



## African Swimmers Made History

**>H**istorical accounts indicate that from the Medieval Period through the mid-1800s, most people of European descent could not swim. In an 1879 address to the American Geographic Society, “Preservation of Life at Sea,” U.S. Navy rescue expert Lt. Theodorus Mason stated, “The great majority of people cannot swim, and strange as it may seem to you, there are many who follow the sea as a profession who cannot swim a stroke.”

As Westerners came into increasing contact with people of African descent, they were amazed by the Africans’ swimming abilities. In 1696, French author and swimming advocate Melchisédec Thévenot noted the decline of European swimming in contrast to the abilities of Africans and slaves, writing “Swimming was in great esteem among the Ancients. But to come to our times, it is most certain that Negroes, excel all

others in these Arts of Swimming and Diving. It is to them the Ladies are obliged for their Ornaments of Pearl.”

Recognizing that they could exploit Africans’ swimming and underwater diving abilities, slave traders carried many Africans to the Americas, where they served as pearl and salvage divers, descending more than 90 feet to harvest pearl oysters and recover goods from sunken ships.

Africans and slaves often saved the lives of drowning whites. In one account, a white clerk, “who could only swim a few strokes,” slipped off a “ship’s gangway” in Baltimore Harbor and was pulled by the current “far out in the harbour.” Fortunately for the clerk, his enslaved friend Zamba, “who could swim like a seagull,” dove in and kept the hapless clerk afloat until men in a rowboat could haul him out.

In 1853, a Brazilian steamer ran aground and began to break apart during a storm. A black

sailor named Simao “swam through the furious breakers” 13 times to save as many passengers. To reward this sailor, the passengers collected more than “£1,000” and had a statue rendered in his likeness.

There is no evidence that Westerners officially employed Africans as lifeguards, but accounts indicate blacks provided this service de facto. When a canoe carrying Paul Isert from ship to shore upset in the surf he “was tossed around in the breakers until a Black came swimming from the shore, pulled me onto his back, and thus drew me ashore.”

When high surf inhibited the embarkation of several hundred slaves in canoes to an awaiting slave ship, French slave trader Theophilus Conneau employed African lifeguards to ensure safe passage of his manacled human property. Conneau recorded that “a lot of youths were appointed to swim off whenever a canoe should capsize. Negro af-

ter Negro was rescued by the swimming party.”

Slaveholders in the American South employed slaves to teach their children to swim and serve as lifeguards. John Clinkscales of Abbeville County, South Carolina, explained that when he was young, an enslaved man named Essex, regarded as the best swimmer in the county, taught him to swim and served as his lifeguard.

After slavery was abolished in the U.S., some former slaves officially worked as lifeguards. In their 2001 book, “Fire on the Beach: Recovering the Lost History of Richard Etheridge and the Pea Island Lifesavers,” David Wright and David Zoby document how former slaves worked as lifesavers on North Carolina’s Outer Banks. These rescuers typically used surfboats to retrieve people from ships that had run aground during a storm.

However, former slaves were often compelled to swim out hundreds of yards to wrecks so they could rig breeches buoys to shuttle passengers safely to shore. This required them to battle storm-driven surf, undertows and powerful side currents.

African-Americans have a long swimming tradition that can be traced back to their ancestors’ homelands in Africa. The 20th century migration of many African-Americans to urban areas, coupled with segregation and cities’ unwillingness to duplicate expensive recreational facilities for blacks, deprived black neighborhoods of swimming pools. These developments highlight the need for African-Americans to once again become proficient swimmers.

**Kevin Dawson is assistant professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is working on a book titled “Enslaved Watermen in the Atlantic World,” 1444-1888.**