

AN EPIC JOURNEY THROUGH 500 YEARS
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY



THE AFRICAN AMERICANS

MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

with HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

Six-part series premiering October 22, 8 pm on PBS (check local listings)

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EPISODE SUMMARIES

Episode One:

The Black Atlantic (1500 - 1800)

Tuesday, October 22, 8-9 p.m.

The Black Atlantic explores the truly global experiences that created the African-American people. Beginning a full century before the first documented “20-and-odd” slaves who arrived at Jamestown, Virginia, the episode portrays the earliest Africans, both slave and free, who arrived on these shores. But the transatlantic slave trade would soon become a vast empire connecting three continents. Through stories of individuals caught in its web, like a 10-year-old girl named Priscilla who was transported from Sierra Leone to South Carolina in the mid-18th century, we trace the emergence of plantation slavery in the American South. The late 18th century saw a global explosion of freedom movements, and *The Black Atlantic* examines what that Era of Revolutions — American, French and Haitian — would mean for African Americans and for slavery in America.

Episode Two:

The Age of Slavery (1800 - 1860)

Tuesday, October 29, 8-9 p.m.

The Age of Slavery illustrates how black lives changed dramatically in the aftermath of the American Revolution. For free black people in places like Philadelphia, these years were a time of tremendous opportunity. But for most African Americans, this era represented a new nadir. King Cotton fueled the rapid expansion of slavery into new territories, and a Second Middle Passage forcibly relocated African Americans from the Upper South into the Deep South. Yet as slavery intensified, so did resistance. From individual acts to mass rebellions, African Americans demonstrated their determination to undermine and ultimately eradicate slavery in every state in the nation. Courageous individuals, such as Harriet Tubman, Richard Allen and Frederick Douglass, played a crucial role in forcing the issue of slavery to the forefront of national politics, helping to create the momentum that would eventually bring the country to war.

Episode Three: Into the Fire (1861 - 1896)

Tuesday, November 5, 8-9 p.m.

Into the Fire examines the most tumultuous and consequential period in African-American history: the Civil War and the end of slavery, and Reconstruction’s thrilling but tragically brief “moment in the sun.” From the beginning, African Americans were agents of their own liberation — forcing the Union to confront the issue of slavery by fleeing the plantations, and taking up arms to serve with honor in the United States Colored Troops. After Emancipation, African Americans sought to realize the promise of freedom — rebuilding families shattered by slavery; demanding economic, political and civil rights; even winning elected office. Just a few years later, however, an intransigent South mounted a swift and vicious campaign of terror to restore white supremacy and roll back African-American rights. Yet the achievements of Reconstruction would remain very much alive in the collective memory of the African-American community.

Episode Four: Making a Way Out of No Way (1897 - 1940)

Tuesday, November 12, 8-9 p.m.

Making a Way Out of No Way portrays the Jim Crow era, when African Americans struggled to build their own worlds within the harsh, narrow confines of segregation. At the turn of the 20th century, a steady stream of African Americans left the South, fleeing the threat of racial violence, and searching for better opportunities in the North and the West. Leaders like Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey organized, offering vastly different strategies to further black empowerment and equality. Yet successful black institutions and individuals were always at risk. At the same time, the ascendance of black arts and culture showed that a community with a strong identity and sense of pride was taking hold in spite of Jim Crow. “The Harlem Renaissance” would not only redefine how America saw African Americans, but how African Americans saw themselves.

Episode Five: Rise! (1940 - 1968)

Tuesday, November 19, 8-9 p.m.

Rise! examines the long road to civil rights, when the deep contradictions in American society finally became unsustainable. Beginning in World War II, African Americans who helped fight fascism abroad came home to face the same old racial violence. But this time, mass media — from print to radio and TV — broadcast that injustice to the world, planting seeds of resistance. And the success of black entrepreneurs and entertainers fueled African-American hopes and dreams. In December 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, heralding the dawn of a new movement of quiet resistance, with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as its public face. Before long, masses of African Americans practiced this nonviolent approach at great personal risk to integrate public schools, lunch counters and more. As the civil rights movement scored one historic victory after another, non-violence was still all too often met with violence — until finally, enough was enough. By 1968, Dr. King, the apostle of non-violence, would be assassinated, unleashing a new call for “Black Power” across the country.

Episode Six: It’s Nation Time (1968 – 2013)

Tuesday, November 26, 8-9 p.m.

After 1968, African Americans set out to build a bright new future on the foundation of the civil rights movement’s victories, but a growing class disparity threatened to split the black community in two. As hundreds of African Americans won political office across the country and the black middle class made unprecedented progress, larger economic and political forces isolated the black urban poor in the inner cities, vulnerable to new social ills and an epidemic of incarceration. Yet African Americans of all backgrounds came together to support Illinois’ Senator Barack Obama in his historic campaign for the presidency of the United States. When he won in 2008, many hoped that America had finally transcended race and racism. By the time of his second victory, it was clear that many issues, including true racial equality, remain to be resolved. Now we ask: How will African Americans help redefine the United States in the years to come?

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Executive Producer, Writer, Presenter

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University and the director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research. He is editor-in-chief of *The Root* and the Oxford African American Studies Center. An award-winning scholar, he is author and co-author of 17 literary works and the producer and host of numerous critically acclaimed PBS series, including *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*. An influential cultural critic, he has published a cover story for *Time* magazine, as well as numerous articles for *The New Yorker*.

Professor Gates earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in English Literature from Clare College at the University of Cambridge. He received a B.A. in English Language and Literature, *summa cum laude*, from Yale University. His many accolades include: election into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 51 honorary degrees, a MacArthur Foundation Genius Award, a George Polk Award for Social Commentary, a Ralph Lowell Award, a National Humanities Medal, *Time*’s “25 Most Influential Americans,” *Ebony*’s “100 Most Influential Black Americans.” He was inducted into the Sons of the American Revolution after tracing his lineage to John Redman, a Free Negro who fought in the Revolutionary War.

Sing me your folk songs and I’ll tell you about the character, customs, and history of your people.

— Paul Robeson, 1898-1976 [*“Songs of My People,” Soviet Music (July 1949)*]

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

— Martin Luther King, Jr., 1929-1968 [*Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963)*]

Anger, used, does not destroy. Hatred does.

— Audre Lorde 1934-1992 [*“Eye to Eye,” Sister Outsider (1984)*]

Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you’re a man, you take it.

— Malcolm X, 1925-1965 [*Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (1965)*]

You don’t fight racism with racism, the best way to fight racism is with solidarity.

— Bobby Seale 1936- [*Interview with Wallace Terry (1970)*]

A community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess.

— A. Philip Randolph, 1889-1979 [*Why Should We March? (1942)*]

I won’t have it made until the most underprivileged Negro in Mississippi can live in equal dignity with anyone else in America.

— 1919-1972 [*New York Post (1960)*]

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes...Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world — I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

— Zora Neale Hurston, 1891-1960 [*“How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928)*]

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NINE LIVES THAT HAVE SHAPED AMERICA

Alex Haley • (1921-1992) • Writer

One of the greatest ongoing tragedies of slavery is its anonymity. History records few names and fewer stories of the millions who endured the Middle Passage and the first two centuries of slavery in particular. It has largely fallen to writers to research and conjure the human face of these earliest African American experiences, and none have done so as successfully as Alex Haley, whose 1976 novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*

Hannah Bond • (????-????) • Writer

Because so much of pre-Civil War African American history must be painstakingly assembled from incomplete or obscure evidence, important figures have sometimes only been discovered and celebrated long after their own time. This is the case with Hannah Bond, an enslaved woman in North Carolina recently revealed to be the author (under the pen name of Hannah Crafts) of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* — a novel depicting a slave’s life in the 1850s. The books, which according to Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Harriet Tubman • (1820?-1913) Underground Railroad Conductor

In 1849, fearing that her enslaved family would be torn apart by auction and convinced that she could only save them as a free woman; Harriet Tubman escaped from Maryland to the North through the informal abolitionist network of safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. The next year, she returned to the South as an Underground Railroad “conductor” to rescue family

George Washington Carver • (1864-1943) • Scientist

Born into slavery, George Washington Carver went on to become the first African American to attain prominence in the sciences. Hired in 1896 by Booker T. Washington to head the Agriculture Department of the Tuskegee Institute — a celebrated African American college — Carver remained there until his death, attaining such status and celebrity that in 1949, *Time*

W.E.B. Du Bois • (1868-1963) • Writer & Sociologist

The first African American to earn a Harvard doctorate, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was one of the most respected and outspoken intellectual and political figures of the Jim Crow era. As a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Du Bois insisted on full equal rights for African Americans and opposed contemporaries like Booker T. Washington who advocated more incremental gains. He championed a strong leadership role for a small but classically

Zora Neale Hurston • (1891?-1960) • Writer & Anthropologist

Growing up in an all-black community in Florida at the turn of the twentieth century, Zora Neale Hurston was one of a very few African Americans of her generation to have her formative years untainted by the direct experience of racism. She went on to establish herself as one of the central figures of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance with her unashamed celebration of

Mahalia Jackson • (1911-1972) • Gospel Singer

Born into poverty, young Mahalia Jackson found an early refuge in her church, and transcendence in its choir. By the 1930s she was touring professionally as a gospel singer and by the 1940s and 50s she’d established herself as an international star. Despite her commercial success, “The Queen of Gospel” refused throughout her career to sing secular music, preferring to “sing

Thurgood Marshall • (1908-1993) • Lawyer & Supreme Court Justice

As Chief Counsel of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Thurgood Marshall was a central figure in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. His most famous legal victory was the landmark 1954 case *Brown vs. Board of Education*, in which Marshall successfully

Spike Lee • (1957-) • Film Director

Movies have historically been a difficult medium for African Americans to establish themselves in — especially behind the camera. Despite this, perhaps no other artist has so vividly captured the contemporary challenges of African American life as Spike Lee. His groundbreaking films — in particular 1989’s

Our whole constitutional heritage rebels at the thought of giving government the power to control men’s minds.

— Thurgood Marshall, 1908-1993 [*Unanimous Opinion, Stanley v. Georgia (1969)*]

Hope is the bedrock of this nation. The belief that our destiny will not be written for us, but by us, by all those men and women who are not content to settle for the world as it is, who have the courage to remake the world as it should be.

— Barack Obama, 1961- [*Iowa Caucus Victory Speech (2008)*]

You are not judged by the height you have risen, but from the depth you have climbed.

— Frederick Douglass, 1818-1895 [*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881)*]

There is in this world no such force as the force of a person determined to rise. The human soul cannot be permanently chained.

— W.E.B. DuBois, 1868-1963 [*Address at the New York City Republican Club (March 5, 1910)*]

I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to: liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive.

— Harriet Tubman, 1821-1913 [*Sarah H. Bradford, Harriet, The Moses of Her People (1869)*]

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