March April 2001

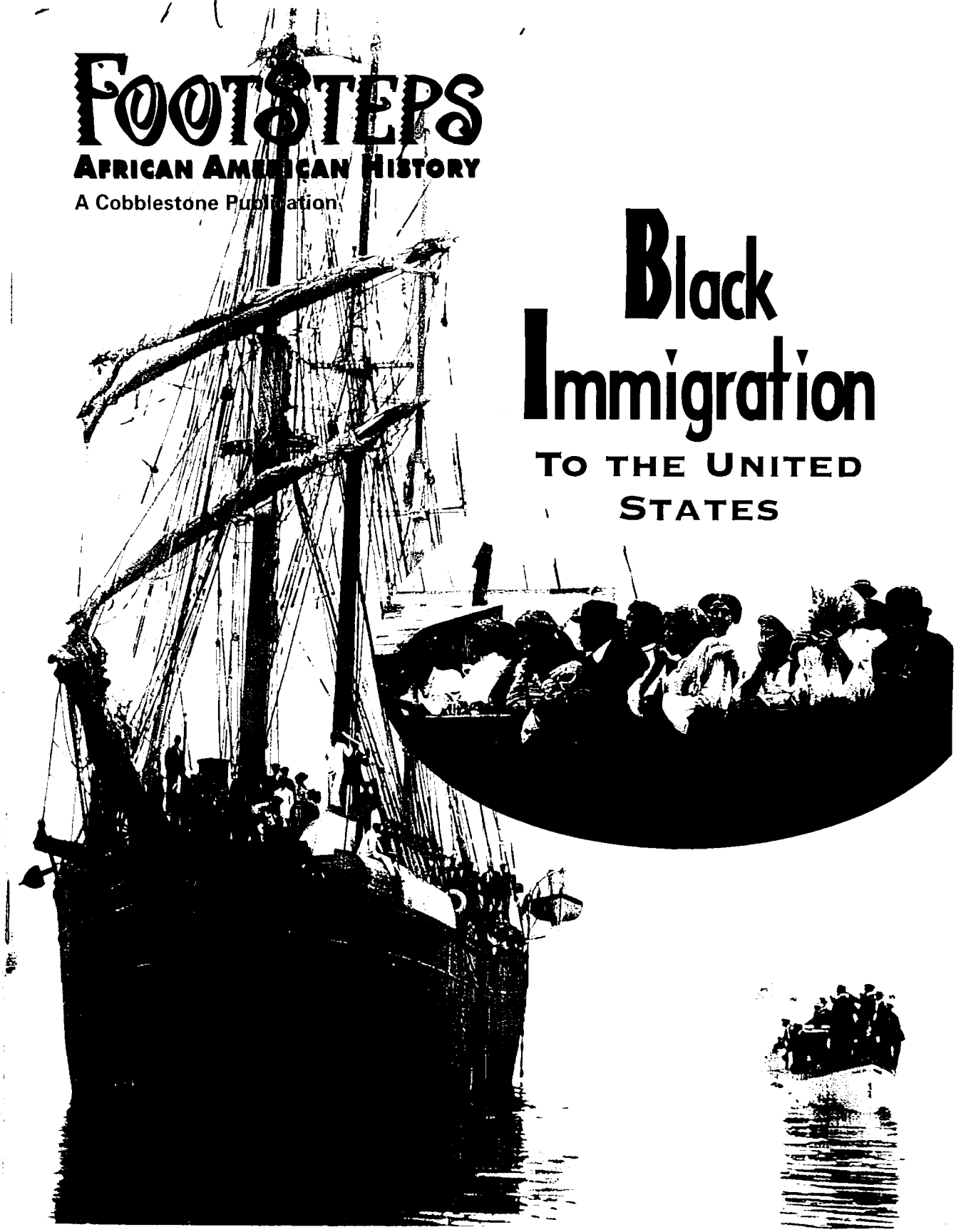
FOOTSTEPS

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

A Cobblestone Publication

Black Immigration

TO THE UNITED STATES



Consulting Editors

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ABOUT THE FRONT COVER: In 1914, Edmund Ashley took this photo of the *Savoia* arriving in port at New Bedford, Massachusetts. Aboard were arriving immigrants from the Cape Verde Islands. The inset shows a close-up of several passengers. Look closely at their expressions and consider the many thoughts and questions racing through their minds. (Photo courtesy of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society–New Bedford Whaling Museum.)

ABOUT THE BACK COVER: Always in the minds of immigrants are familiar scenes of their homeland, both of the people they knew and of the land itself. Pictured here is a waterfall on Obudu ranch in northeast Nigeria. (Photo courtesy of the Nigerian Information Service/Embassy of Nigeria [from "Destination Nigeria," published by Ramat Publishing, Inc., Tarrytown, New York])

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Africans IN THE United States

by J. LORAND MATORY

African-born residents of the United States are exceptional in many ways. On average, they are the wealthiest and most highly educated of all the groups who move to the United States.

Among the emigrants from all continents, those from Africa come in the smallest numbers—officially only 15,000 per year. Although most of them are black, some 40 percent of foreign-born United States residents from Africa are white. Flight from political turmoil in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and South Africa appears to account significantly for these figures. Another 10 percent are "Asian"—that is, their recent ancestors had themselves immigrated to Africa from countries such as India. The "Asian," white, and black subgroups from Africa all have average incomes that are well above the United States national average.

Cape Verdeans make up the oldest community of voluntary African immigrants to the United States. The population of the Cape Verde Islands is descended from Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian settlers (particularly from the city of Genoa), as well as from members of at least 27 different West African ethnic groups who were forcibly taken to work the land in this Portuguese colony.

These free Cape Verdean immigrants in various shades of black and brown were quite unaccustomed to American racism. Their close relationship with Portugal

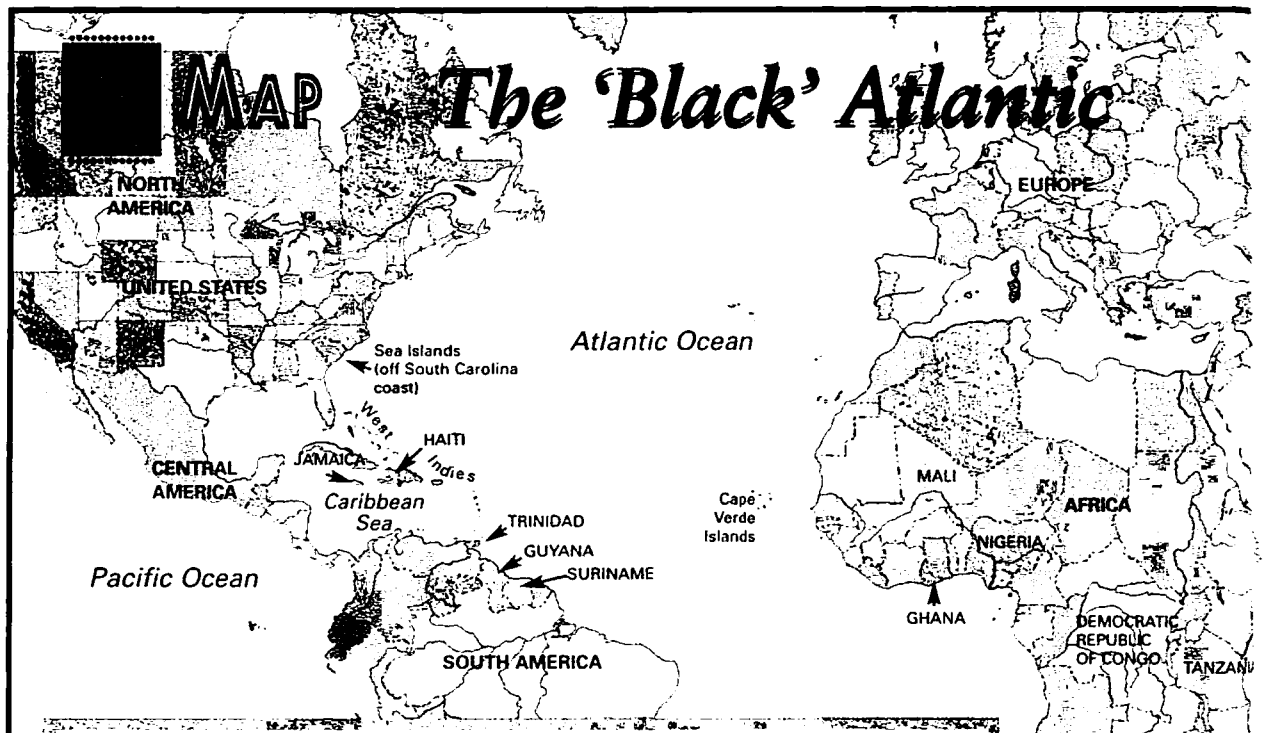
had led Cape Verdean Americans to expect to live alongside and participate in the same social and religious organizations as immigrants from Portugal and its Atlantic island possessions. However, like the lightest-skinned Louisiana Creoles after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and light-skinned Puerto Rican migrants to the United States, the lighter-skinned Portuguese immigrants were afraid that associating with their darker-skinned compatriots would allow white American racists to discriminate against them as well. So, Cape Verdeans found themselves segregated out of "Portuguese" parishes, social clubs, and neighborhoods in the United States. This betrayal led many Cape Verdeans to re-think their racial identity. By the 1960s, social programs meant to protect blacks from discrimination and to combat the resulting poverty created additional reasons for Cape Verdeans to identify with black Americans. Then, as Portugal's colonies in Africa gained independence in the 1970s, many Cape Verdean Americans began to think of themselves as "African."

Emigration from other parts of Africa was spearheaded by

Nana Yaw Oppong Kyekyeku (che che koo) is the Asante chief of Quebec, Canada,

students. There had long been a trickle of Africans entering American universities, but in the late 1950s, the number increased dramatically. By 1991, there were officially 24,000 African students in United States colleges, representing seven percent of the foreign students enrolled nationally.

Before the 1960s, most had come from Africa's British colonies (such as Nigeria, Gold Coast [now Ghana], and Kenya). For the most part, they attended predominantly black colleges and universities in the United States. As colonized people, they had experienced the highhanded attitude of their colonial overlords. Once in the United States, and living alongside black Americans,



Identities

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they suffered racial slurs in segregated America. Thus, they shared common ground and, sometimes, deep emotional ties with African Americans.

The next wave of immigrants, after the mid-1960s, included scholars, professionals, and skilled workers trained in Africa. Yet, many faced the question of whether they actually would enjoy a higher standard of living here than in their home countries. Perhaps more than most immigrants to the United States, they are obliged to accept jobs beneath their level of qualification, such as driving taxis. Furthermore, even if they do earn more money than they would at home, they often suffer from the absence of a community in which their earnings translate into leadership and respect.

Several African-origin ethnic groups in the United States have started organizations that celebrate their specific, maternal African cultures and foster ethnic, rather than pan-African or black racial, unity. For example, the Asanteman Association of the New England States crowns one of several democratically elected, regional kings of the Ghanaian Asante ethnic group in North America. Among Nigerian-origin Igbo immigrants in the United States, the Philadelphia-based Ngwa Family Association–Delaware Valley was launched in 1993 with a "cultural festival." Igbo weddings in the Boston area often feature sacred masquerades. And, at most of these events among African immigrants, the celebrants and guests wear the traditional formal attire of their home countries and cultures.

Nana Yaw Owusu Achiaw rides in a palanquin after being sworn in as the chief of Asantes in Greater Houston, Texas. Among his chief duties is upholding the dignity of black people and sharing the rich Asante culture with people of African descent.

Pan-African refers to the unity of all the countries of Africa and, sometimes, of all the peoples of African descent in the world.

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