

NEGROES AND THE FUR TRADE

Even a casual study of the North American fur trade is likely to suggest the possibility that, in various parts of the continent, certain races or national groups correspond closely to certain economic and functional categories into which the persons connected with this great industry may be divided. The fur trade as carried on in the regions about the Great Lakes, with Montreal as headquarters, was characterized by the fact that the entrepreneurs, the *bourgeois*, were nearly all Highland Scots—McTavishes, McGillivrays, Forsyths, and the like—though as time went on Canadians of French stock, such as Pierre de Rocheblave, assumed an increasingly prominent rôle. The dominance of the Highland Scots appeared even in fur companies chartered in the United States. The conspicuous example is the Pacific Fur Company, which, though chartered by the state of New York, included seven Highland Scots from Canada among its eleven partners.

The dominant racial stock in the fur trade as conducted from St. Louis, however, was French—Louisiana French rather than French-Canadian. Berthold, Chouteau, Pratte, Cabanné were some of the conspicuous names in the St. Louis fur trade, the Spaniard Manuel Lisa being one of the earlier discordant racial notes. Soon after the Louisiana purchase, traders from the former thirteen colonies entered the trade, and only a little later the inevitable Highland Scots—Ramsay Crooks for one—began to come down from Canada. Still, the *bourgeois* of the St. Louis fur trade remained dominantly French, as that of Canada remained Highland Scotch. In Wisconsin, in the region of Green Bay and Prairie du Chien, were many small fur traders chiefly of French-Canadian origin—Rolette, Porlier, Grignon. Farther east, in the portion of the fur country which early in the nineteenth century was already menaced

by the advancing frontier line, the fur traders were naturally to a large extent American citizens of British colonial stock. Since clerks in the fur trade were regarded rather as apprentices than as employees and were interested more in prospective advancement than in immediate wages, it was to be expected that racially they would be of the same stock as the members of the class they aspired to enter.

The outstanding example of racial solidarity in the fur trade is to be found in the class of general laborers, the voyageurs, who almost to a man were French-Canadians. Such solidarity also was characteristic of the hunters, who constituted a small but interesting class, particularly in the fur trade of the United States. Typically, the hunter was of Kentucky or, what is the same thing, of Virginia backwoods stock. The Canadian fur traders depended to a large extent on the aborigines for the services performed south of the border by hired hunters, and they sometimes made use of the Christianized Iroquois. In the United States, next to the Kentuckian among the hunters, was the French-Indian half-breed.

The persons connected with the Astoria expedition may be considered fairly typical of a group active in the fur trade of the United States.¹ Of the partners, two, Ramsay Crooks and Donald McKenzie, were Highland Scots from Canada; Wilson P. Hunt, Robert McClellan, and Joseph Miller were United States citizens. The one clerk, John Reed, seems to have been an American citizen, though of Irish birth. The voyageurs bore French names, to a man. Of the fifteen hunters more or less prominently connected with the expedition, ten bore typical Anglo-Saxon surnames. The names of the other five indicate French origin, but it is noteworthy that no less than three of them are known to have been of mixed French and Indian blood, as was at least one of the group of ten.

¹ See Kenneth W. Porter, "Roll of Overland Astorians, 1810-12," in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 34: 105-112 (June, 1933).

Some of the racial aspects of the fur trade have been indicated — entrepreneurs and clerks: Highland Scots, French, and British Americans; voyageurs: French-Canadians; hunters: Kentucky backwoodsmen and French-Indian half-breeds. Yet this analysis is inadequate, for it neglects to mention one of the largest racial elements in the United States of the early nineteenth century. Any picture of the racial aspects of the fur trade of that period which omits the Negro is so incomplete as to give a false impression, for representatives of that race were to be found in all three groups connected with the trade.² Among the overland Astorians, at least two, a voyageur and a hunter, were of Negro origin.

It is rather surprising to note that the earliest Negroes known to be connected with the fur trade were among those who occupied the highest functional category, that of independent entrepreneurs. "In giving the early history of Chicago," wrote Mrs. John H. Kinzie, "the Indians say, with great simplicity, 'the first white man who settled here was a negro.' This was Jean Baptiste Point-au-Sable," or Point Sable, or Point du Sable, who is referred to variously as a "French-West-Indian mulatto" and doubtless apocryphally, as a runaway slave from Kentucky. Dr. Milo M. Quaife finds "considerable reason for believing that he belonged, on his father's side, to the family of Dandonneau *dit* du Sablé, one of the most noted in the annals of New France." He had a trading house on the site of Chicago as early as 1779 and had at least two natural children by an Indian woman. In 1790 his daughter Suzanne married Jean Baptiste Pelletier at Chicago and in 1799 a child of

² Some of the material included in this paper has been employed in another connection in the writer's articles entitled "Relations between Negroes and Indians within the Present Limits of the United States" and "Notes Supplementary to 'Relations between Negroes and Indians,'" which appear in the *Journal of Negro History*, 17: 287-367, 18: 282-321 (July, 1932; July, 1933). The author wishes to thank the editor of the *Journal*, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, for permission to draw upon these articles in preparing the present narrative.

this union was baptized at St. Louis. A son, Baptiste Point du Sable, Jr., died sometime before February 17, 1814, and the elder Point du Sable probably died sometime in the following year.³ A less important but perhaps even more interesting example of an early entrepreneur of Negro blood is furnished by a runaway slave from Kentucky, who in 1790, in partnership with a Wyandotte Indian, was trading from Detroit into Ohio.⁴

But the most usual and typical rôle of the Negro in the fur trade was the same as that which he played in contemporary American economic life, namely, that of a servant or slave. His entrance into the fur trade in the capacity of a personal servant, however, sometimes opened to him the opportunity for participation in its activities in higher and more responsible capacities. Typical of such progress is the experience of York, the Negro slave who accompanied the Lewis and Clark expedition. Though trading in furs was not one of the purposes of this expedition, its story nevertheless belongs to the history of the fur trade. York's nominal function in the expedition was that of personal service to Captain Clark, but before the expedition was far advanced he was acting as hunter, trader, and interpreter, as well as vaudeville performer before appreciative audiences of Indians, to say nothing of the eugenic function he was induced occasionally to fill.⁵

With Alexander Henry when he was in charge of the Northwest Company's Red River brigade in August, 1800,

³ Mrs. John H. Kinzie, *Wau-Bun: The "Early Day" in the Northwest*, 219, 220 (Quaife edition, Chicago, 1932); John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, 155 (St. Louis, 1920).

⁴ Joseph Pritts, *Incidents of Border Life*, 414 (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1841).

⁵ *History of the Expedition of Captains Lewis and Clark*, 1: 113 (Hosmer edition, Chicago, 1902). See also the entries under "York, Clark's negro servant," in volume 7 of Reuben G. Thwaites's edition of the *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806* (New York, 1904).

was a Negro, Pierre Bonza or Bonga, Henry's servant. Pierre was the son of a Negro named Joas or Jean Bonga and of Marie Jeanne, both slaves of Daniel Robertson, British commandant at Michilimackinac from 1782 to 1787. The two Negroes were married in 1794, thus legitimatizing their children. Pierre married a Chippewa woman, and his wife was delivered of a daughter on March 12, 1801. Henry reposed such confidence in his servant that in the trader's absence in January, 1803, Pierre was one of two men left in charge of the fort at the mouth of the Pembina River. A certain J. Duford threatened to kill Bonga during his master's absence, "but did not escape without a sound beating." After having acted satisfactorily as personal servant and as joint castellan of a fur-trading fort, Pierre appeared in 1804 as an interpreter for the Northwest Company on the lower Red River.⁶ In 1819 a Bonga, probably Pierre, was one of the principal traders among the Chippewa.

Among Pierre's children was one George, who also entered the Indian trade, at first as a voyageur for the American Fur Company. He, like his father, married into the Chippewa tribe, and in 1820 he acted as an interpreter for Governor Lewis Cass at Fond du Lac. He later became a prominent independent trader and a man of wealth and consequence, noted alike for his gentlemanly manner and for his tremendous size and strength. As a voyageur he packed seven hundred pounds for a quarter of a mile over the portage around the dalles of the St. Louis River. Although half Indian, Bonga was purely African in appearance. Never having heard of any racial distinction other than that

⁶ Elliott Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson*, 1: 50, 194, 231 (New York, 1897); William W. Warren, "History of the Ojibways, Based upon Traditions and Oral Statements," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 5: 381; "The Mackinac Register," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 18: 497; 19: 83, 97.

of white and Indian, Bonga, who was a popular and princely host, would amuse his guests by remarking reminiscently, "Gentlemen, I assure you that John Banfil and myself were the first two white men that ever came into this country." In 1833-34 George Bonga was listed as a licensed trader at Lac Platte; he was probably the Bonga who acted as interpreter at the treaty with the Chippewa at Fort Snelling in 1837. George and his brother Jack had many descendants, most of whom were noted for their powerful physiques.⁷ The Bongas are an example of a fur-trading family of Negro blood the members of which advanced from positions as personal servants or voyageurs to stations as interpreters, and who finally became independent entrepreneurs.

Few Negroes who entered the fur trade in menial capacities ever became independent entrepreneurs. The position of interpreter or subordinate trader on a salary was about as high a station as they could expect to reach. The famous, or notorious, Edward Rose was the son of a white trader among the Cherokee and a woman who was half Cherokee and half Negro. He went to St. Louis about 1807 after a career of alleged brigandage and piracy along the lower Mississippi, and for a quarter of a century or more he alternated between life among the Crows and the Arikara. Among the former he attained the rank of chief, and he served as interpreter, guide, and hunter with various fur-trading and government expeditions. He was probably with Manuel Lisa in 1807 or with the Missouri Fur Company in 1809; he was certainly with the Astorians during part of the summer of 1811, with Lisa in 1812, with General William H. Ashley of the Rocky Mountain Fur

⁷ Warren, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 5:381; Edward D. Neill, *History of Minnesota*, 322, 416, 873, 874 (Minneapolis, 1882); Joseph A. Gilfillan, "The Ojibways in Minnesota," Charles E. Flandrau, "Reminiscences of Minnesota during the Territorial Period," Nathan Butler, "Boundaries and Public Land Surveys of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 9:56, 199; 12:670.

Company in 1823, and with General Henry Atkinson on a treaty-making expedition in 1825.⁸

Somewhat similar was the career of the interpreter, *raconteur*, squaw man, and Crow chief, James P. Beckwourth or Beckwith, who was born in Virginia in 1798. According to one account he was the son of a Negro slave woman and an Irish overseer; according to another, the offspring of an octoroon and a planter. At any rate, he was some kind of a mulatto and he bore a strong resemblance to an Indian in features and physique. He was taken to St. Louis at the age of seven or eight and was enlisted as a horse wrangler in Ashley's fur-trading expedition of 1824. Although he gave exaggerated accounts of his own exploits, there seems to be no question that he was a man of great courage, and this quality, with his appearance, led to his adoption into the Crow tribe and his attainment of the rank of chief. His prestige with the Indians caused him to be employed for some time at a good salary as a trader for the American Fur Company.⁹

There were other persons of Negro blood who, coming into contact with the Indians through the medium of the fur trade, entered upon a vagabond life as members of various tribes, but without gaining the prestige among their new friends attained by such heroes as Rose and Beckwourth. Late in June, 1814, the well-known fur trader Ezekiel Williams was captured by the Kansa. "I gave," he wrote, "my gun, etc., to a mulatto man to be my friend and speak for me." Finally, "four Indians and the mulattoe brought me in. On the first day of September I arrived at Boons Lick."

⁸ Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1: 189; 2: 590, 597, 609, 685, 688 (New York, 1902). A sketch of Rose by the present writer will appear in a future volume of the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

⁹ Harrison C. Dale, "James P. Beckwourth," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 2: 122 (New York, 1929); Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, 2: 684; Charles G. Leland's introduction to T. D. Bonner, *Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth* (London, 1892).

It is possible that this mulatto was the famous Rose, of whose movements at this time it is known only that he was in the section where Williams was captured. Beckwourth tells of a mulatto who "could speak the Crow language tolerably well" and who stirred up Indians and renegade whites to rob a trader.¹⁰

The great majority of Negroes who entered the fur trade as personal servants or common employees were no better able than the ordinary French-Canadian voyageur to make their way out of the menial classification. Some were estopped from advancement by the fact that legally they were slaves. Racial discrimination, however, does not seem to have been very significant in retarding the advancement of free Negroes connected with the fur trade, as is evidenced by the examples given above. This was probably because on the frontier the racial division lay between Indian and white rather than between white and Negro.

A casual exploration of fur-trade literature, in manuscript or in print, will reveal many mentions of Negroes, named or anonymous, who acted as cooks, voyageurs, or in some unspecified capacity. On September 17, 1806, the Lewis and Clark expedition on its return from the West encountered "a large keel-boat commanded by a Captain McClanen, loaded with merchandise and bound to the Spanish country by the way of the river Platte. . . . He had fifteen hands, an interpreter and a black."¹¹ With the overland Astorians were at least two persons of Negro blood, the interpreter Rose and a voyageur. The latter was François Duchouquette, whose mother, Aunt Mary Ann Menard—to employ the name by which she was known at Prairie du Chien, where for many years she acted as midwife, nurse,

¹⁰ "Ezekiel Williams' Adventures in Colorado," in *Missouri Historical Collections*, 4: 202-208; Bonner, *Life of Beckwourth*, 208-210.

¹¹ Patrick Gass, *Journal of the Voyages and Travels of a Corps of Discovery, under the Command of Capt. Lewis and Capt. Clarke*, 261 (Philadelphia, 1810).

and healer—was of mingled French and African blood. During the course of her life she bore thirteen children to three husbands.¹² Stephen H. Long, writing of his expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1819 and 1820, mentions a Negro belonging to one of the fur companies to whom the Omaha Indians referred as “the black white man” or, jokingly, as a *wassabajinga* or “little black bear.” Willis or Thillis, a “black man,” was on Ashley’s expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1823 and he was among those wounded in a fight with the Arikara on June 2. Rose was interpreter for the expedition.¹³

Four white men and a Negro who had been killed and plundered by Osage between the Arkansas and Red rivers in 1823, and “William (a black)” who was robbed of his horse by Osage near Santa Fé in 1825 are included in a list of persons engaged in the fur trade who had been plundered or murdered by Indians between 1815 and 1831 which was compiled for the government in the latter year. In 1833 some Kiowa killed a white man and a Negro engaged in the fur trade in what is now Oklahoma.¹⁴ In 1833 Maxmilian of Wied encountered at Fort Union “a negro slave belonging to Mr. McKenzie.” The prince mentions also the cook at Fort Clarke, “a negro from St. Louis,” who was involved in a serious quarrel with an Indian, and who gave medical advice that enabled the prince to cure an attack of scurvy.¹⁵

A conspicuous figure in the journal of Charles Larpenteur

¹² *Wisconsin in Three Centuries*, 2: 225 (New York, 1906).

¹³ Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains . . . Compiled from the Notes of Major Long, Mr. T. Say, and Other Gentlemen of the Party*, 1: 287 (Reuben G. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, vol. 14—Cleveland, 1905); 18 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Documents*, no. 1, p. 80 (serial 89).

¹⁴ 22 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Documents*, no. 90, p. 82, 83 (serial 213); Grant Foreman, *Pioneer Days in the Early Southwest*, 121 (Cleveland, 1926).

¹⁵ Maxmilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, 2: 192, 3: 47, 87 (Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, vols. 23, 24—Cleveland, 1906).

is John Brazeau or Brazo, according to one account a "full-blooded Aethiopian," according to another, a mulatto. He went to the fur country as the servant or slave of a man from whom he took his name. "He was hardy, courageous," spoke good English and French, and knew the Indian languages. His character, according to contemporary accounts, was not particularly attractive, though it doubtless was well suited to the exigencies of the Indian country. Larpenteur mentions the coolness and apparent enjoyment with which he disposed of the Blackfeet dead in a terrible smallpox epidemic. He also seems to have been something of a bravo, and in 1836 he did his *bourgeois* a good service by shooting and seriously wounding a hunter who was giving trouble. He was employed for a number of years by the American Fur Company, but he was cast off in his old age and he died in 1868, when over seventy years old, an object of charity.¹⁶

In the winter of 1842-43 the Blackfeet killed a "negro by the name of Reese," by whom that notorious ruffian and fur trader Francis Chardon "set great store." By means of a cannon loaded with grapeshot, Chardon tried to massacre the next band of Blackfeet who arrived at his fort, and he succeeded in killing several Indians.¹⁷ At Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River in Colorado were two Negroes, Andrew and Dick Green, servants respectively of William and Charles Bent. Andrew was very black, could speak the Cheyenne language, and was popular with the members of the tribe, who called him "Black Whiteman" and, sometimes, "Turtle Shell." A young Cheyenne, out of compliment to Andrew, adopted the name "Black Whiteman," and in time it became a common name in that tribe. Dick was with Colonel St. Vrain's trappers and traders when they

¹⁶ Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri*, 1: 121 (Coues edition, New York, 1898).

¹⁷ Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, 1: 217; Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, 2: 694.

stormed the Taos pueblo in 1847 to take vengeance for the murder of his master, and in the affray he killed several Indians.¹⁸

Near Fort Laramie in 1846 Francis Parkman encountered a Negro who had been picked up by Indians in a starving condition. He ran away from his master in Missouri and joined a party of trappers from whom he became separated in a storm while hunting for some stray horses.¹⁹ This is probably the only case in which a runaway Negro became associated with the fur trade of the Far West. The others mentioned were all apparently Negro slaves accompanying their masters, or free persons of color who were usually, it would seem, free-born.

St. Louis, for a variety of reasons, was the distributing center for most of the Negroes connected with the fur trade. The fur trade of the West had its headquarters in that city, which was located on the Missouri, the principal avenue of access to the Indian country of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. The area of which St. Louis was the metropolis was an enclave of early settled, slave-holding territory jutting out into the Indian country; and it thus contained a large number of fur traders to whom the use of Negro slaves for personal service and other menial labor in the fur trade would seem natural. St. Louis was a city dominated by French traditions and closely connected by the Mississippi with New Orleans, a city with a similar background. In both cities free persons of color occupied a more conspicuous and respectable position than in slave-holding communities where Anglo-Saxon ideas of race prevailed. It was thus natural that both Negro slaves and free *gens du couleur* should constitute a not insignificant racial element in the fur trade as conducted from St. Louis.

A list of the *engagés* employed by Manuel Lisa on an ex-

¹⁸ George Bird Grinnell, "Bent's Old Fort and Its Builders," in *Kansas Historical Collections*, 15: 61.

¹⁹ Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, 151 (Boston, 1895).

pedition to the upper Missouri which left St. Louis in May, 1812, gives an excellent idea of the part played by Negroes in the fur trade. "George, *negre*," who was probably a slave acting as cook or personal servant, is listed in a conspicuous position at the very end of the muster roll. At first glance he seems to be the only representative of the African race with the expedition, but further investigation reveals one "Edouard Rose," none other than the notorious guide, interpreter, hunter, and Crow chief. Another familiar name is that of Baptiste Pointsable, the half-Indian, one-fourth French, one-fourth Negro son of the "first white settler in Chicago." Still more careful examination brings to light at least one more person of Negro blood—Cadet Chevalier, a free mulatto who engaged in the fur trade from about 1802 until his death during this expedition on January 4, 1813.²⁰

Colonel James Stevenson of the Bureau of American Ethnology, who "spent thirty years among Indians for study of them," is quoted as having "remarked upon . . . the fact that the old fur traders always got a Negro if possible to negotiate for them with the Indians, because of their 'pacifying effect.' They could manage them better than white men, with less friction."²¹ Stevenson's opinion of the affinity of the Indian for the Negro is upheld by such independent and well-qualified observers as John H. Kinzie, the Reverend Edward D. Neill, and the journalists of the Lewis and Clark expedition. But whether or not this rather extreme statement of the relation of the Negro to the Indian trade is accepted, the facts presented herein give some idea of the varied parts played by Negro slaves and free persons of color in the drama of the American fur trade—rôles which included the entire range of cast, from cooks, personal servants, voyageurs, hunters, guides, and interpre-

²⁰ Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-trading Expedition*, 101, 157, 158.

²¹ *Ten Years' Work for Indians at Hampton Institute, Va., 1878-1888*, 9, 13 (Hampton, Virginia, 1888).

ters to salaried traders and independent entrepreneurs. The Negroes have not dominated any one rôle, as have the Highland Scots, the French-Canadians, or the Kentuckians, but it is probably fair to say that they have been more versatile in their fur-trading activities than any of the latter. Any survey of the racial aspects of the American fur trade, to be complete, must include the people whose African blood is sometimes mingled with that of the Caucasian or the Indian or both, who are colloquially known as the American Negroes.

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