



African American Swimming History



3000 B.C.-1440 A.D. Swimming: Europe

The Ancient Assyrians, Greeks and Romans stigmatized the uneducated and ill-bred as being unable to neither "read nor swim." Swimming was an art required of all Roman Legionnaires and no Roman town or city was without a public pool. The Roman pools were unlike our modern pools. In addition to swimming pools the buildings housed lecture

halls, libraries, gymnasiums, steam rooms and these were the epicenter of Roman social life. By the 2nd Century A.D. there were over 900 Public Baths in the City of Rome alone and these establishments were the crowning achievements of Roman architecture and engineering.

As the Romans bathed and swam in the nude, the early baths were segregated by gender, with women swimming in the morning and the men in the afternoon. However, as Roman civilization advanced, its morals declined. By the end of the 2nd Century, men and women swam together and every example of a morally bankrupt and degenerate society was on display at the Public Baths.

Early Christians deplored the behavior of the Roman

elite at the Baths, which led to their closure in the 5th Century and condemnation of nudity, bathing and swimming as sins. Thus, the art of swimming was lost to the western world for nearly 1,000 years.

The first great story of swimming is found in Homer's Ulysses, who swam to save himself after his fleet was destroyed in a storm while returning home after the Trojan War.



Depiction of the Baths of the Emperor Caracalla by Victorian artist, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Covering over 25 acres, it was the most luxurious swimming complex ever built, including a 50-meter long tank with columns of marble and gold.



After holding off the Etruscan invaders while the Romans tore down the Sublican Bridge, Horatio Cocles, swam safely across the Tiber in full armor and became ancient Rome's greatest hero.

1441-1699 Swimming: "The Best Swimmers in the World" are African



Among the aquatic hunting techniques Europeans learned from African watermen was the harpooning of whales.

When the first European explorers reached present day Mauritania, on Africa's west coast, they were met by curious Black skinned Africans who paddled out to greet the strange ships in their canoes. The first instinct of the Europeans was lower their long boats to capture human specimens to take back to Portugal. But it was not all easy for the Portuguese kidnappers, for the Africans were expert watermen who "swam and dove like cormorants" so that they [the Portuguese] could not get hold of them until resorting to the use of boat hooks. Later, Europeans would attribute

the extraordinary swimming skills of the Africans to constant exercise and "from being brought up, both men and women from infancy, to swim like fishes."

In 1455, a Venetian adventurer, Ca'da Mosto landed to the south of the Senegal River, and began trading with the King of Budomel. During his stay, the weather turned and the King insisted he travel by land to his capital many miles to the north. Before leaving, Ca'da Mosto wanted to transmit instructions to his ship to meet him at the mouth of the Senegal. In his journal, Ca'da Mosto wrote that his vessel

was three miles out at sea, and it was impossible to get a boat through the surf on account of a great storm and the violence of the waves breaking on the sand-banks. In spite of this the Africans were eager in offering their services to carry his letter on board. He asked two of them what he should give them for the enterprise, and they only asked two maulgi of tin apiece, the maulgi being worth something less than a penny. "I cannot describe," wrote Ca'da Mosto, "the difficulty they had to pass the sand-banks in so furious a sea.

Sometimes I lost sight of them, and thought they were swallowed up by the waves. At last one of the two could no longer resist the force of the water, turned his back on the danger, and returned to the shore. The other, more vigorous, after battling for more than an hour with the wind and the waves, passed the bank, carried my letter to the ship, and brought me the answer. I dared hardly touch it, looking upon it as such a wonderful and sacred thing. And thus I learned that the people of Budomel are the best swimmers in the world."



Ca'da Mosto receiving the message from the best swimmer in the world.

1441-1699 Swimming: “The Best Swimmers in the World” are African

Historic records show that Africans were taken to Europe to serve as swim instructors either as slaves or free men.

In 1498, on his third voyage to the New World, Columbus noticed an Indian woman wearing a pearl necklace. In Europe, pearls were many times more valuable than gold and Indians were enslaved to harvest the pearl beds off the Venezuelan coast. When disease decimated the Indian population, enslaved Africans were imported to harvest the pearl beds and later their skills as watermen proved essential for the survival the coastal colonies.

In the introduction to the first popular “How to Swim” book, published in 1699, Melchisedec Thevenot explained that “Swimming was held in great esteem among the Ancients. But to come to our times, it is most certain that the Indians and the Africans excel all others in the Arts of



Swimming and Diving. It is to them the Ladies are obliged for their Ornaments of Pearl; they are the Divers who fish for them; they are also very useful for recovering Anchors and Merchandises that have been cast away.”



Enslaved African Pearl divers off the coast of Venezuela, ca 1520. Artist unknown.



*Enslaved African Pearl divers faced the terror of being attacked by Sharks and Manta Rays
From the Drake Manuscript, ca 1560.*

1700-1865 Swimming: An African-American Tradition

At a time when most Whites did not know how to swim, many slaves, even those born on plantations, learned to swim young. Most plantations were located near waterways to facilitate the transportation of slave-produced goods to market. Thus, slaves had ready access to swim and it was one of their favorite pastimes. Professor Kevin Dawson, of the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, estimates that in the 18th Century, as many as 80% of Blacks knew how to swim while only 20% of Whites could.



Mamout Yarrow



Paul Cuffee

Frederick Douglass recalled that near where he lived in Maryland in the 1820's, when he was seven or eight, "there was a creek to swim in... a very beautiful playground for children."

Mamout Yarrow, a freed slave and practicing Muslim, was reportedly over 100 years old at the time of this painting by Charles Wilson Peale in 1819. During his lifetime he was regarded as "the best swimmer to ever have swum in the Potomac River."

Paul Cuffee, son of an African born slave who earned his freedom in Massachusetts, joined the whaling fleets at 16, rose to the rank of captain and became, perhaps, America's first Black millionaire.



Frederick Douglass



York

York, the slave of William Clark, was the only African American to serve on the "Corps of Discovery." According to the "journals," he was also the expedition's best swimmer.

Whether organized by slaves themselves or by slaveholders, slaves of both sexes competed in swimming contests. Some slaves fused swimming to blood sports when they fought sharks, alligators and manta rays to amuse themselves or their owners, and to demonstrate their skill and strength - and perhaps their manhood.

However, as it became known that the ability to swim could be used to escape from slavery, many slave owners prevented slaves from swimming.

Escaped slaves and free Blacks able to swim, found economic opportunities in the merchant and whaling fleets of the northern states. In 1863, African Americans made up nearly 1/3 of New England's merchant seamen and 1/4 of the Union Navy.

The Underground Railroad

In 1831, Tice Davids, a runaway slave from Kentucky, dove into the Ohio River with his owner and posse in hot pursuit. Davids swam for his life across the great river while the other men chased him in a boat. When Davids disappeared from view his owner presumed him drowned, and told the others that the slave must have got to where he was going on "an underground railroad." Davids, however, made it to Ripley, Ohio and freedom. Although generally associated with Harriet Tubman, it was a swimming feat that gave birth to the term "Underground Railroad."



1866-1945 Swimming: For Whites Only

After the civil war, Whites began to take an interest in swimming as a public safety issue to reduce the high rates of drowning and Whites exclude Blacks from the best pools and safest beaches. The pools of this era were enormous aquatic playgrounds that were the epicenter of social life for White society in nearly every city and small town in America. National Learn-to-Swim campaigns offering free swimming lessons were immensely popular. African Americans were generally relegated to small pools at "Colored YMCAs" or dangerous swimming holes. As a result, during this era, the rich tradition of swimming was excised from African American culture. At the start of WWII, a study showed that 85% of Black sailors were unable to swim, compared to only 10% of Whites – almost a complete reversal of statistics in one hundred years.



In the 1870's Whites discovered the beach, the health benefits of learning to swim, and drowning was recognized as a public health issue.

SWIM FOR HEALTH WEEK



**JUNE
2ND-7TH**

Bathing Beauty



Above: "Colored" pools were not "separate but equal." Where communities did provide swimming facilities for Blacks, they were typically little more than shallow wading pools, without the amenities and attractions found at White pools.

Right: WWII hero Charles Jackson French is a curious footnote from the era of Jim Crow segregation.



Steeplechase Park's swimming pool was the most popular attraction at Coney Island, N.Y. It was one of hundreds of giant aquatic playgrounds that attracted White people to swimming across America, in the first half of the 20th Century.

1946-1964 Swimming: Civil Rights



According to Professor Marvin Dunn, of Florida International University, the start of the modern civil rights movement can be traced to the demand by Black veterans for equal access to beaches and other swimming facilities after WWII. With the possible exception of Miami, and the establishment of the Virginia Key "Colored Beach," virtually every attempt to integrate swimming pools and beaches resulted in violence, even after the Supreme Court overruled segregation with the landmark decision of Brown vs. Board of Education.

Opening Pools to Negroes Starts St. Louis Race Riots

St. Louis (June 23, 1946) A racial clash between Negroes and whites flared in a St. Louis park June 23 over a non-segregation order.

Seven persons were injured, two seriously. Police have established that white boys, armed with clubs and knives, attacked the Negroes. One Negro was cut on the head in the fight. Police arrested the rest from the park and told them to go home. Toward evening larger groups gathered around the park. Several bicycles, cars, and trucks belonging to Negroes were damaged.

Police Halt Fight
Ten persons suffered injuries in the second outbreak. More than 400 persons were taken to the park to break up the riotous fight. The park is in a white neighborhood.

By 11 p.m. police reported the crowd was dispersing and under control. The order to open all city pools to Negroes was issued June 20 by John J. O'Toole, Director of Public Welfare. He said the city could not prevent anyone from lawfully using a swimming pool and added that Negroes are citizens and taxpayers.

Mayor Harbo said he intended the order "in the interest of the general public" and in line with the "desegregation policy" of separate facilities for Negroes and whites.

After about 45 minutes several Negroes left the pool. Police said white boys, armed with clubs and knives, attacked the Negroes. One Negro was cut on the head in the fight. Police arrested the rest from the park and told them to go home. Toward evening larger groups gathered around the park. Several bicycles, cars, and trucks belonging to Negroes were damaged.

Police Halt Fight
Ten persons suffered injuries in the second outbreak. More than 400 persons were taken to the park to break up the riotous fight. The park is in a white neighborhood.

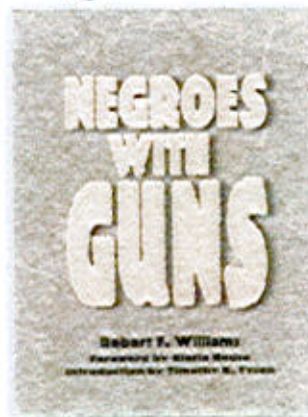
By 11 p.m. police reported the crowd was dispersing and under control. The order to open all city pools to Negroes was issued June 20 by John J. O'Toole, Director of Public Welfare. He said the city could not prevent anyone from lawfully using a swimming pool and added that Negroes are citizens and taxpayers.

Mayor Harbo said he intended the order "in the interest of the general public" and in line with the "desegregation policy" of separate facilities for Negroes and whites.

The mayor added: "If the Negro pools police headquarters, it is my purpose to expel them."



Riotous with permission of the Christian Science Monitor

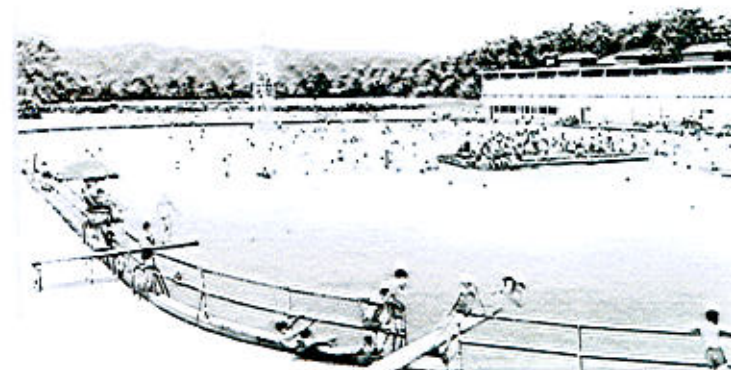


In Monroe, North Carolina in 1956, a group of Blacks, outraged at the drowning of several black children at the local "colored swimming hole," demand access to the town's municipal pool that was for "Whites Only." Threatened by an angry mob of 3,000 Whites, Robert Williams threatens the whites with his gun and the situation is diffused. His actions in self-defense and subsequent book, "Negroes With Guns" is credited with the start of the "Black Power" movement.



As congress was debating the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a group of integrationists staged a "Swim In" at the Monson Motel in St. Augustine, Florida. This photograph of the motel's manager pouring muriatic acid on the demonstrators made front page news across the country and is widely credited with influencing the passage of the Act.

INTEGRATING SUNLITE POOL



The Sunlite Pool at Cincinnati's Coney Island was the site of the 1932 Men's Olympic Trials

8 NEGROES ARRESTED Tried to Gain Admittance to Pool in Cincinnati

CINCINNATI, May 24 (UPI).—Eight members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Congress on Racial Equality were arrested yesterday at Coney Island, an amusement park near here.

The police made the arrests on charges of trespassing and took the group to JUVENILE CITY Hall. They posted \$200 bond each and will appear before a county judge.

It was the third time Negroes attempted to gain admittance to the swimming pool had been arrested. The two groups entered the pool entrance segregationist police.

Four of those arrested yesterday obtained warrants charging Laverne Rios, a cashier at the swimming pool, of violating the civil rights law for refusing to sell them tickets.

The members of the two organizations were arrested at the park on Sunday and six on Saturday.

The New York Times
May 24, 1946, p. 1
Copyright © The New York Times

1965-Present Swimming: Safety, Health and Gold Medals

With integration and its accompanying racial tensions, the idyllic "Golden Age of Swimming" ends for whites. In New Orleans, city officials closed the Audubon Park Pool rather than comply with legal mandates that required Black and White children to swim together. The pool reopened in 1971 as the Whitney Young Pool, named after the Civil Rights leader who drowned during a trip to Africa, but it was never again popular. As was the case with

public pools across America, Whites abandoned them for the safer havens of private clubs and newly affordable backyard pools. With few people patronizing the public pools, they lost money and closed for "financial reasons."

Swimming facilities built after 1960, like the International Swimming Hall of Fame,



Audubon Park Pool, New Orleans



International Swimming Hall of Fame

catered primarily to competitive swimming enthusiasts and offered few of the inducements and amusements that attracted non-swimmers to pools in the first half of the 20th Century. Not surprisingly, most swimming pools today are as segregated as they were before 1964.

One tragic consequence of the African-American swimming experience, once one of the most important African Traditions – is that today, African Americans drown in significantly disproportionate numbers when compared to Whites. Another, is that many African Americans will never experience the pleasures and health benefits of recreational pastimes made possible by the acquisition of swimming skills.

Today, modern aquatic facilities welcome everyone and descendants of the African Diaspora have overcome false genetic stereotypes by excelling at the highest levels of competitive swimming. The only obstacle preventing all individuals from learning to swim and enjoying all the health, recreational and safety benefits of swimming is the desire to get in and swim.



Black Pioneers in Swimming

1. Enith Brigita, 1st to Medal in the Olympics, 1976.
2. Chris Silva, 1st on a USA National Swim Team, 1983.
3. Anthony Nesty, 1988 Olympic Champion.
4. Sabir Muhammad, 10 Time NCAA Champion & American Record Holder.
5. Anthony Ervin, 2000 Olympic Champion.
6. Maritza Correia, 2004 Olympic Silver medalist.
7. Cullen Jones, 2008 Olympic Champion.

