

The Truth Behind African Americans and Swimming

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Swimming is a common American pastime that thousands of Americans have enjoyed for centuries. What most people don't know is that fewer African Americans either know how to swim or swim on a regular basis in the United States than Americans of other races. Sadly, drowning is the number two cause of unintentional injury related death between children ages one through fourteen in America; however, African Americans between the ages of five and fourteen years old are 3.2 times more likely to drown than white children of the same age.¹ In recent studies conducted at the University of Memphis, it was found that a shocking seventy percent of African American children did not know how to swim at all.² Similarly, only three percent of the members of U.S.A. Swimming, the nation's governing body for the sport, is made up of people of color today³. Although many African Americans today have lower swimming ability than Americans of other races, their descendants, West Africans, were recognized as some of the best swimmers in the world before coming to America, and their swimming ability far surpassed that of the whites who enslaved them. Swimming was stamped out of African American culture because of the effects of slavery and racism on African Americans, including a fear of the water; the result is that African Americans have been kept out of the water for years.

At the start of the seventeenth century, West Africans were often considered to be the world's best swimmers, especially by Europeans. Most West Africans grew up around oceans, rivers, and lakes where they learned to swim at very young ages, about the same time as they learned how to walk. European explorers often commented on their swimming ability. They observed that West Africans swam the freestyle, the strongest and most efficient stroke, which

¹ R. Irwin, et. Al, *Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation*. University of Memphis, 2008. 24.

² "Research Study Reveals 60-70% of African American and Hispanic Kids Can't Swim." *USA Swimming*. 2010. USA Swimming. 15 January 2014. <http://www.usaswimming.org/DesktopDefault.aspx?TabId=1796&Alias=Rainbow&Lang=en>.

³ Naji Ali, "Blacks Don't Swim." *U.S. Masters Swimming*. 1 November 2010. 15 January 2014. <https://www.usms.org/articles/articledisplay.php?aid=294>.

was strange to Europeans who at the time only swam the breaststroke, the slowest and least efficient stroke. The explorer, Pieter de Marees, said about Africans from the Gold Coast that their freestyle allowed them to, “swim very fast, generally easily outdoing people of our nation in swimming and diving.”⁴ These observations by European explorers support the idea that West Africans were considered to be outstanding swimmers. In addition, several ethnic groups in Africa were such good swimmers that they invented surfing independent of Polynesian influence.⁵ This fact also shows West Africa’s advancement in swimming compared to the rest of the world; when people in many countries could still not swim at all, West Africans were already surfing.

By the start of the seventeenth century, swimming had become ingrained in the culture of many West African communities. Swimming became a social event for Africans to participate in in order to relax and to be together. The hot climate also encouraged swimming as a way to cool down. Many European accounts included the observation of West Africans swimming together. In the 1740s, it was recorded that slave traders captured Jeffery Brace when he and his friends were swimming together in a local river.⁶ This implies that swimming was a common pastime in West African culture. In addition, Africa had not developed the same standards of modesty for women as Europe had, and African women were allowed to swim nude, as was the custom. This meant that in West Africa, swimming was an activity for everyone in the community to participate in, including women, unlike in Europe. Besides for recreation, swimming was a part of many occupations in West African culture such as fishing and gathering gold from the bases

⁴ Kevin Dawson, *Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World*. The Journal of American History, 2006. December 2013. http://faculty.ucmerced.edu/sites/default/files/kdawson4/files/enslaved_swimmers_divers_in_the_atlantic_world_1.pdf. 1331.

⁵ Dawson, 1336.

⁶ Lee Pitts. “Black Splash: The History of African American Swimmers.” 2007. 1. 14 January 2014. http://www.ishof.org/pdf/black_splash.pdf.

of waterfalls. There have even been reports of African cultures trying criminals by forcing them to swim across rivers or lakes. If they survived, they were deemed innocent; if they drowned, they were deemed guilty.⁷ Swimming had essentially become a part of nearly every aspect of West African life.

In contrast to West Africans during this time, Europeans were usually very poor swimmers. Before Medieval times, many Europeans had strong swimming abilities, especially Greeks and Romans, who had bathing in their culture. Europeans from these times knew how to do the freestyle. Julius Caesar was famous for his swimming abilities; swimming was even an activity of high regard. Swimming ability, however, declined among Europeans from the Medieval Period to the late nineteenth century. Changes in war to favor heavy armored knights on horseback diminished the importance of learning to swim because the armor made it impossible in war, for which learning to swim was previously necessary.⁸ This meant that many European men never learned to swim. In addition, European doctors also began to discourage swimming, and some Catholic Church officials called it immoral because it was done nude. It was for the latter reason that most women did not know how to swim. Finally, many Europeans believed in water monsters and mythical creatures such as the Loch Ness Monster. All of these factors further diminished their desire to swim. By the end of the fifteenth century, most Europeans could not swim at all. Those who did have swimming skills usually only had enough to save themselves if they accidentally fell into the water, or they only knew the breaststroke, which minimizes putting the head into the water. Finally, the freestyle, and swimming in general, were deemed unsophisticated because they became associated with Africans, who were seen as inferior at the time. This discouraged the development of swimming and learning more efficient

⁷ Dawson, 1339.

⁸ Dawson, 1333.

stroke skills in Europe. Thus, the development of the sport of swimming in Europe came to a standstill.

As the slave trade picked up and many West Africans were taken to the New World, they brought their swimming abilities with them. A former slave, Francis Frederic once said, “Unlike most slaves, I never learned to swim.”⁹ This statement implies that most slaves did know how to swim. Plantations were often located near waterways, especially rice plantations, so most slaves had access to water. During the times of slavery in America, there were many accounts of slaves saving their drowning masters, as most whites still did not know how to swim. In fact, before the Civil War, more blacks knew how to swim than whites in America,¹⁰ which suggests that swimming was not an uncommon skill in slave culture. The Underground Railroad was even named because of a slave named Tice Davids, who ran away by swimming. He was rumored to have been swimming across the Ohio River to freedom with his owner chasing him in a boat. When the owner lost sight of him, thinking he had drowned, he joked that the slave must have taken the “underground railroad,” and the term was used ever since.¹¹ In addition, one report states that one African American slave whose ship wrecked swam a remarkable sixty hours to reach shore and survived.¹² All of these facts and accounts lead to the conclusion that many African American slaves not only knew how to swim, but were outstanding swimmers.

Like in West Africa, swimming also became a part of the culture of West Africans and their descendants in America. Many slaves were taught to swim by their parents or other relations between the ages of four and six.¹³ Swimming was often then used from there as one of

⁹ Dawson, 1345.

¹⁰ Jane E. Brody, “Swimming and the Fear Factor.” *The New York Times*. 10 June 2013. January 2014. http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/swimming-and-the-fear-factor/?_php=true&_type=blogs&smid=fb-nytimes&WT.z_sma=HL_SAT_20130611&_r=0.

¹¹ Pitts, 2.

¹² Pitts, 2.

¹³ Dawson, 1344.

the only forms of recreation for slaves. It was observed by slave owners to be one of their favorite activities. Slaves on some plantations participated in races and contests, often organized by their slave owners, who would then bet on the races and would even sometimes give out prizes. There are also many accounts of slaves wrestling sharks, alligators, and manta rays as a show of strength. These events became spectacles and often drew large crowds. These types of contests required great swimming skill and were a way for slaves, especially men, to demonstrate their power and earn distinction in the slave community. It also gave them pride to be so skilled at swimming, an activity that most of their masters were afraid of. Accounts of these types of contests and of slaves using swimming as a recreational activity show that swimming was included in many slaves' cultures in America.

Some slave owners soon recognized their slaves' swimming abilities and even incorporated them into labor. A few slaves in America were put to work as pearl divers, although this mostly occurred in the Caribbean. Some West African slaves had developed enormous lung capacities, allowing them to dive over ninety feet deep for pearls. This was a high profile job in the slave community, and it was also valued by slave owners because it was an extremely profitable business. Some slaves were also put to work as fishermen, most commonly in North Carolina and other coastal areas of the United States. Many times they were sent into the water to move debris out of the way for boats and nets. Other slaves, especially near the Florida straits, were put to work as treasure divers to dive down and recover treasure from sunken ships, which along with pearl diving required slaves to have a tremendous swimming ability and lung capacity. This was also a significant industry because it was highly profitable. Lastly, some slave owners kept slaves as lifeguards to save white non-swimmers if they accidentally fell into the water on boats or around other bodies of water. Slave owners' requiring slaves to carry out these

jobs, which all required a significant swimming ability, further suggests that slaves were very talented swimmers.

Although most early slaves in America did learn to swim, slave owners soon began to gradually recognize swimming as a means of escape for slaves, as it was extremely hard to track a slave who escaped by water, and the runaway left no trail. In addition, slave owners began to view their slaves' swimming as dangerous because it could result in loss of property due to drowning. Therefore, slave owners began to force slaves to stop swimming through a variety of tactics. For example, some slave owners forced disobedient slaves underwater until they nearly drowned publicly. Slave owners also told stories of sea creatures and monsters to scare slaves. All of these factors over the years cumulated into a general fear of water amongst the black community in America. It also began the stereotype that blacks simply don't swim, eventually changing black culture. After a few generations, fewer and fewer slaves learned to swim and more and more slaves became afraid of the water.

As the popularity of swimming amongst African Americans declined, the popularity increased amongst white Americans and Europeans. In the late nineteenth century, drowning became a huge health issue amongst whites. This led whites to begin to finally make an effort to learn how to swim and to begin to change their views about swimming. During his reign, King George III took to bathing in the ocean, and it gradually became an activity for the rich. In addition, as the modesty standards from the strict Victorian Era loosened, people of European descent were more willing to show their bodies in order to swim. Similarly, doctors also began to endorse swimming and salt air as good for the body and soul, which further encouraged swimming. It wasn't until 1912 that Westerners really began to use the freestyle again,¹⁴ finally signifying their forward progress in the sport since before the Medieval Period. This gradual gain

¹⁴ Dawson, 1334

in the popularity of swimming lead to the boom of public swimming pools and white swimmers in the early twentieth century.

As segregation and Jim Crow laws continued to divide blacks and whites after the end of slavery, African Americans were given very little access to pools. Young African American swimmers like Dorothy Height were denied access across the country to pools at YWCA'S and YMCA'S.¹⁵ This barred many African Americans from learning to swim or from making swimming a part of their regular life. Public pools that did allow African American swimmers often only allowed them to swim on certain days and at strange times, making it hard for them to come. It was also not uncommon for pools to have guards who exercised violence on African Americans who tried to enter. In one instance, a white man named James Brock poured acid into a pool when black swimmers staged a swim in at a hotel. These instances of violence and threats scared African Americans away from pools because they were in fear of being attacked there and felt they didn't belong. After the Plessy versus Ferguson Supreme Court ruling in 1896, some pools were built in black neighborhoods to appease African Americans and to attempt to obey the "separate but equal" ruling of the case. However, these pools were hardly equal to the pools built for white Americans and they were not big enough for them to really learn to swim. In addition to pools, beaches and other natural bodies of water were also segregated. Because African Americans were unable to swim in safe pools and other locations, some swam in unsafe swimming holes where many drowned. In North Carolina twelve children died in a swimming hole after being denied access to a public pool, even though their tax dollars were used to build it. Drowning tragedies such as this created a great fear of drowning and a lot of worry by parents that their children would drown in African American communities. Because of this, many

¹⁵ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*. Politics and Culture in Modern America. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 13.

African Americans began to attempt to protect their children by keeping them from the water altogether, unintentionally increasing their drowning risk by not teaching them how to swim.

The mandated integration in the 1950s and 1960s after the Brown versus Board of Education ruling and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 actually decreased African Americans' access to pools and other swimming locations. Many whites closed, sold, or privatized public pools instead of integrating and opened private pools for themselves. Therefore, whites stopped putting money into maintaining and building public pools, further decreasing African American's access to safe swimming locations. For example, Virginia closed its state park system to avoid integration of its pool in 1953, keeping African Americans out. Whites especially resisted pool desegregation because by this time, swimming had become a common activity in the white culture, and pools were coveted. Similarly, African Americans were kept away from beaches and lakes because they had difficulty moving near them since whites desired the property surrounding them, which made it more expensive. All of these factors caused even more African Americans to stop swimming altogether or to swim in unsafe swimming holes, further exacerbating the drowning problem and increasing parents' fear for their children.

By the 1960s, swimming had been practically erased from African American culture. The moment that slave owners began to see swimming as a means of escape, the practice of African American swimming first began to decline. Owners kept slaves from the water and began to instill fear of the water into slaves for the first time. Slave owners were also the first to popularize the stereotype that blacks do not swim. Soon reports were published that African Americans were physically not made to swim because they had bone and buoyancy issues. This furthered the stereotype. As generations passed, fewer and fewer African Americans swam and learned to swim. Those who did retain the skills through slavery were barred from swimming by

segregation, and many people became more afraid of swimming because of the risks of being attacked by whites at beaches and pools. As swimming continued to gain popularity within the white community and blacks were kept from the sport, it became labeled as a white activity. As more and more African American children died in swimming holes, terrified parents tried to protect their children by keeping them from swimming, passing on their fears and dislike of the water to their children. In recent studies, many children reported that they did not swim because they felt it was not an activity for them¹⁶; they considered swimming to be a white sport and not an activity for African American children. This shows the absence of swimming in African American culture because even children at young ages have already learned that their culture does not typically include swimming. In addition, there are barely any African American Olympic swimmers; the vast majority of swimmers portrayed in the media are white. This means that there are almost no role models to inspire and guide African American children to swim. Cullen Jones, one of the very few African American Olympians in swimming began swimming only after he nearly drowned in a water park himself. Even then he was discouraged from swimming by a family member who told him, “Don’t you know that blacks don’t swim?”¹⁷ This statement strongly suggests that swimming had been completely wiped out from African American culture by the late 1900s, when Jones became an aspiring swimmer.

Today, it is clear that African Americans do not swim nearly as much as Americans of others races, especially whites. For example, swimming became an Olympic sport in 1896, but an African American did not qualify for the U.S. Olympic team until Anthony Ervin in 2000. In addition, an African American woman did not make an Olympic team until Maritza Correia did

¹⁶ R. Irwin, 14.

¹⁷ Martha Southgate, “Water Damage.” The New York Times. 10 August 2012. January 2014.
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/11/opinion/water-damage-more-blacks-lack-swimming-skills.html?_r=3&.

in 2004. In the most recent summer Olympics in 2012, only three African Americans swam on the U.S. Olympic Team out of 47 swimmers. Similarly, as previously mentioned, only three percent of U.S.A. Swimming, the national governing body of the sport, is made up of people of color. The most shocking fact is perhaps that seventy percent of African American children today do not even know how to swim. These statistics truly show the disparities between Africans Americans and Americans of other races in terms of swimming ability.

Fear has played a major role in the decline of African Americans' swimming ability. Fear was first instilled into African Americans by slave owners, then by violence at pools, and finally by hundreds of drowning incidents at unsafe swimming holes in the South. Parents who wanted to protect their children kept generations of African Americans from swimming and learning to swim because they figured their children would be less likely to drown if they never swam at all. Unfortunately, this only increased drowning risks for African American children. Soon parents' fear of the water and their traditions of not swimming were passed on to their children, and fear or uneasiness around the water became prolific amongst the African American community. Incredibly, in studies conducted at the University of Memphis in 2006, fear was cited as the number one reason that African Americans did not learn how to swim above financial concerns.¹⁸ This strongly suggests that fears of the water originally instilled by slave owners are still having a great affect on African Americans today.

At the present, although fear and the fact that swimming is not a part of African American culture are main reasons for keeping African Americans out of the pool, there are also many other factors. For example, many African Americans, especially girls, do not swim because of problems that chlorine in swimming pools causes to their hair and skin. Chlorine makes processed hair, which is popular among African American women, break off or discolor.

¹⁸ C. Irwin, et. Al, *Constraints Impacting Minority Swimming Participation Phase II*. University of Memphis, 2010.

It can also make African American skin dry and white, or “ashy.” Similarly, water also can make straightened hair curly, and it is expensive to get it redone at a salon. In addition, although many families have access to swimming facilities, many also do not. There are concentrations of African Americans in cities, where there are also fewer pools due to space constrictions. Finally, swimming in general, especially swimming lessons, are expensive. In the Memphis Study it was reported that sixty seven percent of at risk swimmers, many of which were African Americans, reported an annual income of \$49,999 or less.¹⁹ This suggests that some African American families who do not swim do not have the financial means to learn to swim or put their children through lessons. Many simply do not have the time or transportation either. Many of these factors probably contribute to why many African Americans still do not swim today.

Most African Americans had incredible swimming ability before being brought over to the U.S. as slaves and as early slaves in America. Slave owners and the policies of both segregation and integration kept African Americans from swimming. In addition, the water related torture of slaves by slave owners, myths of monsters, drowning incidents at unsafe water holes, and violence at swimming facilities instilled great fear of the water into African Americans, which they passed down for generations. This contributed greatly to many African Americans not learning how to swim, and remains one of the greatest factors today. Finally, as swimming became more prominent in white culture, and whites had the power to exclude African Americans, African Americans were given even less access to swimming facilities. Eventually all these factors came together and the stereotype was solidified that African Americans do not swim, essentially erasing a once vital activity from African American culture altogether. It is shocking to see how much slavery and racism in America continue to affect African Americans today, even in aspects of life that one might never expect. Without these

¹⁹ R. Irwin et. Al, 17.

practices, thousands of African American children might not have drowned. The Olympic swimming events might be full of African Americans instead of white Americans. No one can say for sure what might have been, but by using these facts to understand how it came to be that swimming was effaced from African American culture, maybe our society can overcome this tragic reality and save lives. By teaching the history of swimming to all Americans, people of all races might just be inspired to get into the pool.

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