resistant to all but the most measured improvements in the lives of blacks. During the colonial period, its laws reflected the importance of African bondage in economic development and the nascent concept of white racial superiority. During the nineteenth century, belief in the importance of the individual in the society grew and the ideals of freedom were fostered by the Civil War, but New Jersey denied suffrage to its black males and kept most in an impoverished condition. In our own century, New Jersey's population became more heterogeneous and prosperous, but most blacks, whether long-time residents or recent migrants, could expect few opportunities to demonstrate their worth to the larger society. The difficulties they faced in taking advantage of the expanding opportunities afforded whites in New Jersey had parallels to setbacks faced by their forebears when the state was cultivating a democratic culture.

Greene's examination of this historical canvas draws from and augments the scholarly work produced over the past two generations and is the first general treatment of the history of New Jersey blacks since the 1988 publication of Giles R. Wright's *Afro-Americans in New Jersey: A Short History*. The studies by Wright and Greene exemplify what John Hope Franklin has called the fourth generation of Afro-American historical scholarship, which came into vogue in the 1960s and 1970s. In many works written during and since those decades, the realities of resistance, Afro-American cultural traditions, and transcendent racial expression by blacks redefined historical inquiry. While Wright explored the enduring themes of African and Afro-American settlement from the colonial period to the near present and the creative adjustment blacks made to the rigors and opportunities of New Jersey life, Greene focuses upon the extraordinary racial obstacles fostered by the state's political and economic culture and the efforts by blacks to improve their status within the constraints imposed by white racism. In both we sense the twilight of a productive period of historical study which began in the 1930s with Marion Thompson Wright and now closes as new approaches are made to the study of the nuances of black life under pressure.

The story of Afro-Americans in New Jersey Greene aptly calls "the ambiguous legacy of a long journey from slavery to freedom begun more than three generations ago in the slave ports of Charleston, South Carolina, and Perth Amboy, New Jersey." At a time when the decline of local and

state historical literacy imperils the ability of New Jersey residents to cope with changes nearly as dramatic and seemingly as threatening as those witnessed generations ago, this persuasively argued study is another symbol of the tenacity of black life and of its contribution to the betterment of our society.

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