

SISTER DAYS

365 INSPIRED MOMENTS IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY



SISTER DAYS BOOK CLUB

Member preview: March 1-31

Janus Adams

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scanned from the book.



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*365 Inspired Moments
in African American Women's History*



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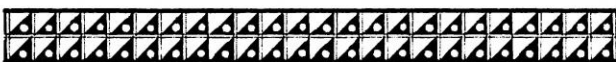
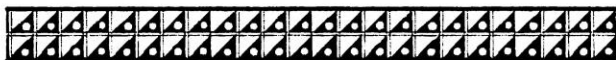


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March



Guadeloupe woman arrives at Ellis Island aboard S.S. Korona (April 6, 1911). Photo by Augustus Sherman. Reprinted courtesy National Park Service, Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island.



Deep into the winter of 1692, Tituba, an enslaved twenty-year-old charged with caring for her owner's children, retold the tales of jombies and spirits from her own childhood that sent her charges *wild* and ignited the hysteria that was the Salem Witch Trials.

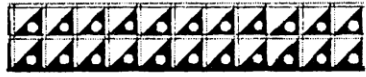
On March 1, 1692, hearings began with evidence of witchcraft. Because Sarah Good, for example, was seen near the farm of her neighbor whose crop had gone bad, she must be a witch. Faced with the logic of Puritan New England, Tituba—the embodiment of “culture clash”—didn’t have a chance. A slave with no interest in upholding such a system, the spectre of mass executions made her a pragmatic enough “witch” to “confess.” Still, she was sentenced to death. But with true absurdity, hers was the rare case when being a slave was a protection—because her execution would have deprived her owner of his property. It also deprived her of exoneration. When the governor released those awaiting trial, she was unable to pay the cost of her thirteen months in prison and was sold for costs.

Repenting the excesses of the Frenzy, in October 1697, colonial governors limited the extent of future righteous indignation. In lieu of execution, blasphemers, atheists, and any who denied the Bible as divine would receive time in the pillory or six months in prison, have his/her tongue bored with a hot iron, or be seated on the gallows with a rope around the neck. In the seething cauldron of 1690s society, Tituba’s tales were the spark inflaming existing biases against such traditional taboos as the *outsider*, the *outcast*, and the *woman in possession of her faculties*. To study the era is to know that given the temper of the times and the psychology of the zealous, any group of people can justify anything in the name of piety; all it takes is power gone mad.

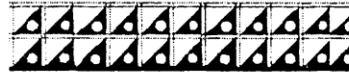
Saturday, March 1, 1692

Massachusetts

USA



March 2



It was Frederick Douglass who sold President Abraham Lincoln on the Emancipation Proclamation as a winning Civil War strategy. His next coup upheld a tradition of every American-fought war before (and since): recruitment of black soldiers. On March 2, 1863, Douglass stirred the troops with an editorial that would become a historic recruitment poster: "Men of Color! To Arms! Action!" "There is no time to delay," he rallied. "Better die free, than to live slaves. This is the sentiment of every brave colored man amongst us." By war's end, nearly two hundred thousand brave men would enlist, as brave women battled the home-front.

Victimized, as were their husbands and brothers, by the violent of every stripe and rank, in and out of uniform, North and South, black women enlisted their own courage. "My Dear Husband[,] I received a letter from you week before last and was glad to hear that you were well and happy," wrote Emily Waters. Unable to pay her eight-dollar-a-month rent when the Union neglected to pay its black troops, she was about to be evicted. Black women fought for family: "Mr abraham lincon I wont to kno sir if you please wether I can have my son relest from the arme he is all the subport I have now his father is Dead," wrote Jane Welcome. When Confederates denied black soldiers respect as prisoners of war, black women fought for their men. "Excellent Sir" wrote Hannah Johnson, demanding that the president fulfill his "responsib's to the soldiers and their families." Her son's regiment (joined by two of Frederick and Anna Murray Douglass's sons) was the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Colored, whose attack on Fort Wagner was immortalized in the film *Glory* and with statues in Boston and Washington, D.C.

We also fight who stand and wait!

Monday, March 2, 1863

Massachusetts

USA



Billed as a peaceful demonstration in the nation's capital, the Women's Suffrage Parade of March 3, 1913, attracted five thousand women and scores of white men who were so numerous, disruptive, and violent that one could only wonder at the argument that women didn't need the vote because they had men to protect them.

"Hoodlums, many of them in uniform, leaned forward till their cigarettes almost touched the women's faces while blowing smoke in their eyes" wrote a reporter of the scene. As women inched their way up Pennsylvania Avenue, in step, they were jeered, spat upon, and slapped until a "surging mass" of men overwhelmed police and the cavalry was rushed in from Fort Myer to restore control. Of those who were swamped in the melee more than a hundred were trampled, and with only two ambulances, it took six hours to shuttle the wounded to a nearby hospital.

"Does it not make you burn with shame to be a mere black man when such mighty deeds are done by the Leaders of Civilization?" cooed W. E. B. Du Bois in his editorial in *The Crisis*. "Does it not make you 'want to be white'?" From a white woman came this note: "Not one of [the colored people] was boisterous or rude as with great difficulty we passed along the unprotected avenue. The difference between them and those insolent, bold white men was remarkable. . . . The dignified silence of the colored people . . . was a great contrast to those who should have known better. I thank them in the name of all the women for their kindness." Imbedded in her comment, however, was the very notion against which blacks fought and marched that day: that "women" means "white women." As a sister once said, "All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave." A week later, the bravest of all died at close to ninety-two years of age—Harriet Tubman (see March 10). Exiting one era, we began a new . . . *anew*.

Monday, March 3, 1913

Washington, D.C.

USA



On March 4, 1789, the Congress of the United States convened for the first time, empowered by the vote of nine of the original thirteen states ratifying the Constitution. Emancipation should have been achieved with the Revolutionary War. Instead slavery was upheld, and with humiliating flourish, an enslaved individual was declared three-fifths a man. Seventy years later, as the crisis flared into Civil War, author Frances Ellen Watkins Harper took time to read the Constitution. Moved, she wrote a letter to the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*:

I never saw so clearly the nature and intent of the Constitution before. Oh, was it not strangely inconsistent that men, fresh, so fresh, from the baptism of the Revolution should make such concessions to the foul spirit of Despotism! that, when fresh from gaining their own liberty, they could permit the African slave trade—could let their national flag hang a sign of death on Guinea's coast and Congo's short! Twenty-one years [from independence to abolition of the slave trade] the slave-ships of the new Republic could gorge the sea monsters with their prey; twenty-one years of mourning and desolation for their children of the tropics, to gratify the avarice and cupidity of men styling themselves free! And then the dark intent of the fugitive clause veiled under words so specious that a stranger unacquainted with our nefarious government would not know that such a thing was meant by it. Alas for these fatal concessions. . . . In the freedom of man's will I read the philosophy of his crimes, and the impossibility of his actions having a responsible moral character without it; and hence the continuance of slavery does not strike me as being so very mysterious.

Her letter appeared in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on April 9, 1859.

Friday, March 4, 1789

Maryland

USA

 March 5 

Just the day before, Abraham Lincoln had been inaugurated President of the United States. Now, on March 5, 1861, in the flush of excitement surrounding the new administration, Mary Todd Lincoln met Elizabeth Keckley—the elegantly attired, statuesque African American designer who would be her official dressmaker and confidante throughout her White House years.

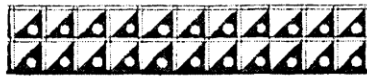
Keckley would tell an interviewer thirty years later, “I dressed Mrs. Lincoln for every levee. I made every stitch of clothing that she wore. I dressed her hair. I put on her skirts and dresses. I fixed her bouquets, saw that her gloves were all right, and remained with her each evening until Mr. Lincoln came for her. My hands were the last to touch her before she took the arm of Mr. Lincoln and went forth to meet the ladies and gentlemen on those great occasions.” But that was hardly the measure of the depth of allegiance to which Elizabeth Keckley would go.

A former slave who had purchased her freedom and that of her son in 1855, it was to former slaves that she paid greatest deference. When her son George, the light-skinned product of rape by a former owner, joined a white Union regiment and died in the line of duty, she channeled her energies into helping others. As cofounder of the Contraband Relief Association, she raised funds to assist the thousands of refugees who flooded the capital city seeking food and shelter—an effort to which her friend Mary Lincoln contributed two hundred dollars. Then, in 1868, following the president’s assassination, she naively hoped to help ease the former first lady’s financial woes with publication of her memoir, *Behind the Scenes; Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Instead, the book dissolved their friendship. Intimate and controversial, it is, to this day, the best account of the Lincolns’ family life.

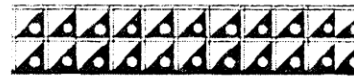
Tuesday, March 5, 1861

Washington, D.C.

USA



March 6



People often look back upon the twentieth-century women's movement and assume that the conversation on the value of "women's work" and its lack of compensation began in the 1970s. Not so, as Gertrude Bustill Mossell wrote in an illustrative anecdote titled "A Boy's Estimate of His Mother's Work." It appeared in her column in the *New York Freeman* on March 6, 1886:

"My mother gets me up, builds the fire, and gets my breakfast," said a bright youth. "Then she gets my father up, and gets his breakfast and sends him off. Then she gives the other children their breakfast and sends them to school; and then she and the baby have breakfast."

"How old is the baby?" asked the reporter.

"Oh, she is 'most two."

"Are you well paid?"

"I get \$2 a week and father gets \$2 a day."

"How much does your mother get?"

With a bewildered look the boy said, "Mother, why, she don't work for anybody."

"I thought you said she worked for all of you."

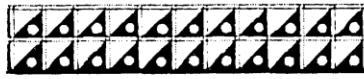
"Oh, yes, for us she does, but there ain't no money in it."

In the days of Reconstruction, Sojourner Truth warned against according men rights denied women (see May 10), and there were a few men, Frederick Douglass among them, who broke with traditional male dominance to fight for the rights of all women. They well knew that a mother who could not protect herself could not protect her children. And every man is first his mother's child—a point not lost on Mossell's nephew, Paul Robeson.

Saturday, March 6, 1886

New York

USA



March 7



They stood in the middle of the floor, crying, with their arms locked about Bigger. Bigger held his face stiff, hating them and himself, feeling the white people along the wall watching. His mother mumbled a prayer, to which the preacher chanted.

"Lord, here we is, maybe for the last. You gave me these children, Lord, and told me to raise 'em. If I failed, Lord, I did the best I could. (*Ahmen!*) These poor childrens been with me a long time and they's all I got. Lord, please let me see 'em again after the sorrow and suffering of this world! (*Hear her, Lawd!*) Lord, please let me see 'em where I can love 'em in peace. Let me see 'em again beyond the grave! (*Have mercy, Jesus!*) You said You'd heed prayer, Lord, and I'm asking this in the name of Your son."

"Ahman 'n' Gawd bless yuh, Sistah Thomas," the preacher said.

They took their arms from round Bigger, silently, slowly; then turned their faces away, as though their weakness made them ashamed in the presence of powers greater than themselves.

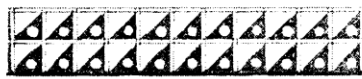
"We leaving you now with God, Bigger," his mother said. "Be sure and pray, son." They kissed him.

Bigger Thomas wasn't just an archetypal invention of his author, Richard Wright, who lived only in the pages of *Native Son*. As Wright confided on March 7, 1940, in his essay "How Bigger Was Born," he had witnessed Bigger's baptism by fire in the racism of Natchez, Memphis, and Chicago; in his life he had come to know five Biggers. There was Bigger the childhood bully, Bigger the angry teenager, Bigger the dangerous young man, Bigger the "crazy nigga," and Bigger the volcano, whom pain had tricked into believing he had nothing to lose. Five Biggers killed the white girl and robbed his black mother of him. Five demons killed Bigger long before his mother's prayer for all the Biggers she, too, had ever known.

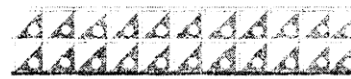
Thursday, March 7, 1940

Mississippi

USA



March 8



In the account book of Philadelphia cobbler Abraham Shadd, halfpence and shillings code his Underground Railroad stationmastery. In the journal of his daughter, Mary Ann Shadd, is the story of the first African American woman newspaper editor and publisher. Emigrating to Canada with a growing number of expatriates and slaves “forwarded” to freedom aboard the UGRR, she extended the family’s activism with her paper, the *Provincial Freeman*. The voice of freedom, she was the target of repression. A quarter century after Maria Stewart (see September 21) became the first woman on the lecture podium, Shadd was in Illinois to promote the paper when men “so conservative they [won’t] tolerate lectures from women” shut down her speech. In the March 8, 1856, edition of the *Freeman*, she documented the incident and called upon activists in the cause of women’s rights to head to Illinois posthaste. Half a century later, coincidentally, March 8 was proclaimed International Women’s Day. Today, we honor all our sheroes, like Shadd, who helped to make a better world with this parable:

The story is told of an old blind woman and those who would try to trick her. Known for her insight, she is often asked questions that no one else can answer; to define some of life’s greatest mysteries and explain into palpable meaning its sorrows. One day, two youngsters decide to find out just how wise she really is. We’re going to trick her, they dare think. And so they go out and catch a bird, a littler life innocent in the scheme. They will go to the woman with a question and plan in mind. Is the bird alive or dead? they will ask, knowing that if she says it is dead, they will let it fly; if she says it is alive, they will kill it. Walking up to the blind old woman, they pose their question. She pauses, smiles, and answers. “Whether the bird is dead or alive,” she tells them, “it is in your hands.” From Shadd’s day to ours, like the life of a fragile little bird, the condition of human rights is *in our hands*.

Saturday, March 8, 1856

Illinois

USA/Canada

Celebrations

Collective Responsibility



March 9



As quiet as it is kept, the truth of lynching is this: the overwhelming majority of African American men, women, and children killed by white mobs were middle- and upper-class individuals guilty of one crime alone—violating the doctrine of white supremacy. Never was that made more clear than on March 9, 1892, when the owners of the People’s Grocery Store in Memphis, Tennessee, were lynched—an event that propelled Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells to launch the anti-lynching campaign that nearly made them victims.

Threatened by the success of the three businessmen and its portent for black economic independence, a white competitor and his friends in the press, police, and courts fueled the white rage that led to the slaughter, in which one victim’s eyes had been gouged out and three of his fingers shot off. In a wave of terror mirroring the increased scapegoating of blacks for the Civil War losses of an unreconstructed South, 255 known lynchings would be committed that year by whites angered by the loss of former prey. Four years later, the Supreme Court would restore total white-over-black dominion with its *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision legalizing segregation and circumventing “freedom amendments” to the Constitution for the next sixty years (see May 17). But what made the lynching of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart unique was its effect.

Mary Church Terrell (see May 14), daughter of a wealthy ex-slave who raised her to be “a lady,” pregnant wife of the future first black federal judge, would lose her baby to substandard segregated hospital care. Ida B. Wells, a seasoned anti-segregationist crusader, was co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech*. The movement forged by these two very different women (see July 30) would yield a tale of fear in black and white, and legendary courage where *hell hath no fury* . . .

Wednesday, March 9, 1892

Tennessee

USA

Lynching

Respect for One’s Power

 March 10 

On March 10, 1913, Harriet Tubman died at her Auburn, New York, home. Nearing ninety-two years of age, she had been an icon for the African American and women's rights movements, remaining active in both in her later years. As long ago as slavery and her life seem, it is significant that Tubman helped define two human rights agendas across two centuries. In a time of freedom that was not free, when the gains for which she fought were as endangered as most of her life had been, her calls for vigilance and self-determination took on new meaning. On August 28, 1868, Frederick Douglass wrote the testament that well serves as her eulogy:

The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day—you the night. I have had the applause of the crowd and the satisfaction that comes of being approved by the multitude, while the most that you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scared, and foot-sore bondmen and women, whom you have led out of the house of bondage, and whose heartfelt "God bless you" has been your only reward. The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witness of your devotion to freedom.

Coming one week after women's suffrage marchers in Washington, D.C. (see March 3) had been attacked by irate men along the Pennsylvania Avenue parade route, the timing of her death was significant. For the woman who had seen the best and the worst of valor and ignorance, it must have seemed time to venture to higher ground.

Monday, March 10, 1913

New York

USA



On March 11, 1973, visitors crossed the threshold of Boston's new Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists into a world wrought by two visionary women. In twenty years of building the national center, Elma Lewis, the venerated educator-entrepreneur and future MacArthur "genius" Award recipient, had opened many a door for artists. Now she opened doors for art lovers on the "Reflective Moments" of Lois Mailou Jones. It was a retrospective exhibition of the Boston-born artist's forty-six years as a door opener herself as founder of Charlotte Hawkins Brown's Palmer Institute (see June 17) art department in 1927 and as a member of Howard University's art faculty since 1930.

As museum director Edmund Barry Gaither noted in the show catalog, Mailou Jones was "one of the few figures in American art to achieve a long, exciting and inspiring career in which there is no room for defeat, dullness, or trickery." As a child, summering on Martha's Vineyard while her mother plied her own artistry as a beautician and milliner, Lois met the African American singer-composer Harry T. Burleigh. Generous to the island children, he inspired them with stories of his own success in Europe. He urged them to go abroad—to "try to make something of the importance of your life" away from American racism. Remembering his advice, Jones took a "shackle-free" sabbatical in France, studied Africa's classical art traditions, designed masks for the African choreographer Asadata Dafora. So consumed by art was she that her mother warned her against being singular and single: "Some day you'll wake up and find yourself surrounded with pictures." It was not to be. Mailou Jones was soon influenced by Haitian art and a Haitian artist, Louis Vergniaud Pierre-Noël, to whom Dafora introduced her. "Tall, handsome Pierre reappeared in my life when that reminder from my mother seemed to be true." Married in 1953, they shuttled to Haiti, explored Africa, enriched their art, and made of their love an artful gift to others.

Sunday, March 11, 1973

Massachusetts

USA

 March 12 

On the morning of March 12, 1959, basking in opening night reviews, it was official: Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* was a hit! The first black drama to achieve such kudos, it was directed by Lloyd Richards; starred Ruby Dee, Claudia McNeil, Sidney Poitier, and Diana Sands; and took its title from a poem by Langston Hughes: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or does it explode?" A classic "well-made play" in craft and art, it won the Drama Critics Circle Award for the twenty-nine-year-old Hansberry. With that distinction came the responsibilities of success.

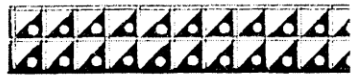
In romantic reflections of the Kennedy era as the "days of Camelot," it is easy to dismiss as incongruous the alter images of the time: police dogs and fire hoses set upon children, fire bombings, and J. Edgar Hoover, an FBI chief obsessed with destroying Martin Luther King. On October 27, 1962, racked by a cancer that would claim her life, Hansberry left a sickbed to issue "A Challenge to Artists" at a Carnegie Hall protest against the dangling McCarthy era threat posed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC):

Simply being against life as it is is not enough . . . it is perhaps the task, I should think certainly the joy, of the artist to chisel out some expression of what life can conceivably be. . . . As I stand here I know perfectly well that such institutions as the House Committee, and all the other little committees, have dragged on their particular obscene theatrics for all these years not to expose "Communists" or do anything really in connection with the "security" of the United States, but merely to create an atmosphere where, in the first place, I should be afraid to come here tonight at all and, secondly, to absolutely guarantee that I will not say what I am going to say, which is this: I think that my government is wrong.

Thursday, March 12, 1959

New York

USA



March 13



In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as kidnappers swarmed the African continent seizing bodies for the slave trade and destroying ancient civilizations, a tradition emerged as a means of survival: the secret societies. From culturally specific rituals evolved rites and rituals uniquely female and male.

Among the Baule of contemporary Ivory Coast, such is the sacred nature of the woman's body and its sexuality that boys are allowed to go nude longer than girls, who are usually clothed after their second birthday. When a girl first experiences menstruation, she is given an *atonvle*, a coming-of-age ceremony. Dressed for womanhood in fine clothes and gold jewelry, she is celebrated by her family and friends. Then her courting years begin—symbolically in most regions, actually among the eastern Baule. She is encouraged to have lovers and to marry. For the full community of women, there is the diety of womanhood, *Aɔyanun*, in whose dance all women are welcome. Dressed in white, their faces speckled with white paint, they sing and dance through the village, the distinctive African women's shrill "whoop" piercing the air, marking each cadence. For some, it is a sign of crisis, for others it might fulfill a chief's request to ward off potential danger. But in no case are men present. They have their own times and sounds for the protection and perpetuation of the culture. When the women dance, it is a time, as men well know, to remain out of sight, to "hide themselves."

In our time and space, when most Africans in the Americas no longer know our precise lineage, what a revelation it is to hear a Caribbean elder say "Aw, go hide yourself." Our past might be past, but it is not gone.

Circa 1800

Baule region

Ivory Coast

Culture

Identity

 March 14 

Free at last! Having arrived safely in Toronto, Canada, and having changed her name from Mary Epps, on March 14, 1855, “Emma Bowen” wrote a note of thanks to William Still, Philadelphia’s main line Underground Railroad conductor. Upon the sale of her child, she explained, she had been so deeply grieved that violent, convulsive seizures left her unable to speak for a month. When she recovered, inspired by a hope that she would one day “sit under her own vine and fig tree where none dared to molest or make her afraid,” she had fled to freedom. But Bowen did not realize that her flight was a disease first diagnosed in 1851 by Dr. Samuel Cartwright, a noted member of the faculty of the University of Louisiana, in his paper “Drapetomania; Or, the Disease Causing Negroes to Run Away”:

Drapetomania is from [the Greek, meaning] a runaway slave and *mad* or *crazy*. It is unknown to our medical authorities, although its diagnostic symptom, the absconding from service, is well known to our planters and overseers. . . . The cause in most of the cases, that induces the Negro to run away from service, is as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation, and much more curable as a general rule. With the advantages of proper medical advice, strictly followed, this troublesome practice that many Negroes have of running away, can be almost entirely prevented. . . . The experience [of owners is] whipping them out of it, as a preventive measure against absconding, or other bad conduct.

Dysaesthesia Aethiopica, or Hebetude of the Mind and Obtuse Sensibility of Body—a Disease Peculiar to Negroes—Called by Overseers, “Rascality” . . .

With medical expertise like this, is it any wonder that blacks held to their own secret remedies? Clearly, someone was *crazy*, but not Mary. Mary was free.

Wednesday, March 14, 1855

Louisiana

USA/Canada

 March 15 

Born in Toccoa, Georgia, in 1896, Ida Cox had the blues. At fourteen, she ran away from home to put them to music, where they could do her some good. From White & Clark's Black & Tan Minstrels to the studios of Paramount Records, with the bands of Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and her own road shows, she could work the crowd. And work it she did when she sang this song in 1924, her own "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues":

*I've got a disposition and a way of my own,
When my man starts to kicking I let him find a new home,
I get full of good liquor, walk the street all night,
Go home and put my man out if he don't act right.
Wild women don't worry,
Wild women don't have the blues.*

*You never get nothing by being an angel child,
You'd better change your way an' get real wild.
I wanta' tell you something, I wouldn't tell you no lie,
Wild women are the only kind that ever get by.
Wild women don't worry.
Wild women don't have the blues.*

Always a lady, a tough and demanding professional in every way, Miss Ida could take care of bizness. Uum Huummm.

1924

Georgia

USA

 March 16 

From newspaper ads come a history of African American businesswomen.

Boarding & Lodging

The subscriber respectfully informs her friends and the public generally, that she has opened a house for the accommodation of genteel persons of colour with Boarding and Lodging at No. 88 South-Fourth St. . . . Philadelphia. Citizens and strangers in want of Boarding and Lodging may depend upon having every attention paid to them on the most reasonable terms. Gracy Jones, Philadelphia.

Leghorn Bonnets

Mrs. Sarah Johnson, No. 551 Pearl-Street, respectfully informs her Friends and the Public, that she has commenced Bleaching Pressing and Refitting Leghorn and Straw Hats, in the best manner. Ladies Dresses made, and Plain Sewing done on the most reasonable terms. Mrs. J. begs leave to assure her friends and the public that those who patronize her may depend upon having their work done faithfully, and with punctuality and despatch. New York.

On March 16, 1827, Samuel Cornish and John B. Russworm founded African American journalism with the publication of *Freedom's Journal*, the first black-owned American newspaper. "We wish to plead our own cause," they wrote in their first editorial. "We form a spoke in the human wheel, and it is necessary that we should understand our pendency on the different parts, and theirs on us." Critical to that "pendence" were the paper's advertisers. With print space provided by publishers, ads placed by businesses, and subscriptions from readers, the key to success lay in the support of black business by black business—or, as each sister-advertiser made note, by the patronage of "her friends and the public."

Friday, March 16, 1827

New York

USA

 March 17 

Of the portrayal of African American women, author bell hooks has said, “We don’t have to be punished . . . we don’t have to sacrifice our lives when we invent and realize our complex selves.” In *Bone Black*, her memoir of coming-of-age in the 1960s, she writes of the bond of hair in the African American sisterhood.

We are six girls who live in a house together. We have different textures of hair, short, long, thick, thin. We do not appreciate these differences. We do not celebrate the variety that is ourselves. We do not run our fingers through each other’s dry hair after it is washed. We sit in the kitchen and wait our turn for the hot comb, wait to sit in the chair by the stove, smelling grease, feeling the heat warm our scalp like a sticky hot summer sun.

For each of us getting our hair pressed is an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be white. It is not a sign of our quest to be beautiful. We are girls. It is a sign of our desire to be women . . . a rite of passage. Before we reach the appropriate age we wear braids and plaits that are symbols of our innocence, our youth, our childhood. Then we are comforted by the parting hands that comb and braid, comforted by the intimacy and bliss. There is a deeper intimacy in the kitchen on Saturday when hair is pressed, when fish is fried, when sodas are passed around, when soul music drifts over the talk. We are women together. This is our ritual and our time.

Born with “good hair,” hooks will wish to share in the rite of the hot comb; wish for its power to transform her “thin good hair into thick nappy hair.” That is her child’s-eye view. Later, she will want an Afro, “never to get my hair pressed again.” Having tasted and tested this ritual of womanhood, she concludes, its “intimacy masks betrayal.” Come of age, the girl is a woman now.

Circa 1962

Kentucky

USA



On March 18, 1895, two hundred pilgrims—men, women, and children—left Savannah, Georgia, emigrating to Liberia. With their journey, they renewed the back-to-Africa exodus of the early 1800s (see August 27, October 24) that had been suspended in the hopeful years following the Civil War and revived in the 1870s, fleeing the terror of the Ku Klux Klan and its allies. In search of peace, some chartered prairie schooners to the western territories, others sailed sea schooners east. In Liberia, the first African nation to emerge from colonial rule, they found what they had been seeking.

In the eternal quest for home and for peace, our journeys across the seas go on, propelled by circumstance. In 1967, Arzu Titus was a child fleeing Honduras for the United States “with nothing but the clothes I was wearing.” Years later, still pained by that legacy, she took a course entitled, “You Can Heal Your Life.” From it came a work of art, a self-love piece, as she calls it, her story quilt, *She Kisses*. An assignment to look into a mirror each morning and say “I love you” sounded easier than it was. “For three months I did this exercise in front of the bathroom mirror with my eyes closed,” said Titus. “One day I looked at myself in the mirror and was able to look into my own eyes. What I saw was a beautiful woman. I said, ‘I love you.’ I kissed the woman in the mirror, and the woman kissed me back.” In dialogue with her inner self, new revelations and new quilts would come. “Take the pain and do something useful with it,” said *My Spirit*. “You have exhausted your allotted time for regret in this life. The only time left is for creating value. Eat the pain and make yourself strong. Swallow the tears and nurture me. Take the pressure and use it like a diamond. Make yourself shine.”

In Liberia, in the mirror of Arzu Titus a change of destination and of destiny. *This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. Everywhere I go, let it shine. . . .*

Monday, March 18, 1895

Georgia

Liberia

Emigration

Re-visioning

 March 19 

On March 19, 1935, in Harlem, a seething wound waiting to burst stopped waiting.

As with such things, the inciting incident seemed simple: a boy had shoplifted a ten-cent penknife. But as guards ejected him from the store, a woman screamed—and by midnight, five hundred policemen had been called out to quell the riot that left one dead, one hundred wounded, and scores more arrested for looting and sentenced to months in prison on the spot. The few shopkeepers to escape damage did so by posting notices in boarded windows: “This shop is run by Colored people”; “This shop employs Negro workers.” Six years into the Great Depression, half the city’s black workforce was unemployed. Anger was turning inward or to despair as even the most menial jobs, once conscribed to blacks, now went to desperate whites. “My purpose is to let the Communists know that they cannot come into this country and upset our laws,” a careless, opportunistic district attorney told the press. Four sacrificial Communists—one black man, three whites—were held for the rebellion that left broken shop windows to mirror the shattered lives of most black passersby. The “Communist threat,” it seemed, was easier to target than the true cause-and-effect of labor woes.

Above the din, educator Nannie Burroughs charged “Declaration of 1776 Is Cause of Harlem Riot”: “The framers of the Declaration . . . prophesied that uprisings would occur ‘in the course of human events.’ . . . They declared that ‘when a long train of abuses and usurpations pursuing, invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.’ If that’s Red, then the writers of the Declaration of Independence were very Red.” “Harlem did not have a ‘race’ riot,” she concluded. “It had a human revolt.”

Tuesday, March 19, 1935

New York

USA



On March 20, 1852, the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published. A sentimental depiction of slavery, it was so radical in its day that President Abraham Lincoln later greeted its diminutive author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, with the immortal line "So this is the little lady who wrote the book that made this great war!"

First serialized in newspapers, the complete book sold out its five-thousand-copy first printing in just two days. Translated into twenty-five languages, performed onstage continuously from 1853 to 1930, it even launched its own merchandising campaign—the Tomitudes, statuettes of the book's main characters. A cultural icon rarely out of stock and never out of print, it has added two terms to the modern lexicon: *Uncle Tom*, for self-effacing blacks; and *Simon Legree*, for chiseling evildoers. A favorite of teachers, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has shaped the view of slavery held by most people worldwide—surpassing such authentic African American voices as Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, based on her own family's odyssey, and even Alex Haley's *Roots*, now more synonymous with genealogy.

Perhaps the book's greatest contribution to American letters, however, was its humanity. Stowe's witness to children being ripped from mothers came from her despair at the deaths of her own children. Uncle Tom, a conflicted man who later helped others escape, was based on Josiah Henson (see October 28). In 1851, a chance meeting in Canada reunited "Poor Eliza" and an Ohio-based Underground Railroad agent. With abolitionists persecuted for causing the Civil War long after its close, not until the 1876 publication of his *Reminiscences* did the UGRR agent divulge his connection to the slave, dubbed "Eliza Harris" by his wife, who slipped across the half-frozen river to his door (see January 17). Eliza's story was real, and Stowe's fictional Quaker couple, Simeon and Rachel Halliday, were the real-life rescuers, Levi and Catherine Coffin.

Saturday, March 20, 1852

Ohio/Connecticut

USA

Literature

Continuity

 March 21 

"**A**nd before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, And go home to my Lord, And be free." That was the decision Margaret Garner had made for herself and her children, as reported in *The Liberator* on March 21, 1856.

In late January 1856, Margaret Garner and her four children had been among a slave party escaping from Kentucky across the frozen river into Ohio. Splitting up on shore, one group boarded the Underground Railroad and found freedom in Canada. Garner's group was less fortunate. Tracked by a posse and surrounded, the slave men fought hard, but to no avail. Determined to kill herself and her children rather than be returned to bondage, Garner seized a butcher knife and slit the throat of her youngest child before being restrained. She was then jailed under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required the return of escaped slaves and imposed penalties on would-be rescuers. The trial lasted two weeks. When her lawyer could not prevent her return, he made a desperate attempt to have her charged with murder in order to keep her in Ohio and save her life. When that, too, failed, Margaret Garner was shackled and forced aboard the *Henry Lewis*, bound for Louisville. En route, an accident occurred. Whether she fell or jumped into the river with her child was never clear. But all agreed she was overjoyed when her child drowned and bitterly fought her own rescue by a friendly albeit ill-advised cook. She was then put aboard the *Hungarian*, and it is said that Margaret Garner was last seen "crouching like a wild animal near the stove, with a blanket wrapped around her," determined still to avoid further enslavement. Sold in the South, Margaret Garner soon died. "She had escaped at last," her husband wrote.

More than a century after Garner's death, her story inspired Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison to write the 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (see June 19).

Friday, March 21, 1856

Virginia

USA

 March 22 

Only the night before, a young artist had been stag-partying around New York till four in the A.M. with his artist-writer friends. A truly talented—and soon-to-be legendary—group, they were roaring through their twenties, imbibing Harlem’s cultural scene, and stirring up their own notable brew—the “New Negro.” It was 1925. “We build our temples for tomorrow,” one of their number, Langston Hughes, would write. But the “visionary” among them, artist-muralist Aaron Douglas, was turning his eye for painterly detail to matters of the heart. Spring was here! as he wrote to his lady love.

Sweetheart: I looked at the moon last night. I wondered at it. What a beautiful thing it was. How full of mystery. How full of life. How full of love. It seemed to reek with voluptuousness. What a sensitive thing it seemed last night. How charming. But the most fascinating thing about it was that it seemed to give me an unusual sense of your presence. I could feel you. I lived in the memory of all moons. Last night I saw the happiness and beauty and love of all moons crowded into the memory of that most glorious of all moonlight nights. The night that I shall never forget. The night that we rode from Topeka to K. C. last June. I can see it now. We were one with nature that night as we sped along oblivious of everything except our own happiness and the flood of moonlight that spread over us a soft canopy of love.

Douglas signed his letter “Daddy,” in that swinging fashion that would be immortalized by Ella Fitzgerald in her hit song “My Heart Belongs to Daddy.” It certainly did for Alta Sawyer, to whom the letter was written. She soon pledged her heart to Douglas as his future bride.

Spring 1925

New York

USA

 March 23 

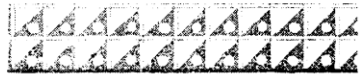
It was the Roaring Twenties, the temperance years of Prohibition when rum joints for revellers of every hue flourished in backroom parlors after dark. Right out front at the Cotton Club, Ethel Waters was queen, crooning “Am I Blue?” But “being blue” and “having the blues,” like city slick to country folk, were worlds apart. Taking sweetness from a honey man could get you to misbehavin’. Better get with the jive talk, a sound all its own:

Bird’s-eye maple: a very light skinned woman
Blue: a very dark skinned person
Bolido: gambling on the New York clearinghouse numbers
Buzz cart: a car
Dicty: high-class, a good sport
Dogs: feet
Eight ball: a blue
Honey man: a kept man
Juice joint: an after-hours spot during Prohibition
Lammer: a car
Lap: liquor
Scronch: a dance
Skip: to dance
Snouts: food, as in pickled pig snouts
Speakeasy: a juice joint
Spruce: a sucker
Sweet man: a honey man
Unsheiking: a woman trying to get a divorce
Working moll: a prostitute

1929

New York

USA



March 24



It was a Sunday in early spring the first time that Caramel Johnson dawned on the congregation of _____ Church in a populous New England city. The Afro-Americans of that city are well-to-do, being of a frugal nature, and consider it a lasting disgrace for any man among them, desirous of social standing in the community, not to make himself comfortable in this world's goods against the coming time when old age creeps on apace and renders him unfit for active business. . . . Of course, these small Vanderbilts and Astors of a darker hue must have a place of worship in accordance with their worldly prosperity, and so it fell out that _____ Church was the richest plum in the ecclesiastical pudding. . . .

The attendance was unusually large for morning service, and a restless movement was noticeable all through the sermon. How strange a thing is nature; the change of the seasons announces itself in all humanity as well as in the trees and flowers, the grass, and in the atmosphere. Something within us responds instantly to the touch of kinship that dwells in all life. . . . There was a suppressed feeling of expectation, but not the faintest rustle as the minister rose in the pulpit, and after a solemn pause, gave the usual invitation: "If there is anyone in the congregation desiring to unite with this church. . . ." The words had not died upon his lips when a woman started from her seat near the door and passed up the main aisle [and] the men said to one another, "She's a stunner, and make no mistake." The minister whispered to the candidate, coughed . . . and, finally, turned to the expectant congregation: "Sister Chocolate Caramel Johnson—" He was interrupted by a snicker . . . "I'd get the Legislature to change that if it was mine, 'deed I would!"

This passage is from "Bro'r Abr'm Jimson's Wedding," by Pauline E. Hopkins (see April 6), in the December 1901 issue of *Colored American Magazine*.

Spring 1901

Massachusetts

USA

March 25

It was the “last great march” of the Civil Rights era: a ribbon of marchers miles long streaming over the crest of the hill and the struggle called Selma, Alabama. The Selma-to-Montgomery march, over a fifty-four-mile course, rallied on March 21, 1965, and culminated at the state capitol building on March 25. What had begun as a voter registration campaign the year before had escalated into a violent assault on marchers crossing the Pettus Bridge, to become a showdown on segregation.

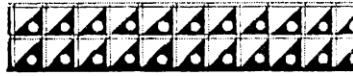
On March 7, state trooper Major John Cloud and Sheriff Jim Clark had launched a violent assault on the Pettus Bridge, beating back demonstrators. So horrid was the spectacle that it was called “Bloody Sunday” and President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act the next day. Two weeks later, demonstrators returned with reinforcements, conquering their dragons in a sweeping tide of four thousand under protection of the National Guard. The date, March 21, had been chosen for its solidarity with South Africa’s victims of apartheid and the infamous Sharpeville Massacre of March 21, 1960. With America’s swelling casualty list came a swell of conscience as people the nation over headed to Selma. With marchers gathering en route like an avalanche gathers momentum, a streaming ribbon of twenty-five thousand marchers miles long reached Montgomery in five days. In the lead was Dr. King, who had taken up the mantle of Selma at the invitation of a woman too often overlooked in the story of the struggle—Amelia Boynton.

Boynton was one of the few blacks registered in pre-voting rights Selma; for her campaign to register others, Sheriff Clark dragged her off to jail by the collar. Boynton had recruited SNCC to Selma. When a court injunction blocked SNCC, she sought out Dr. King. For her strategic role, as one historian noted, “It would probably not be too much to call her the mother of the Voting Rights Act.”

Thursday, March 25, 1965

Alabama

USA



March 26



In 1863, at the age of ninety-seven, a woman who had spent fifty years on the road, traveling the United States and Canada as an itinerant preacher, sat down to write the story of her life, *The Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman*. Enslaved until the age of thirty, she had the stripes of the lash to prove it. She began her career at about the time the slave trade was outlawed in 1808. At first, she was predictably discouraged from her mission on account of gender and of race, and she was made to feel “very unworthy and small.” There were times when her “imprudence” was “so much condemned, that I was sorely tempted by the enemy to turn aside into the wilderness.” But with her growing confidence came converts from the ranks of her staunchest opponents:

At one of the meetings . . . a great scripturian, fixed himself behind the door with pen and ink, in order to take down the discourse in short-hand; but the Almighty Being anointed me with such a portion of his Spirit, that he cast away his paper and pen, and heard the discourse with patience, and was much affected, for the Lord wrought powerfully on his heart. After meeting, he came forward and offered me his hand with solemnity on his countenance, and handed me something to pay for my conveyance home. . . . At a meeting which I held in Maryland, I was led to speak from the passage, “Woe to the rebellious city,” &c. After the meeting, the people came where I was to take me before the squire; but the Lord delivered me from their hands. [In Virginia] the people did not believe a colored woman could preach. And moreover, as she had no learning, they strove to imprison me because I spoke against slavery.

Venturing on “without purse or scrip,” she made her way. An inspiration to her sisters enslaved, she was a *dangerous* woman to the wicked indeed.

1863

Maryland/Virginia

USA

 March 27 

The Africana Studies and Research Center of Cornell University was twenty years old and celebrating. On March 27, 1990, it inaugurated its anniversary with a lecture series by the noted historian in whose honor its library had been named, Dr. John Henrik Clarke. Beginning his talk with his roots in the rural Georgia of 1915, he spoke of growing up poor in a family too often separated by the search for work. "I had to work against all of the odds to succeed, but succeed I did." That success, as a master teacher, he would attribute to three women.

As a young child, he would follow behind his great-grandmother as she tended turkeys on the farm, running up and down the hill after them and telling him her African stories. If he was mischievous, even though she was 108 years old, "She would hit me and her arm would almost go around me as though she was hugging and apologizing at the same time. . . . Then I would go through this fake crying, and when it was all over, I would sit there and she would tell me African stories." Planting the word *Africa* in him, she said her husband was "brave like in Africa" for fighting back; she knew the look and sound of the last Africans from the continent, having witnessed their landing. In a time when only one child per family outside the city limits could attend a city school, of his nine sisters and brothers, John was the chosen one. There, "the dark-skinned kids went to Miss Taylor . . . and the light-skinned kids went to Miss Fontrice." It was Miss Taylor who "raised my face between her hands and looked me dead in the eye . . . and said something that every child needs to be told at least once in his or her lifetime, simply: 'I believe in you. I have confidence in you. I believe you'll make it.'" Said Clarke, "I've had three deities in my life, all women. My great-grandmother; my mother, who died when I saw seven; and Miss Evelina Taylor." No wonder he became a master teacher.

Tuesday, March 27, 1990

New York

USA

Education

Responsibility to Youth



March 28



On March 28, 1976, the National Conference on the Black Family in the American Economy was meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, when the eminent psychiatrist Dr. Frances Cress Welsing broke the seal on language and the identity crisis it belies. "Blacks ask, 'What's happening,' because we really don't know *what's going on*," led Dr. Welsing, evoking a quandary posed in the song by Marvin Gaye. "The black man's language reflects his powerlessness in the face of white supremacy. The 'man' refers to the white man. The black man revolted against being called 'boy,' and now they call each other 'baby.' The black man calls the black woman 'mama,' he calls his house a 'crib,' and he calls himself a 'motherfucker.'"

Hardly content to leave things on that note, Welsing developed her "Cress Theory of Color Confrontation and Racism" and other healing balms for the wounded. In that, she joined such grassroots pragmatists as Los Angeles organizer Margaret Wright, a married mother of four known, in the 1970s, for her work with Women Against Repression. "Black men have been brainwashed into believing they've been emasculated. I tell them they're nuts," said Wright. "Black women aren't oppressing them. We're helping them get their liberation":

In black women's liberation we don't want to be equal with the white man, we're fighting for the right to be different and not be punished for it. . . . Equal means sameness. I don't want to be equal with the white community because I don't think it's very groovy. . . . Men are chauvinistic. I don't want to be chauvinistic. Some women run over people in the business world, doing the same thing as men. I don't want to compete on no damned exploitative level. I don't want to exploit nobody. I don't want to be on no firing line, killing people. I want the right to be black and me.

Sunday, March 28, 1976

Kentucky/California

USA

 March 29 

It was spring 1859 when Cordelia Loney approached the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. Within days she had been rescued from the fashionable boardinghouse where she was staying with the slaveowner-mistress who had warned her about “free niggers.” And so, it was of great concern to the woman, left to worry over how she would comb her own hair and dress her own form, that her slave return to the “kindnesses” offered by slavery. A wealthy woman of high standing in the Episcopal church, “a certain Doctor of Divinity” agreed to help relieve her distress by inquiring into the whereabouts of her missing property:

Hailing on the street a certain colored man with a familiar face, who he thought knew all the colored people about town, he related to him the predicament of his lady friend from the South . . . signified that Cordelia would rue the change . . . quoted Scripture justifying Slavery, and finally suggest[ed] that he (the colored man) would be doing a duty and a kindness to the fugitive by using his influence to “find her and prevail upon her to return. . . .” The colored man thus addressed was Thomas Dorsey, the well-known fashionable caterer of Philadelphia, who had had the experience of quite a number of years as a slave [and had] himself once been pursued as a fugitive . . . felt entirely qualified to reply to the reverend gentleman . . . telling him that Cordelia had as good a right to her liberty as he had, or her mistress either . . . that he would “rather give her a hundred dollars to help her off, than to do aught to make known her whereabouts, if he knew ever so much about her.” What further steps were taken by the discomfited divine, the mistress, or her boarding-house sympathizers, the Committee was not informed. [But Cordelia] took her departure for Canada.

As this incident, anonymously reported in the *New York Evening Post*, proves: those who believe the free were indifferent to the enslaved should consider the source.

Spring 1859

Pennsylvania

USA



March 30



To hear Gladys Knight sing “Memories” is to find it unbelievable that there had been a time when she actually prayed to lose her voice: “I don’t want this voice. . . . It’s getting in the way of the things I want to do. It’s causing so much trouble. Please, God, just take it away.” She was a teenager then, with parties and fun in mind, and that was one prayer she would later “hope he tuned out.” But in Las Vegas in 1989—thirty-seven years after she had won national acclaim on the *Original Ted Mack Amateur Hour* and begun singing with the Pips (her brother and their two cousins)—this was different. It was time to move on to new dreams.

From the age of seven, she’d been riding that “Midnight Train to Georgia” and up to New York to compete for Ted Mack. It had been quite a year of commuting and competition, carrying her little shoe box lunch, riding the segregated trains with her mother and siblings, for that was “The Way We Were” back then. Her father wasn’t for it, at first, and “Daddy Could Swear, I Declare,” but he came around. Indeed, she could say of her voice, “You’re the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me” and “Try to Remember” the great times at Motown before she “Heard It Through the Grapevine” that she hadn’t been paid all she was due. Through it all, “There’s a Lesson to Be Learned,” she thought; “I Can See Clearly Now”—1989 marked “My Time” to “Give Me a Chance.” Yes, Gladys Knight had sung a lot of songs in all those years:

I sang for preachers, parents, princes, and presidents; for drag queens and mob kings; for regal audiences and drunken fools. I sang for my husbands, for my children, for my band members, my managers, my record companies, my debtors, and, of course, my fans. On March 30, 1989, I sang purely for myself. . . . On that night, at the age of forty-four, I made my world premiere as an adult solo artist.

Thursday, March 30, 1989

Nevada

USA



These were revolutionary days. Abigail Adams declared her own independence of thought. In bold strokes, she linked the plight of the slave, the rights of women, and the hypocrisy of men who would suppress both. In its denial of universal freedom, she knew the plank on which the Founding Fathers teetered was fragile indeed. In a letter dated March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John, co-signer of the yet-undeclared Declaration of Independence and the future nation's second president. Chiding him for coddling slaveholders by denying others the rights he so prized for himself, she wrote:

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain, it is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us. . . . I desire you would Remember the Ladies. . . . If perticuliar care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no . . . Representation. That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend.

In 1935, another revolution loomed as the Great Depression—fiscal and emotional—lumbered on. With most black breadwinners *out of dough* and segregation peppering the stew, predictably, the recipe was a disaster. Again, it was a woman who saw the plight of the oppressed in global terms. As published by *The Afro-American*, activist-educator Nannie Burroughs titled her historic column “Declaration of 1776 Is Cause of Harlem Riot” (see March 19).

Sunday, March 31, 1776

Massachusetts

USA