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Notes from the Underground

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The Historical Underground

The Treacherous Web of General James Wilkinson

By: Sarah Martin, Student

James Wilkinson was born in Calvert County, Maryland on March 24, 1757. His family lived an upper-middle class life and before his father died, he told Wilkinson that if he "ever put up with an insult," he would "disinherit" him. At age nineteen, Wilkinson served alongside the colonists in the American Revolution, and he climbed the ladder of promotion all the way from Captain to Brigadier General. During the war, however, rumors had spread that he was involved in the Conway Cabal: a supposed plan to replace George Washington with Horatio Gates. This would not be the last time he was involved in a conspiracy. Regardless, after the war, he was asked by George Washington himself to move to the Kentucky territory, which was then owned by Virginia. After his move, Wilkinson began to take on the issue of independence or some kind of recognition for Kentucky. At the time, despite having won their War of Independence, those living in western territories did not have rights to trade on the Mississippi River. Wilkinson complained to the American government to no effect. Eventually, he finally decided to strike a deal with Spanish officials in Louisiana.

Swearing allegiance to the Spanish crown, he vowed to promote their interests in the West in exchange for them giving him and others large land grants in Mississippi. Wilkinson and his fellow conspirators would also receive pensions from the Spanish government. In exchange, the Spanish asked Wilkinson and his conspirators to try to separate Kentucky from the new United States in order to weaken the new and growing country. The Spanish saw the U.S. as a threat, which should be dealt with before it became too powerful. In correspondences between Wilkinson and the Spanish officials, he was referred to as "Agent 13" – these letters of his were also encrypted in code. Wilkinson was very skilled at managing connections in the guise of doing it for the greater good, but many including Aaron Burr and Meriwether Lewis would soon find out that those caught in the web he was spinning often found themselves being thrown to the wolves.

In 1800, Aaron Burr lost the presidency to Thomas Jefferson and instead was bumped to Vice President. Burr was outraged, he had been pining for this moment and was let down by the vote. He sincerely did not care about being Vice President, so he turned his sights on becoming governor of New York State. This was a prized and powerful office. Unfortunately, he lost the election to Morgan Lewis. During the campaign, Alexander Hamilton had publically denounced Burr and declared him to be a "dangerous man." Burr was furious, and he challenged Hamilton to a duel! On July 11, 1804, Burr killed Hamilton, but this victory destroyed Burr. His political career was now just as dead as the United States' *former* Secretary of Treasury. Under the eyes of scrutiny and still angry at the Federal government, Burr looked for more opportunities. Upon meeting Wilkinson they immediately become allies. The two began looking over maps of what is now Mexico and Texas, all of which at that time was New Spain. Wilkinson gave Burr's name to his Spanish official friends in Louisiana. Burr, however, did not care much for their counsel. Instead he decided to travel around looking for people in the western territories to back up his plans for a possible separation of the western states and territories from the eastern states. Wilkinson then received a ciphered letter from Burr explaining a plan for an armed takeover of New Orleans and an invasion of Spanish territory. Wilkinson alerted Thomas Jefferson, and Burr was intercepted and put on trial. At the time, since the United States and Spain were on good terms, Jefferson wanted to stop any aggressive activity against them. Oddly enough, Wilkinson ended up incriminating himself – he was a part of that ciphered letter and a part of the plan. In the end, a lack of evidence did not find Burr guilty and he was acquitted. Wilkinson, however, was court marshaled.

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were sent off with the rest of the Discovery Corps to conduct research and map out the west, Wilkinson was still in correspondence and in cahoots with the Spanish crown. He tipped off the Spanish officials, who sent out Pedro Vial and José Jarvet to work with the Native American tribes in finding a solution, or a way, to intercept them and stop them from reaching their destination and spreading the influence of the United States among other tribes. They failed to do so. When Lewis returned, Jefferson appointed him as the Governor of the upper Louisiana territory, *replacing Wilkinson*.

On October 11, 1809, Lewis stopped by at a little inn located on the Natchez Trace trail in Tennessee while on his way to Washington D.C. with some questionable information he had gathered and was ready to present to officials. Unfortunately, that night he "committed suicide." The innkeeper, Mrs. Grinder, recalled that when Lewis arrived he seemed very anxious, and that he had been talking or mumbling to himself. When she heard the gunshots, she did not go to his aid as her husband was not present and she was too afraid. When Lewis's body was found, he had two gunshots (one to the head, one to the abdomen) and stab wounds as well. It was deemed a suicide, based on previous attempts and a history of depression – but, when his memorial was erected and his body exhumed later in the 1840s they presumed that the cause of death was most than likely murder. Sadly, no one else continued to elaborate on *why* they believed that to be the cause.

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Living History: The Peyton Colony

By: Stephen McCarley, Student

Peyton Colony is unlike other communities in the vast history of Texas, for it was founded exclusively by black freedmen after the Civil War. One of the founders, Peyton Roberts, was born enslaved on the William Roberts Plantation in Virginia. Roberts gained his freedom at the end of the Civil War and soon migrated to the Lockhart area in Caldwell County, Texas. Soon after arriving in Texas, Roberts acquired public land in Blanco County by preemption. When the Preemption Grant Act of 1854 was passed, it gave land to settlers, but required them to live on the land for three years. Several freed slave families on the Roberts Plantation made their way to Texas as well. Together with other freedmen from all parts of the Southern United States came to help Roberts build a new community. The black settlers formed this settlement in the beautiful hill country area of eastern Blanco County around 1865. Although the residents named the community Peyton Colony in honor of its main founder, white inhabitants of the area called it Freedman's Colony. The volunteers worked tirelessly to construct many homes, a church, a lime kiln that provided high quality materials with which to make mortar for buildings and the first black schoolhouse in Blanco County. Despite the lack of any financial support from the white establishment in the region, these settlers were able to carve out a life that provided for their families as a self-sustaining farming community.

But as families grew and employment opportunities arose in the cities, Peyton Colony's population began to shrink. The old timers died off and many young people moved away, seeking livelihoods elsewhere. But much of the land is still owned by descendants of the original settlers. A post office operated in Peyton Colony from 1898 to 1909, and the school that was integrated in the 1960s still stands today, although it's now closed. The original Mount Horeb Baptist Church is still in use. In 1989, residents of Blanco County succeeded in persuading the state to designate the church as a state historical landmark, which means it will remain standing for future generations to see the fruits of the labors of the original freed back settlers. Efforts are still underway to persuade the state to do the same for the two room schoolhouse. Part of the Peyton Colony community is now a state park that includes a representation of the lime kiln, cemetery with 176 graves, including Peyton Roberts who passed in 1888, and many of the original settlers. Peyton Colony can still be visited today; it's near Boardhouse Creek just west of the junction of Farm roads 165 and 2325, seven miles east of the city of Blanco in southeastern Blanco County.

Conversations with History: Marvin W. Dulaney

Interview By: Bradley J Borougerdi, History Instructor

How and why did you want to become a historian?

I always loved Social Studies and I just loved to read. About age 17, I stumbled across a book in my hometown's public library (the Alliance Public Library) by Lerone Bennet, Jr., entitled *Before the Mayflower: A History of Negro Americans*. It was a book about African American history, and I was blown away by it because in all of my schooling, some 10-11 years at that point, I had not learned about a single African or African-American man or woman who had ever done anything in history. Thus, I was intrigued and motivated at the same time to learn more about my own history and to teach it to others. I guess that I am one of the few people who knew at age 17 what he wanted to be and followed through to do it over the course of almost 50 years.

Where did you go to graduate school?

I went to "The" Ohio State University.

What is your philosophy of history?

I believe in "grassroots history." As opposed to the traditional focus on 'great men" and the history of "elites," I focus on the history of the everyday people. They are the ones who truly make the history in our society. Thus, in all of the classes that I teach, I teach from the perspective of and provide a lot of emphasis on the "people's history" and how they acted to change society at a given time.

What is your areas of expertise and what courses do you teach?

My major area of expertise is African-American history, but in addition to this, I teach the U.S. history surveys, public history and the history of the American Civil Rights Movement.

Why do you feel that Black History Month is important"

Given what I experienced at age 17, Black History Month is still important because our education system still shortchanges the teaching of African-American history. Of course, there is more inclusion of the African-American experience in the curricula of our public history classes, but African-American history is still considered a subtext of American history and a field that only needs to be addressed in February. Of course, if you teach "American History" or "World History" the right way, African American history will be an integral part of those courses and help to provide a new, comprehensive and holistic approach to the teaching of history.

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William Marvin Dulaney, Ph.D is Associate Professor of History at the University of Texas at Arlington, where he is Department Chair and heads the African-American studies program. He has worked on a number of interesting projects, and is currently completing a social and political history of African-Americans in Dallas for Texas A&M Press.

A Critique of Black History Month

By: Khenda Mustapha, Student

It's February. Once again, public schools and libraries are ardently promoting the achievements of African-Americans by displaying portraits of selected historical figures accompanied by, for the most part, universally-known facts about them. Local radio stations and television networks mark the occasion by broadcasting montages of quotes by the same handful of people, often set to vaguely African-sounding drum music, between regularly scheduled programming. The festivities can feel like an outdated and oftentimes halfhearted attempt at a more culturally inclusive national narrative.

In fact, the arbitrary separation of black history from mainstream history, however justifiable and well-intentioned, essentially does more harm than good. The concept is fundamentally counterproductive and betrays the spirit of integration and equality, given that the existence of ethnic-specific holidays presupposes and accepts the cultural norm that is in place during the rest of the year – that of the dominant racial group. Additionally, treating black history as a subject wholly divorced from the rest of American history is absurd in that it trivializes the contributions that blacks have made to this country and the world, perpetuating Eurocentric ideals on which the institution of white supremacy relies – that African civilization lies marginal in relation to world history.

Equally absurd is the repetitious focus on a selected few – unquestionably estimable – characters, such as Dr. King, Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. This practice is especially disconcerting given this nation's history of denying black people – as well as indigenous peoples and other minorities – ownership of how they are publicly depicted and understood. The calculated watering down of black history in our education system is alarming. To put it into perspective, Nat Turner, Martin Delaney, Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton and the like were virtually absent from my 13 years of public education. If they were mentioned at all, it was in the form of a brief historical footnote. The achievements of black leaders and movements that are perceived as too radical – in spite of their popular support and contextual significance – are deliberately misrepresented, if not utterly omitted from the curricula and textbooks.

Furthermore, when relegated to one month out of the year, African-American historical achievements and perspectives are stripped entirely of context. Because black history is fundamental to American history, a more ideal approach would be to integrate it – along with the histories of other minority groups – into the national curriculum; to be taught at all levels, year round, and within its proper context.

But perhaps my biggest grievance is that in maintaining the ever-predictable "look how far we've come" narrative, Black History Month programs tend to obscure the lingering problems afflicting black communities into the present. While black history has been celebrated in this country for more than six decades, the cycle of racial intolerance and injustice has been remarkably consistent over that period.

To lift up a handful of black celebrities and leaders (whose radical activism has been sanitized anyway) 28 days out of the year is simply not sufficient. Instead, Black History Month should be a time when we recommit to advancing real solutions to poverty in minority communities; to redouble our efforts in breaking down stereotypes; to criticize politicians and the media for their role in maintaining the status quo. It should be a time to speak truthfully about the economic history that laid the foundation for the racial inequality we see today. Rather than diverting our resources and energy from the hard work we should be doing year round, Black History Month should serve as an opportunity to increase awareness of inequalities and produce theoretically sound proactive measures as a springboard to pragmatic solutions to our ongoing problems.

Conversations, Continued...

But, until then, I can live with Black History Month as at least one way that people will learn about the African-American experience.

If you had a chance to sit down and speak or have a meaningful conversation with someone from the past, who would it be and why?

That is a tough question to answer. There are so many people from the past with whom I would like to have an oral history interview. From John Brown to Malcolm X, from Harriet Wilson to Fannie Lou Hamer. But I guess that, if I had to choose, I would settle on W. E. B. DuBois. I would select him because he was one of the most brilliant men ever to teach history, to write and publish some of the most critical and powerful works in the field, and at the same time, to lead the N.A.A.C.P. (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), edit *The Crisis* (the N.A.A.C.P.'s magazine) and live a full life of scholarship, activism and public acclaim. If I could only ask him one question, it would be a simple one: how did you do it all?

Wilkinson, Continued...

While it is mostly speculation, the context of the evidence and what we know about Wilkinson scream out that he was into traitorous and suspicious activity—and perhaps even murder. He may not have been acting upon the interests of the U.S. or Spain, but he definitely played around with ways and ideas to put himself in power. He also sought to present an image of an American hero while simultaneously racking up payments from the Spanish government and planning to create his *own* empire. Wilkinson was very good at reading into the desires and weaknesses of men, and instead of completely allying himself with them, he found ways to destroy them so he could continue to enrich himself and amass his personal power. The strange part of this story is that most of the people in Washington D.C. did not trust him, and yet they continued to have him nearby and use him. Is it possible that someone like Thomas Jefferson may have been aware of his double-agent status and used him to gain more of a footing on what Spain's interests were? When Wilkinson was court marshaled in 1811, he was found not guilty. His letters to the Spanish government would not be found and his treasonous activity was not confirmed until 1854 when his ciphered letters were uncovered in the archives of Spain. General James Wilkinson was a self-centered, power hungry man who preyed on others and manipulated them for his own benefit. In his three-volume history of the West, *The Winning of the West*, Theodore Roosevelt wrote of James Wilkinson that "in all our history there is no more despicable character."

Tarrant County College
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Volume 3, Issue 4 — February 2014

"HISTORY IS OUR WEAPON OF CHOICE"

THE UNDERGROUND HISTORICAL

Join Us: Fridays/1 p.m./ESEE 1222

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

Once again it is Black History Month and our history department is busily engaged in putting on a bunch of events for students. There will be a series of film screenings and discussions throughout the month based on the National Endowment for the Humanities "Created Equal" grant that our library attained. Each of these documentary films showcases crucial trends or moments in our nation's history and will help you better understand what several of our articles this month address: namely, that African-American history is American history. All of our stories are so inextricably linked that they each deserve recognition and inclusion in our history classes. We hope too that each of the programs accomplishes what Khenda Mustapha so forcefully and cogently argues for in her article this month—that no one walks away from these events thinking we've made enough "progress" to sit back and enjoy how far we've come. Already at our *Slavery By Another Name* screening and discussion there was a discussion of how many economic structures continued to be leveled against African-Americans to this very day. In effect, there has been a full-on economic assault on African-Americans and other people of color through various methods. The film addressed the prison-industrial complex that accompanied Jim Crow. There have been other hurdles, too. The redlining and buying on contract system from the 1940s to the 1970s meant that African-American neighborhoods (all over the country) were systematically denied home loans by the federal government, and then African-American buyers had to purchase run-down homes for two or three times their actual cost. Additionally, since those homes were bought "on contract," it meant that if a buyer missed one payment all their equity in the home vanished and it was repossessed. This robbed generations of African-Americans of their wealth and savings—transferring it to white contract sellers. Since the 1980s we have also seen a reemergence of the prison-industrial complex with the War on Drugs and the privatization of our prison system. Both of these phenomena have served to disproportionately imprison and disenfranchise people of color across our nation—all the while feeding a prison complex that disproportionately monetarily benefits the white community. Beyond economics, all of these policies have also had a lasting and deleterious effect on African-American families and communities. No matter how painful it is to recognize this history and understand it that is our charge as citizens in a democracy. Knowing our history is the only way in which we can truly begin to work on creating a more perfect union. Lastly, in keeping with Mustapha's pleadings to continue discussing and learning African-American history, our history department is busily engaged in preparing for a new class we will offer next fall: African-American history. So, as these 28 short days quickly pass us by, please look for those screenings and discussions and consider deepening your knowledge of African-American (i.e.—American) history.

~ Bradley J. Borougerdi, Gregory Kosc and Eric Salas