African American Stories in Minnesota

Nora Murphy and Mary Murphy-Gnatz
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Imagine it’s a cool morning and you are standing outside with your friend, waiting for the bus. You notice your friend is wearing a new hat. The hat is made from colorful cloth. “Hey, where did you get that hat?” you ask. Your friend tells you a story about the hat. Turns out, it was made from West African cloth but not in Africa. Your friend’s aunt made the hat right here in Minnesota.

The bus finally arrives, and you take a seat next to the window. As you gaze out the window, you start thinking about the man who came to talk to your class yesterday. The man was a historian named Dr. David Taylor. Dr. Taylor said, “History is a collection of stories.” Even stories like the story of your friend’s new hat? Why not!

Your friend’s story about the hat gets you thinking more about African Americans in Minnesota. When did Africans first come to Minnesota? What did they do when they got here? You don’t know the answers yet, but you do know where to find them. If you want to know more about the history of African Americans in Minnesota, you have to find stories about blacks in Minnesota’s past. But first, you need to start at the beginning. You need to know a little bit about Africa itself.

**Life in Africa**

Africa is a continent that is larger than all of North America and three times bigger than the United States. Many scientists believe that Africa was the birthplace of human life. Some of the first Africans lived in the upper half of the continent. After thousands of
years, the land there grew very dry. The people had to move to different parts of Africa. As they moved, Africans formed different types of communities, kingdoms, and cities all over the continent.

Life in the African cities was more like life in an American city than you might realize. People lived busy lives, working at many different kinds of jobs. There were doctors and cooks, teachers and soldiers, shopkeepers and historians.

When Europeans (YER-uh-PEE-ins) and other outsiders first arrived in Africa, they discovered that parts of Africa were very rich in rubber, oils, gold, and diamonds. The Europeans began trading with the Africans for these things.

In Africa, as in most of the world at that time, some people were slaves. They were owned by other people and forced to work. But in Africa, many slaves were able to become part of the family and community.

Later, Europeans and Africans traded for African slaves to work in North and South America. African slaves were captured by force and sent in ships to the Americas.

**Historians in West Africa**

Historians in West Africa are called **griots** (GREE-ohs). They learned by listening to stories about people and things that happened in the past. Then the griots told these stories to their own students.

A West African griot passed down this story about a boy named Sundjata (Soon-JAH-tah). Sundjata became a king in the 1200s. He lived in Mali (MAH-lee). Mali is in West Africa, which is where many ancestors of present-day African Americans lived.

Several years before Sundjata was born, a wise woman told the king of Mali that he would have a son. This son...
would become the mightiest king ever to rule in West Africa. The woman also said the boy’s mother would have a crooked back and big eyes. The king did indeed marry a woman like that. She gave birth to their son Sundjata in the year 1217.

As a young child, Sundjata could not use his legs. He crawled on all fours and did not walk. Everyone laughed at Sundjata because he could not run and play or do other things boys his age could do. But his father never gave up on him. He knew his son would grow up and become king. To prepare him to be king, Sundjata’s father asked the griot Balla Fasseke (Fa-SAY-kay) to teach Sundjata about the history of Mali.

When he was seven years old, Sundjata decided he would learn to walk. He asked the village blacksmith to make him an iron rod. The blacksmith had been saving a huge rod for a special occasion. This special iron rod was so heavy that six men were needed to carry it. When the men placed the rod in front of him, Sundjata lifted it up with just one hand. Using all his strength, the boy pulled with both hands and stood up. The iron rod bent under his new strength! After that, Sundjata walked like all the other children in the village.

“Using all his strength, the boy pulled with both hands and stood up. The iron rod bent under his new strength!”
**Sundjata the Student and Ruler**

After he learned to walk, Sundjata continued his studies. The griot Fasseke wasn’t his only teacher. His mother told Sundjata and his friends stories about the plants and the animals in the forests. Older men in the village taught Sundjata how to hunt. Later he studied the art of war with a king in East Africa.

When Sundjata returned to Mali, enemies were trying to take over his country. Sundjata used all the skills he had learned from his many teachers. He defeated his enemies and made the Kingdom of Mali bigger than ever before. Under King Sundjata, Mali became one of the most peaceful and richest kingdoms in West Africa.

**Exploring the Americas**

After King Sundjata died, his family continued to rule in Mali, including Abu Bakr (AH-boo Bah-KAR). King Abu Bakr was a very curious person. He wanted to know what was on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. He sent thousands of boats from Africa to explore. His ships discovered special currents in the ocean. Currents are like fast-moving rivers. A ship sailing on this river in the ocean moves faster and easier. The currents Abu Bakr’s ships found led the explorers west to the Americas. Later, European slave traders used these same currents to carry African slaves to North and South America. Some historians believe that King Abu Bakr’s ships landed in America long before the slave trade.

Pedro Alonza Niña (PAY-dro Ah-LON-za NEEN-yah) was another famous African explorer. He guided a ship from Europe to the Americas for Christopher Columbus more than 500 years ago.
African American Stories in Minnesota

Now that you have heard a few stories about Africa and about Africans who explored the Americas, it’s time to move on to Minnesota. King Sundjata and King Abu Bakr didn’t come to Minnesota, of course, but other Africans did. African Americans have lived and worked in Minnesota for more than 200 years. They have all contributed to the Minnesota you know today.

George Bonga was the first African American born in Minnesota. He grew up in what is now northern Minnesota. As a young boy, he learned how to canoe on the many lakes and rivers in our state. George learned how to hunt and fish. He spoke three languages. He grew up to be a famous fur trader. He also helped the United States government buy lands from the Ojibwe (Oh-JIB-way) that are part of Minnesota today. To learn more about him, read the story “Meet George Bonga” on page 12.

William Grey and John Hickman both moved to Minnesota 150 years ago. But they didn’t come here the same way. William and his family took a train and a steamboat. John and his family came by raft up the Mississippi River. William and John and their families helped make a better life for African Americans in Minnesota.
Americans in our state. If you want to learn what they did, read the story “Meet William Grey and John Hickman” on page 22.

The McIntosh (MAC-in-tosh) family lived and worked near the Mississippi River in Minneapolis more than 100 years ago. Their second-youngest daughter was named Mattie McIntosh. Her mother worked at Fort Snelling. Mrs. McIntosh rode a horse trolley to get to work at the fort. Mattie’s father worked in a sawmill near their house in Minneapolis. In fact, Mr. McIntosh could walk to work. To find out more about Mattie’s life and what she studied at school, read “Meet Mattie McIntosh” on page 32.

Nellie Stone Johnson grew up on a farm in central Minnesota in the early 1900s. One of her favorite things to do as a kid was to ride her horse. She rode her horse to deliver newspapers to the farmers. Her family also owned one of the earliest cars—a Model T Ford. When she grew up, Nellie helped make new laws to help Minnesotans, especially African Americans and women. If you want to know what kinds of laws she worked on, read the story “Meet Nellie Stone Johnson” on page 42.

James Griffin grew up in St. Paul, the capital city of Minnesota. His father worked on the railroad and traveled all
around the country. James liked to play sports when he was young. He was very good at basketball and football. When he grew up, James tried working on the railroad like his father, but he didn’t like it. He tried playing basketball on a semi-pro team, but it didn’t pay well. Finally, he decided to become a police officer. If you read the story “Meet James Griffin” on page 52, you can find out how he became the deputy chief in St. Paul.

David Taylor also grew up in St. Paul. David also liked sports, but he liked reading even more. He and his friends liked to write stories. For two years, they wrote and sold a community newspaper. The boys walked all over the neighborhood to gather information for their newspaper. When David had to go downtown, he usually rode a streetcar. When he grew up he became a historian, or a modern griot. If you want to hear a story from David’s past—like the time his pushcart almost caught on fire—read “Meet David Taylor” on page 62.

James Griffin, shown here early in his career, served in the St. Paul Police Department for more than 40 years.

David Taylor and his friends wrote and published this newspaper, the Weekly Trumpet, when they were in elementary school.
In 1996 Eric Mosley and his family moved to St. Paul from Chicago. That same year, Mahamoud Aden Amin (Ma-HA-mood AH-deen AH-meen) and his family flew to Minneapolis from Mogadishu, Somalia (Mo-ga-DEE-shoo, So-MAH-lee-ya). Eric and Mahamoud have many things in common. But there are also many differences between them. For example, Africa is the homeland for both boys and their families. But Eric’s ancestors probably left Africa by force hundreds of years ago. Mahamoud’s family chose to leave Africa. To find out why their families left Africa, read the story “Meet Eric Mosley and Mahamoud Aden Amin” on page 72.

**Becoming a Griot**

The school day is over, and you’re heading back home. Your backpack is stuffed with seven stories that will tell you more about George Bonga, William Grey, John Hickman, Mattie McIntosh, Nellie Stone Johnson, James Griffin, David Taylor, Eric Mosley, and Mahamoud Aden Amin. After you have read them, you can be a griot, ready to share many stories of African Americans in Minnesota.
Imagine you’ve fallen asleep and you’re dreaming. It’s winter in northern Minnesota, and you are standing under a pine tree that is covered in snow. In front of you is a long, narrow building made of logs. The building drips with melting ice. You wonder what’s inside, so you step forward and peek through a crack between logs. People fill the room inside. Who are they? What are they doing? You decide to go inside and find out.

Once the door opens, you see a group of American Indian men standing in front of a long, low wooden counter. The counter is filled with some tin kettles, a gun, and two wool blankets with stripes. The American Indian men are looking at the trade goods very carefully. Is this some kind of store, you wonder?

No one notices you as you step up to the long counter to see better. A tall African American man is standing behind the counter. You get the feeling this man is selling the kettles, the gun, and the blankets. He is talking to the American Indian men. You can’t understand them because no one is speaking English. They are all speaking Ojibwe (Oh-JIB-way), the language of the American Indian tribe in northern Minnesota.

After a while, the Ojibwe men turn around and walk to the front of the room where they have left their stack of beaver pelts—stretched, cleaned beaver skins with the fur still on them. One by one, the men count their pelts and walk back to the counter. They give their
pelts to the man behind the counter. In return, he gives them some kettles, a gun, and some blankets. Then the Ojibwe men say good-bye to the trader and leave the log building with their new things.

The room is quiet now, except for the sound of the African American man cleaning the counter and stacking the pelts. He turns around, gives you a big smile, and says, “Welcome to my trading post! I’m George Bonga. What do you have to trade today?” You realize you don’t have anything to trade—and then you wake up. You are curious to find out more about traders like George Bonga, who lived in Minnesota 200 years ago.

Guns and blankets like the ones shown here were popular items for trade when George Bonga was a fur trader.
The Fur Trade: Minnesota’s First Big Business

When George Bonga was growing up, Minnesota wasn’t a state yet. The land looked very different, too. Trees covered much of the area. The only roads were walking trails on land and canoe routes along our lakes, rivers, and streams. American Indians had used these paths for thousands of years to trade all across North America.

In the late 1600s and 1700s, explorers from other continents traveled to the middle of North America. These explorers were looking for animals with fur. They could sell the furs in Europe and make a lot of money. The most popular of all the fur animals was the beaver. Europeans loved wearing beaver hats because they looked fancy and were waterproof.

The explorers found woods and lakes that were home to many different animals, such as beaver, muskrat, raccoon, deer, and bear. Soon the fur trade grew.

It was a big business in Minnesota for 200 years.

Three groups worked in the fur trade in Minnesota: fur traders, American Indian hunters, and canoe— or voyageurs (voy-ah-JERS). The hunters brought the animal pelts to the fur traders. In return, the fur traders gave the hunters European-made trade goods such as blankets, kettles, and guns. Then the traders hired voyageurs to load the pelts onto their long canoes and paddle them to big ships headed for Europe.
George Bonga was the first African American born in Minnesota. He was born in 1802 near Lake Superior and what is now the city we call Duluth. He and his family were fur traders.

George Bonga’s grandfather Jean Bonga arrived in this part of the country in the 1700s. He worked at an English trading post and fort in what is now Michigan. When Jean first came to the trading post, he was a slave. A slave is a person who is owned by another person. Slaves do not get paid for their work. They must do what their owner says.

The fur trade was Minnesota’s first big business. This map shows many of the fur posts in the area through 1850.

**The Bongas: An Early African American Family in Minnesota**

George Bonga was the first African American born in Minnesota. He was born in 1802 near Lake Superior and

This 1827 drawing by Thomas L. McKenney shows what a fur post near Duluth looked like. George Bonga may have lived here.
Slavery has never been legal in Minnesota. But when George Bonga was alive, some European and American army officers brought slaves to work in Minnesota from the South, where slavery was still legal. For example, Harriet and Dred Scott were two slaves who were brought to work at Fort Snelling, near St. Paul. They met, married, and worked at the fort. Later, the Scotts and their owners left Minnesota. The Scotts believed they should be free because they had lived in a free state. They went to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court makes decisions about laws for everyone in the country. But the court ruled against the Scotts and denied them their freedom.

Jean Bonga did not have to go to court to seek freedom. His owner gave him his freedom in Michigan. Jean married a black woman named Marie.

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June 25, 1794, I, the undersigned priest and apostolic Missionary, Received the mutual consent of Jean Bouga and of Jeanne, the former a negro and the latter a negress, both free, and I gave them the nuptial Benediction in the presence of the following witnesses, to wit: Messr. Jean Nicolas Marcheszeaux, hemonel, the elder, Francois Souligny, Charles Chandonnet, some of whom signed; the others, being unable to write, made their usual marks. * * *

Le Dru, apostolic Missionary.
Jeanne at the trading post. Jean and Marie Bonga’s son Pierre became a respected fur trader in Minnesota. Later Pierre Bonga married an Ojibwe woman there. She gave birth to their son George in 1802.

Like other fur trader families, the Bongas probably lived in a simple log home, heated with a fireplace. When he was a child, George Bonga may have worn a mix of Ojibwe and European clothes. He learned how to hunt like the Ojibwe hunters and how to canoe like the voyageurs. When he grew older, George Bonga went to school in Montreal (MON-tree-ALL), Canada. When he returned to Minnesota, he worked in the fur trade like his father and his grandfather.

George Bonga in the Fur Trade

George Bonga began his work in the fur trade by taking pelts and trade goods across the lakes and rivers of Minnesota. He was famous for his strength. People who knew him wrote that he was over six feet tall and weighed more than 200 pounds. They also reported that he could carry 700 pounds of furs and supplies all at once!
The voyageurs worked very hard for little pay. They also had only a few kinds of food. They traded with the Ojibwe for dried meat and wild rice. They also ate lots of pea soup. Here's one visitor's description of how voyageurs made breakfast overnight:

The tin kettle, in which they cooked their food, would hold eight or ten gallons. It was hung over the fire, nearly full of water, then nine quarts of peas—one quart per man, the daily allowance—were put in; and when they were well bursted, two or three pounds of pork, cut into strips, for seasoning, were added and allowed to boil or simmer till daylight. . . . [The soup was] so thick that a stick would stand upright in it.

Many voyageurs sang while they canoed. George Bonga sang, too. One man wrote that he “got up an excursion on the lake in a splendid birchbark canoe, manned by twelve men who paddled to the music of a French-Canadian boat song, led by himself.”

George’s Bonga’s brother Stephen was an interpreter, too. He signed an 1837 treaty between the Ojibwe and the United States government.
Later, George Bonga became a fur trader like his father. He worked with the American Fur Company at trading posts around the state. George traded pelts and goods with the Ojibwe.

**George Bonga the Interpreter**

George Bonga learned many important skills as a child and as a fur trader. He knew the land and the waterways of Minnesota. He knew many Ojibwe people. He also spoke both Ojibwe and English. George Bonga used these skills to help the U.S. government buy land from the Indian people.

He first helped the United States buy lands from the Ojibwe when he was only 18 years old. The U.S. government men spoke only English, and many of the Ojibwe spoke only Ojibwe. George Bonga was the interpreter. Since he spoke both languages, he helped the
two groups talk to each other and sign treaties.

In 1837 his brother Stephen Bonga was an interpreter when the Ojibwe and the U.S. government signed a treaty at Fort Snelling. In this treaty, the Ojibwe gave up much of their land in central Minnesota and moved to other parts of the area. Thirty years later, George Bonga helped the U.S. government and the Ojibwe sign an 1867 treaty.

**George Bonga and His Many Friends**

When he was almost 40 years old, George Bonga married an Ojibwe woman named Ashwinn from Leech Lake in north-central Minnesota. They had four children: James, Peter, William, and Suzan. George taught his sons how to work in the fur trade, too. But by the time James, Peter, and
William were old enough to become traders, the beaver was almost extinct, and beaver hats were no longer popular in Europe.

When George was an older man, he and Ashwinn ran a lodge, a place where travelers could stay, rest, and eat. One traveler wrote that Mrs. Bonga cooked the best fish he’d ever eaten!

George Bonga was an important trader in Minnesota’s earliest business, the fur trade. He helped the Ojibwe and the U.S. government work together to sell and buy the land that is now Minnesota. When he died, he left many friends all across the state. Governors, hunters, judges, traders, American Indians, and newcomers to Minnesota all counted the tall, strong George Bonga as their friend.