

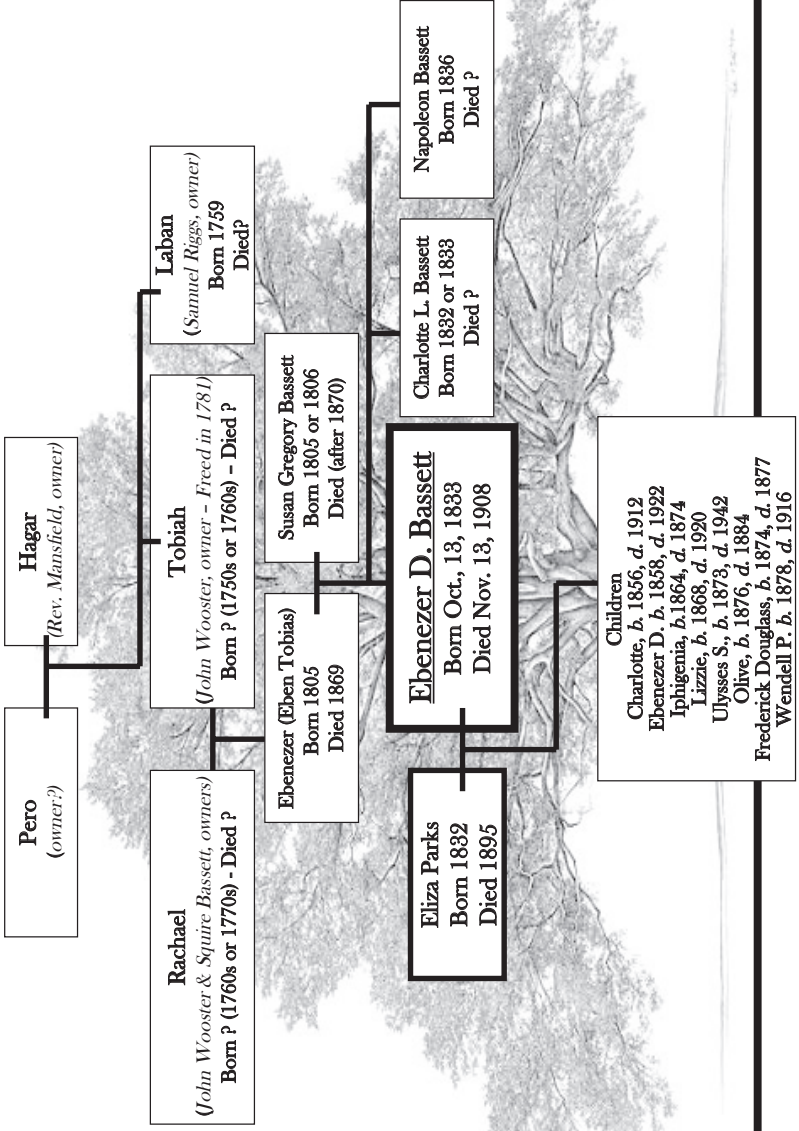
HARPER'S WEEKLY.



EBENEZER D. BASSETT, COLORED MINISTER TO HAITI.
PHOT. BY J. W. BERN, PHILADELPHIA.—(SEE PAGE 251.)

EBENEZER D. BASSETT
(1833 - 1908)

Ebenezer D. Bassett Family Tree



EBENEZER D. BASSETT
(1833 - 1908)

BY
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VALLEY HISTORICAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE
DERBY, CONNECTICUT

2008



Acknowledgments

This publication was a journey in exploration and memory. Local history touches all of our lives and yet is often so easily forgotten. We wanted this publication to honor and preserve the memory of Ebenezer D. Bassett, a local man who dedicated his life to education and forged new paths in U.S. History as the nation's first black diplomat. The journey began in 2004 when local historian and educator Marian O'Keefe of Seymour began researching the life of Ebenezer D. Bassett. In 2006, Marian and retired Professor Mary Mycek of Derby began discussing the possibility of a publication. In 2007, Carolyn Ivanoff, of Seymour, who currently serves as a housemaster at Shelton Intermediate School, joined them in expanding the idea of creating a biographical publication and engaging Valley school students in the story and the life's journey of this quiet local hero. Forming the Valley Historical Research Committee with Marian's research and photography skills, Mary's writing and analytical skills, and Carolyn's additional research, editing, and creation of educational materials, the three have made this local history project a reality. This biography, published in 2008, the centennial year of Bassett's death, and the accompanying teacher and student resource and educational materials for schools will be unveiled and distributed in celebration of Black History Month in February 2009.

Projects such as this are never accomplished without a great deal of help and expertise from many contributors. Uncovering lives from the mists of time takes so many friends and resources. We three wish to recognize the following individuals and organizations for their assistance and courtesy in helping us. The following listing does not take place in any particular order but is compiled with heartfelt thanks. This project could not have been done without the help and assistance of the late Coralie Gray, former archivist of the Wilbraham-Monson Academy, Wilbraham, MA; Brian D. O'Keefe, Librarian, Franklin D. Schurz Library, Indiana University South Bend, South Bend, IN; Frank Gagliardi, Librarian, Elihu Burritt Library, Central Connecticut State University; Terence P. O'Keefe, Librarian, Derby Public Library, Derby, CT; Christopher Teal, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC and Ebenezer D. Bassett's premier biographer; Dorothy A. DeBisschop, Municipal Historian, Oxford, CT and Oxford Historical Society; Charlotte Brown and James L. Brown, Parkside Historic Preservation Corporation, Philadelphia, PA; James W. Campbell, Librarian and Curator of Manuscripts, New Haven Museum & Historical Society, William Cameron, Jr. and Joan Cameron, Superintendents of the Grove Street Cemetery, New Haven, CT and Sandra Coe Wood.

Finally, no project or publication can ever become a reality without financial support. We gratefully thank and acknowledge the following institutions for their contributions and grants to this project.

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CHAPTER 1

Appointment



Ebenezer D. Bassett

... the
Emancipation
Proclamation of
1863 committed
the government to
the abolition of
slavery.

The Fifteenth
Amendment
(1870) gave
voting rights to all
men regardless of
“race, color, or
previous condition
of servitude”.

Women would be
deprived of the
vote until the
Nineteenth
Amendment was
passed in 1920.

The deadliest war in American History was fought to abolish slavery. The Civil War began with the firing on Fort Sumter in South Carolina on April 12, 1861 by the secessionist forces of the eleven Southern slave states, and essentially ended with the surrender of General Lee of the Confederate Army to General Grant of the Union Army at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.

Lincoln’s presidential order, the Emancipation Proclamation, of 1863 committed the government to the abolition of slavery. Despite the war having been won by the North in 1865, the inequality issue still persisted in the North and South where former slaves and free blacks continued to be denied voting privileges. Many abolitionist figures, like William Lloyd Garrison, Henry Ward Beecher, Frederick Douglass and others, pressured the government to grant voting privileges to all African American males and to appoint them to positions in the government. The Fifteenth Amendment, which gave voting rights to all *men* regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude”, was ratified in 1870. Women would be deprived of the vote until the Nineteenth Amendment was passed in 1920.

After assuming the presidency in March of 1869, Ulysses S. Grant, like all presidents, proposed appointments to the Senate committees. On April 12th, the eighth anniversary of the firing on Fort Sumter, Grant forwarded the first list of his nominations, among them was Ebenezer D. Bassett, a black man, to be the Minister Resident and Consul General to Haiti. The term “ambassador” did not come into use until 1893. The following excerpt from the April 16, 1869 Executive Journal records the Senate vote confirming Ebenezer D. Bassett as the first black diplomat in the history of the United States of America.

APR. 16, 1869.] EXECUTIVE JOURNAL.	199
The Senate proceeded to consider the nomination of Ebenezer D. Bassett; and,	
On the question, Will the Senate advise and consent to the appointment of Ebenezer D. Bassett?	
It was determined in the affirmative,	{ Yeas 48
	{ Nays 5
On motion by Mr. McCreery,	
The yeas and nays being desired by one-fifth of the Senators present.	

Who was Ebenezer D. Bassett? Why was he the first black man chosen to serve his country in this important diplomatic post?

CHAPTER 2

The Formative Years

"My success in life I owe greatly to that American sense of fairness which was tendered me in old Derby, and which exacts that every man whether white or black, shall have a fair chance to run his race in life and make the most of himself."—Ebenezer D. Bassett

Tracing the life of Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett, the first African-American to be designated as a diplomat of the United States, one naturally touches on the slavery issue. It is a common misconception that slavery did not exist in the Northern states, including Connecticut, but this is far from the truth. As many as five thousand slaves were believed to be owned by Connecticut residents prior to the Revolutionary War. According to the 1790 census of the United States, 2,759 black slaves and 2,801 free blacks were counted in this state. Some twenty-five years later, only 97 enslaved persons of color were reported. Slavery was finally abolished in Connecticut in 1848.

Though direct evidence is lacking, descendants of the Ebenezer Bassett family trace their roots to one Pero, a slave brought from Africa sometime in the mid 1740s. Pero was the great grandfather of Ebenezer Bassett. The story of Pero's capture, according to a descendant, appears in a book published in 1874 and suggests that Pero may have been the head of a tribe. Contemporary sources at that time refer to him as an African prince. Details of Pero's capture will probably never be known. Like other Africans captured for the slave trade, Pero must have endured the Middle Passage, a term that refers to the middle portion of the triangular route that constituted the Atlantic slave trade. Ships from North America sailed to the coast of Africa with goods, such as rum, cloth and other items, which were exchanged for African captives. The captives were then transported under inhumane, miserable conditions to the Americas and the Caribbean where they were enslaved.



Rev. Richard Mansfield

In spite of the absence of detailed information, we do know that Pero eventually was transported from Jamaica to Connecticut before the Revolutionary War. According to tradition, Pero married a slave by the name of Hagar who belonged to the Rev. Richard Mansfield, the rector of St. James Church in Derby. The Mansfield House still stands on Jewett Street in Ansonia. It was not unusual for clergy of that era to have indentured servants or slaves. We know of two sons, Tobiah and Laban, who were born to Pero and Hagar.

Samuel and Abigail Riggs acquired ownership of either the entire family or only

... Pero must have endured the Middle Passage, a term that refers to the middle portion of the triangular route that constituted the Atlantic slave trade.

The War for Independence had begun and residents were divided in their allegiance. Tobiah supported the independence movement. He enlisted in order to win his freedom.

The black governors were held in high regard by their own race and even by the white community.

the two boys. Records indicate Laban remained their servant child. Tobiah, who would become Ebenezer Bassett's grandfather, was sold to Captain John Wooster, a tavern proprietor in neighboring Oxford. As he grew, Tobiah distinguished himself as a hunter and accompanied his owner on hunting expeditions in the surrounding forest. It was said "few men caught more foxes, and coons, and rabbits, and squirrels than he." According to legend, Tobiah rescued a local white boy in 1776, Chauncey Judd, from "Tory" kidnapers, thereby earning himself the respect of the local citizenry.

Two versions exist of the marriage of Tobiah to another of Wooster's slaves, Rachel Hull. One version, based on church records, states that they were wed by Rev. David Brownson on June 9, 1776 in the Oxford Congregational Church (now the Oxford United Church of Christ). Another account of the marriage indicates that the Rev. Richard Mansfield performed the ceremony. A sketch of this ceremony would suggest that it took place in the Wooster Tavern.

The War for Independence had begun and residents were divided in their allegiance. Tobiah supported the independence movement. He enlisted in order to win his freedom after the town council adopted the following resolution in January 1781:

"Voted, that the authority and selectmen be empowered and directed to give certificates to Capt. Daniel Holbrook and Capt. John Wooster, to free and emancipate their servants, negro men, on the condition that the said negro men enlist into the state regiment to be raised for the defense of the state, for the term of one year."

Although black men could not vote or hold office, they organized themselves into a kind of 'government' in Connecticut well before the Revolution, and held elections for a 'governor'. Though the power of the black governors was unofficial and limited, they judged disputes in the black community and imposed punishment, usually fines. The black governors were held in high regard by their own race and even by the white community. The first black governor of Derby was one Quosh, a native African and slave to Mr. Agar Tomlinson. Upon being granted his freedom, he took the name Freeman. In 1815, Tobiah, the grandfather of Ebenezer Bassett, was elected a black governor. It was the practice to celebrate annual "Election Days" grandly with a military style parade, feasting and speeches, with the newly elected governor, decked out in feathers and ribbons, presiding.

In 1805, Tobiah and Rachel had a son, Eben Tobias, who would become the father of Ebenezer D. Bassett. Eben Tobias, following in his father's footsteps, would be elected a black governor in 1840. Ebenezer D. Bassett would later describe his father, Eben Tobias, as "a mulatto, born in the family of Squire Bassett of Derby". There were many Bassetts in the area and records do not reveal to which one Squire Bassett belonged. It was not unusual for slaves to take the names of their owners therefore one would

have expected that Eben Tobias' family would have assumed the Wooster surname. However, Eben Tobias was a free man who chose the name Bassett, the name of his future wife, Susan Gregory Bassett. She was a Pequot Indian of mixed ancestry.

After their marriage, Eben Tobias and Susan Bassett moved to the Litchfield, CT area. A daughter, Charlotte Luvinia, was born in 1832. A year later on October 16, 1833, Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett was born. His birth certificate has not been located despite a thorough search of Litchfield records. Litchfield's considerable prosperity at that time started to wane. After the birth of their third child, Napoleon, in 1836, the Bassetts returned to their family home in Derby, where they farmed the land. As noted above, Eben Tobias was elected a black governor in 1840. He was a very impressive figure, standing six feet tall, and described as "ready of speech and considered quite witty". He was no doubt proud of his royal roots. His son, Ebenezer Bassett, would recall "I remember that he held the office for two or three terms, and I remember, too, how Sundays and nights he used to pore over books on military tactics and study up on the politics of the state." One cannot help but wonder why Eben Tobias gave his first son the middle name of Don Carlos and his second son, the name, Napoleon. Perhaps his reading led to an admiration of historical figures after whom he chose to name his children.

His father's example of reading history and involvement in politics must have inspired the young Ebenezer, for he went on to study and would become a pioneer black educator. His education began with his early schooling at the Birmingham Academy in Birmingham (section of modern Derby which is now referred to as downtown). The Birmingham Academy, which was established in 1838, was located on Fifth Street between Olivia and Elizabeth Streets. Unlike many other localities, Derby and Birmingham did not exclude blacks from public schools. During that period, Dr. Ambrose Beardsley, who was struck by the youth's talents, employed Ebenezer as an office boy. Dr. Beardsley was one of Derby's leading citizens and the town historian. It was probably Dr. Beardsley who recommended that Ebenezer attend The Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, MA. (Today it is known as The Wilbraham and Monson Academy) The Academy was involved in the abolitionist movement in New England. Indeed, the school was a stop on the "underground railroad", which aided runaway slaves in their search for freedom in the North. Colonel William Burr Wooster, a prominent attorney and public figure, was another Birmingham resident who took an interest and encouraged Ebenezer. Colonel Wooster went on to command the 29th Connecticut Colored Infantry Regiment (CT) in the Civil War. Colonel Wooster would later



Dr. Ambrose Beardsley



Colonel William Burr Wooster

Bassett transformed 40 or 50 "thoughtless, reckless, tardy and reluctant youngsters into intelligent, ambitious, well-disciplined and well-behaved students".

Ebenezer Bassett continued to be active in the civil rights movement. He aided Frederick Douglass in the recruitment of blacks into the military during the Civil War.

publicly acknowledge Bassett's contribution in the recruitment of blacks to fight in the Civil War.

In 1853, Ebenezer finished his studies at the Wesleyan Academy and transferred to the newly opened Connecticut State Normal School in New Britain. (Today it is Central Connecticut State University, CCSU, the oldest public university in the state.) Records of the University show that he was a member of its first graduating class and the only black. In the program of that event, Ebenezer Bassett is listed as giving an address on "The True Teacher". This would attest not only to his class standing but also to his speaking ability.

After graduation, he accepted a position at the Whiting Street School for children of color in New Haven at a salary of \$300 per year. The school board reported that in his first year Bassett transformed 40 or 50 "thoughtless, reckless, tardy and reluctant youngsters into intelligent, ambitious, well-disciplined and well-behaved students".

While in New Haven and close to the academic environment of Yale, Ebenezer chose to attend classes in Greek, Latin and French, as well as mathematics and the sciences, thus satisfying his thirst for learning. Many abolitionist and equal rights speakers, such as Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony, came through New Haven to encourage the populace to support their respective movements. This gave Ebenezer an opportunity to be further exposed to the cause of abolition and possibly to meet some of the most important figures in this movement. It was also in New Haven that he met and married Eliza Park in 1855. They remained married for forty years.

This same year, 1855, Ebenezer Bassett was offered a position as principal of the Institute for Colored Youth, a progressive high school in Philadelphia. He accepted it and his salary doubled to \$700 per year (by 1869 his salary was \$1800). On October 1, 1855, Ebenezer moved with his bride to Philadelphia where they remained for 14 years.

During this period, Ebenezer Bassett continued to be active in the civil rights movement. He aided Frederick Douglass in the recruitment of blacks into the military during the Civil War. His recognizable skills, such as an expertise in French, and school administration, and his involvement in the cause of equal rights, made him an attractive candidate for the diplomatic post of U.S. minister to Haiti. With the backing of Frederick Douglass and others, President Ulysses S. Grant proposed his name for that post in 1869 and the Senate approved the appointment. Thus, Ebenezer Bassett left his position in Philadelphia a month later to become Minister Resident & Consul General of the U.S. in Haiti on May 1, 1869.

CHAPTER 3

Monsieur le Ministre Americain

Now sir, you go to a foreign land as the representative of the United States. You go as one of the colored race; you go as an American citizen. (Rev. Charles Ray at the Shiloh Church in New York City on the occasion of Bassett's departure for Haiti.)

"an honest heart, a generous purpose, and unflagging industry, and an elevated patriotism. It shall be my daily prayer."(Ebenezer D. Bassett)

Ebenezer Bassett was looked upon as one of the elite and prominent black leaders in Philadelphia. Bassett's role as an educator at the Institute for Colored Youth and his subsequent activity in recruiting blacks to serve in the Union forces of the Civil War brought him into close contact with the black leaders in Republican politics, especially Frederick Douglass. After the war, Douglass was anxious for a black to serve in a diplomatic post. In 1867, acting on Douglass' encouragement, Bassett wrote to President Andrew Johnson and expressed his desire to become a candidate for the post of Minister Resident in Port-au-Prince. Many distinguished black and white citizens supported his application. President Johnson, however, did not act perhaps because he was not in favor of a black diplomat but more likely because the Congress had begun impeachment proceedings against him. When Grant was elected in 1868, Bassett again submitted his credentials to the President pointing out that he was a Republican and "a representative Colored man". Ebenezer Bassett was approved by the Senate Committee and then by the House of Representatives on the 16th of April 1869. His appointment was received with great joy among the abolitionist community.

What was this land to which Ebenezer Bassett was being sent as Minister Resident of the United States? Haiti, or Hayti as the natives called it, is the western section of a Caribbean island, which was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and to which he gave the name Hispaniola claiming it for Spain. The Spaniards colonized the island and proceeded to enslave the natives. As a result of conflicts and diseases borne by the Europeans, the native population was decimated and slaves from Africa were imported to work in the sugar cane and coffee plantations. Many European powers were contending for land in the New World at this time. French pirates and adventurers were able to take over the eastern part of the island and eventually a treaty between them and the Spanish confirmed their ownership of Saint Domingue (present day Dominican Republic). More slaves were imported from Africa resulting in an island population of thousands of African slaves who brought with them dengue fever and malaria.



President Ulysses S. Grant

... on January 1, 1804, ... Hayti became the world's first black republic.

The Monroe Doctrine stated "that the American continents ... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers."

Ebenezer D. Bassett was confirmed as Minister Resident. The term "ambassador" did not come into use until 1893.

The brutal treatment and working conditions inflicted on the slave population made the situation ripe for rebellion. Word of the War of Independence of the American colonies (to become the United States) and the French Revolution fostered the desire to revolt. The French National Convention declared slaves in all French territories free in 1794. England and Spain proceeded to grab control of parts of Hispaniola. They were driven out by the French and the black military leader, Toussaint l'Ouverture. When Napoleon Bonaparte came into power, he sent an army to Hayti intending to restore slavery. Disease and conflict decimated the French forces, and Desalines, who succeeded Toussaint, assumed the leadership.

The republic of Hayti under Desalines declared itself independent on January 1, 1804, twenty-seven years after the American colonies declared their independence. Hayti thus became the world's first black republic. This period in the history of this geographical region was very unstable as various colonial powers sought to keep or acquire territory. As a result, in 1830 President James Monroe proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, which stated "that the American continents ... are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers."

Hispaniola gained strength by trading products, such as coffee and sugar, abroad. In 1825, France recognized the independence of Hayti and recognition by other countries soon followed. At about the same time freed slaves in the United States were being sent back to Africa, in a so-called recolonization movement. This movement had strong support by many of the leading politicians of the era, such as Monroe, Jefferson, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay and others. The president of Hayti saw an opportunity to benefit from the skills of these former slaves and invited them to his island.

Although Hayti and the United States had an active trade, the United States had not formally recognized the black republic partly due to racist attitudes. President Lincoln called for recognition and for the appointment of a Minister Resident at Port-au-Prince. Considerable opposition and debate in the Congress delayed recognition until June of 1862, fifty-eight years after Hayti had become independent of France. Lincoln appointed the first diplomat to Port-au-Prince, Benjamin Whidden, in July of 1862. The post was filled with several successors, all white, until 1869 when Ebenezer D. Bassett was confirmed as Minister Resident. (The term "ambassador" did not come into use until 1893.)

Bassett was to take over from the then Minister Resident Hollister at a time when Hayti was in the throes of a civil war. His salary was set at \$7,500 per year plus expenses, a considerable increase from his previous salary. Bassett who was 36 years old would be migrating with his family of four children to a country whose climate, culture and language were very different from those of his New England roots. Before his departure, he

was received at the White House by President Grant and was briefed about the plans the United States had for this territory. He and his family sailed from New York aboard the steamship *City of Port-au-Prince* on the fifth of June. Prior to departure they were entertained and cheered by the local black community. The journey was not a pleasant one due to storms and seasickness. Their first landing was made at Cap Haitien where they found a city in a “deplorable condition” due to the civil war. People were starving and the torrid temperature led not only to discomfort but also disease. The U.S. consulate there had been under siege by the rebels for weeks. The supporters of Salnave, the Haytian president at that time, had sought refuge in it. The ship went on to Port-au-Prince and docked the next day, June 14, where a large crowd greeted it. Bassett soon learned that the French he had learned at Yale was not the same as the Creole the local population spoke.

Bassett was very much taken with the country’s natural beauty. Despite his inexperience as a diplomat, his basic principles of humanitarianism and manner of operation would stand him in good stead as he tried to deal with the upheaval in Hayti. President Salnave (who acted as if he were a dictator) finally accepted Bassett’s diplomatic credentials three months after his arrival. In the meantime Bassett had set about to get to know the U.S. legation and learn the system of communicating with Washington. Dispatches were hand-written and sent by ship back to the State Department. Weeks would pass before answers could be obtained.

Violence was a common occurrence. For example, Bassett’s predecessor, Hollister, received head wounds when attacked by a man with a hatchet. President Salnave asked that the U.S. assist in quelling the opposition but Bassett carefully evaded the request thereby maintaining neutrality in the conflict. The consulate at Cap Haitien was under siege and other American interests were threatened. This prompted Bassett to appeal to Washington to send a battleship, a request that was denied. Bassett tried to keep a good relationship with President Salnave hoping to influence him to be less dictatorial and more humane but this was to no avail. The rebels under Saget attacked Port-au-Prince. The U.S. diplomatic residence became a refuge for thousands of women and children and was threatened by the rebels. Bassett bravely stood his ground and was able to negotiate their safe release. However, many were killed later by the rebels. Saget and his forces took over the capitol and executed President Salnave. Bassett now had to deal with a new government under Saget.

Dealing with the new government presented many challenges to Bassett. He was committed to helping the Haytians rebuild their country. The U.S. government had commended him for the skill with which he had handled the transition of the new administration. Hayti and Santo Domingo (present day Dominican Republic) continued to be at odds with

Their first landing was made at Cap Haitien where they found a city in a “deplorable condition” due to the civil war.

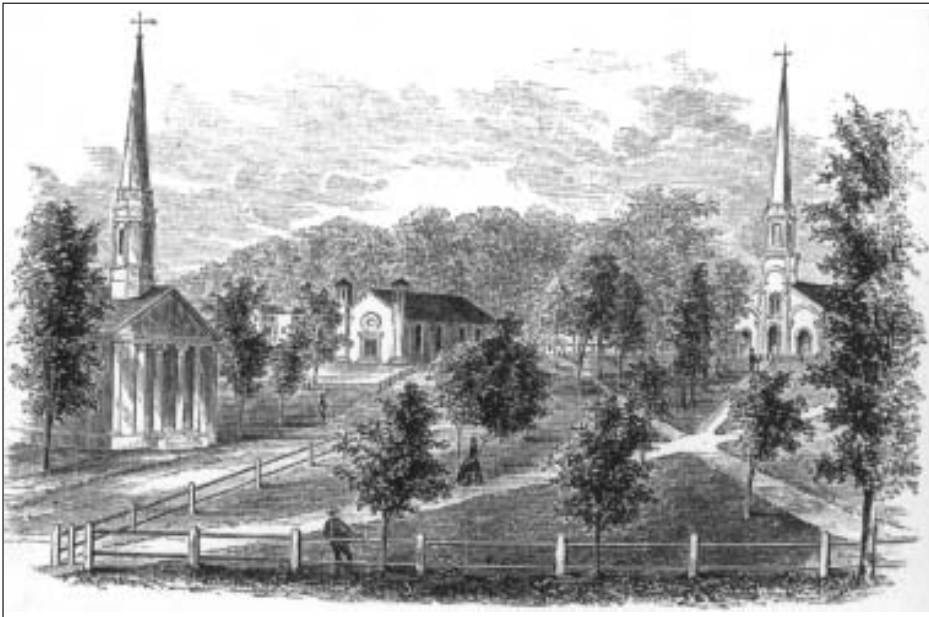
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WEDDING OF TOBIAH AND RACHEL

Wedding of Tobiah Pero and Rachel Hull at Captain John Wooster's Tavern, Oxford, CT. From "Chauncy Judd" by Israel P. Warren, 1874.



Birmingham Green (now Derby Green), center building Birmingham Academy circa 1850's, *History of Derby 1880* Orcutt.



Home and Office of Dr. Ambrose Beardsley. Elizabeth Street, Birmingham (Derby) c. 1850 Bradley Collection, Derby Historical Society.



Marian K. O'Keefe

The Former Home and Office of Dr. Ambrose Beardsley. Minerva Street (moved circa 1908) 2008.



1840

Wesleyan Academy, Wilbraham, MA. Now Wilbraham & Monson Academy.



Marian K. O'Keefe

2008

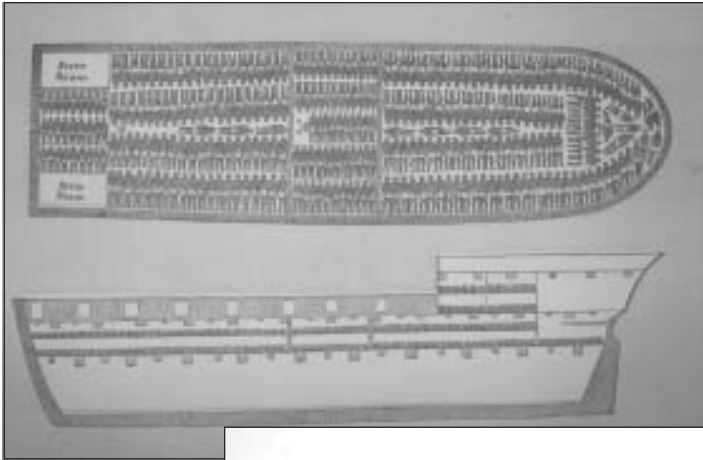
Whiting Street School,
New Haven, CT. From
Saturday Chronicle 1908.
Courtesy of the Whitney
Library, Dana Scrap
Book Collection, New
Haven Museum &
Historical Society.



The Institute for Colored
Youth, Philadelphia,
courtesy of the Wilson
Library, University of North
Carolina.



Detail Map of the West Indies, 1869, by Augustus Mitchell,
courtesy of Carolyn Ivanoff.



Cargo hold of a slave ship.

Woodcuts of the American Slave Trade, 1860, from *A History of Slavery* courtesy of Carolyn Ivanoff.



Marian K. O'Keefe



Marian K. O'Keefe

Bassett Family Plot in Grove Street Cemetery, New Haven, Connecticut

Rochester: - April. 13. 1869

My dear Bassett:

Let me congratulate you and rejoice with you. Your appointment is a grand achievement for yourself and for our whole people - It forms an important point in the History of our progress and upward tendency -

I have no doubt you see the importance of your position. As you shall acquit yourself in it - wisely or otherwise, we shall be affected favorably or unfavorably - I should like much to see you before you go upon your mission - and if I do not I shall be glad to hear from you. My kind regards to Mrs. Bassett - Why can't you both make me a few days visit before sailing -

Yours Truly

Frederick Douglass

Congratulatory
Letter from
Frederick Douglass
to Ebenezer Bassett,
Library of Congress
Archives, Washing-
ton, D.C.

Rochester, April 13, 1869

My dear Bassett:

Let me congratulate you and rejoice with you. Your appointment is a grand achievement for yourself and for our whole people. It forms an important point in the History of our progress and upward tendency. I have no doubt you see the importance of your position. As you shall acquit yourself in it wisely or otherwise, we shall be affected favorably or unfavorably. I should like much to see you before you go upon your mission - and if I do not I shall be glad to hear from you. My kind regards to Mrs. Bassett. Why can't you both make me a few days visit before sailing -

Yours Truly,

Frederick Douglass

each other. This was exacerbated by the interest that the United States had to annex Santo Domingo or to establish a base there. This American ambition promoted an anti-American attitude in Hayti. Indeed, Bassett perceived the possibility of a war between the two island countries and worked to maintain peace. Considerable diplomacy was required to convince the Haytians of his good intentions and those of the U.S. The problem was resolved when the U.S. Congress voted against annexation.

Bassett found himself involved in many difficult situations that arose between Hayti and the Dominican sectors of the Haytian island. Because of delayed communication between Washington and his office, Bassett was left alone to deal with these problems and similar ones, which would arise in the future. For example, Spain blamed the U.S. for supporting Cuban insurgents and attacked the American vessel *Hornet*. Through his diplomacy, he received support from other European countries with representation in Hayti, and urged the U.S. to send a frigate to escort the *Hornet* back to the mainland. The crisis was peacefully averted and Bassett earned the praise of the U.S. government.

Because many American businesses and individuals had lost property during the previous Salnave regime, Bassett was anxious to obtain restitution. Other countries were threatening to achieve restitution by force; however, Bassett chose to exert pressure through personal diplomacy. He and his wife Eliza would ask government dignitaries to dinners and *soirees* at their home to cultivate good will. As a result many of the debts were paid attesting to his skills as a negotiator.

The outbreak of another uprising soon disrupted Bassett's quiet diplomacy. Though it was on a very small scale, the government responded with executions of individuals who may have shown sympathy to the insurgents. Bassett expressed his outrage at the carnage and instructed U.S. consulates to grant asylum. At this time, Hayti was also devastated by hurricane winds and floods thus adding to its misery.

The year was 1874. The United States was in a recession and civil rights for blacks were being challenged by roving bands of armed men who sought to kill the former slaves. Reconstruction was taking its toll on the Southern states. At this time, Ebenezer Bassett wrote a letter to the State Department stating that his health was declining and asked for financial help to run his office, but his request was denied. This placed heavy responsibility directly on his shoulders.

Hayti was undergoing its usual troubles and Bassett predicted that General Michel Domingue, an ally of Saget, would probably take over as head of state. Bassett did not favor Domingue because of his cruel nature. President Saget's term was drawing to an end and the great powers (Great Britain, France and Germany) were showing their concern by requesting naval vessels from their countries to come to Hayti. Bassett again requested a warship.

Because of delayed communication between Washington and his office, Bassett was left alone to deal with these problems . . .

Bassett expressed his outrage at the carnage and instructed U.S. consulates to grant asylum.

Bassett hoped that his quiet diplomacy would further the cause of civil rights.

President Domingue's forces even attacked the U.S. legation where some of these individuals had taken refuge. The lives of Bassett and his family were threatened but Ebenezer Bassett stood bravely firm in defending 'his guests' and the right of the U.S. government to grant asylum.

Domingue had assembled an armed force and was approaching Port-au-Prince in order to drive President Saget from power, should he not resign voluntarily at the end of his term. President Saget respected Bassett and often sought his advice. One of his last acts as President before resigning was to pay a farewell visit to the Bassett family.

Domingue assumed office peacefully and, at his inauguration, was addressed by Bassett as dean of the diplomatic corps. Though Bassett was optimistic that peace might finally be at hand for Hayti, this was not to be.

Due to ill health, Bassett was to leave Hayti in August for the U.S. He was not able to leave because he suffered from constant pain in the head and neck, as well as a bilious attack. Finally in October, Bassett and his family now one member fewer because their daughter, Iphigenia, had died, set sail for the U.S. and returned to New Haven, CT. During the ninety-day period from the time that he had left, hurricanes had ravaged Hayti contributing to the suffering of its people.

The Bassetts returned to Hayti in January 1875. Bassett used his charm to work with President Domingue. The latter was feared and Bassett hoped that his quiet diplomacy would further the cause of civil rights. However, a number of incidents followed which indicated that President Domingue and his nephew, Rameau, were persecuting members of the previous administration. President Domingue's forces even attacked the U.S. legation where some of these individuals had taken refuge. The lives of Bassett and his family were threatened but Ebenezer Bassett stood bravely firm in defending 'his guests' and the right of the U.S. government to grant asylum. A famous incident was the granting of asylum by Bassett to General Pierre Boisrond Canal and his family thereby saving their lives. President Domingue was convinced that they were enemies of the state, which led to months of confrontation between Bassett and the Domingue regime. The summer's heat and the stress of military siege around his home worsened Bassett's health but he continued to work. Eventually Canal and his group were banished by the Haytian government and were allowed to leave on an American-flagged ship, five months after being given refuge in the U.S. legation – further attesting to Bassett's courage and diplomatic skill.

In addition to the problems with the Domingue government, Bassett was being accused by his former consular employee, Abraham Crosswell, for dereliction of duty and other charges. This was in revenge for the fact that Bassett had fired him for not keeping the consulate open during Bassett's absences. Though the charges were finally dropped by the State Department, they added to the strain affecting Bassett's health and relations with the Secretary of State who had not favored giving refuge to President Domingue's opponents. Bassett's principles and sense of justice aided him in prevailing against these attacks.

The brutality of President Domingue led to another civil war that led to the overthrow of that government in 1876. A new government was formed under General Boisrond Canal, the man whom Bassett had shielded in the American legation and with whom he had developed a deep friendship.

This was also the time when Grant's term as President was coming to an end. In the election that followed Rutherford B. Hayes was elected President over Samuel Tilden, although the Tilden had received the majority of the popular vote. It fell to Hayes to appoint diplomatic positions in the State Department. Even though Bassett was anxious to be reappointed to the post in Hayti, the Secretary of State chose to name John M. Langston, to replace him. Langston, another black man, was dean of the Howard University Law School and well known in Washington circles. Thus after eight years, Bassett was asked to submit his resignation to the Secretary of State who responded with a glowing letter acknowledging Bassett's diplomacy. The parting with President Canal was particularly sad. On December 1, 1877, Ebenezer with his wife and three children set sail for New York. A year old infant, named after Frederick Douglass, had died the year before. Their sixth child, a newborn girl, Olive, was with them.

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CHAPTER 4

Ebenezer Bassett's Post-Ministerial Years



Ebenezer D. Bassett

Ebenezer Bassett was just forty-four when he and his family returned to New Haven, CT. The Bassetts were considered among the elite in the black community but little is known about Ebenezer's activities there. Charlotte, the oldest daughter, went to Philadelphia to further her studies and eventually followed in her father's footsteps when she joined the faculty of the Institute for Colored Youth as a French teacher. Ebenezer Junior completed high school at the Institute and then entered Yale University. The two girls, Lizzie and Olive, attended grade schools in New Haven while their brother, Ulysses, became a student at the Hopkins Grammar School. Another son, Wendell P. Bassett, was born a year after the family's arrival in New Haven.

The eight years spent as Minister in Hayti had given Bassett a wealth of experience in diplomacy and he was eager to continue in the Foreign Service. Unfortunately, the new administration did not chose to appoint him to any post. Thus without employment it was difficult to support his growing family.

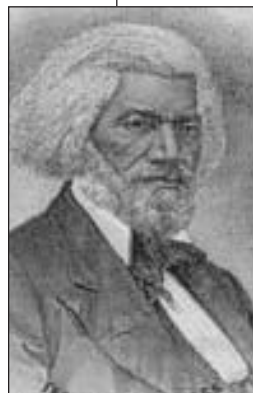
Meanwhile in Hayti, civil unrest soon disrupted the rule of President Boisrond Canal and he was forced to abdicate in July of 1879. He was replaced as President by General Louis Lysius Felicite Salomon who had returned from self-imposed exile in Jamaica. Salomon had left Haiti previously with the help of Bassett due to a crisis that threatened his life. Now as President, Salomon sought to repay Bassett for saving him. He offered Bassett the position of Haytian consul in New York City. At this time, it was not unusual for an American to take a position as consul for a foreign country. Bassett's responsibility was to deal with commercial and trade issues in the Port of New York, the busiest port in the United States. His status meant that he was again in the diplomatic corps. During this time Ebenezer Bassett commuted from his home in New Haven to New York City. He held this position for nearly 12 years.

Though it appeared that a period of stability had come to Hayti under President Salomon, it soon was disrupted by civil war. When the Haytian ambassador to the United States, Preston, was sent to France on business he appointed Bassett to serve in his place. Bassett found himself in the awkward position of having to accuse Americans who were sending arms to the Haytian rebels or breaking Haytian laws. President Salomon was growing old and frail but he assumed dictatorial powers that led to another revolt. This eventually resulted in his fall from power. Continued unrest between various Haytian factions, and their support by American mercenaries, who armed boats in New York harbor to send supplies, resulted

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in very sensitive relations with the United States under President Cleveland. The enormity of the problem resulted in the resignation of Ebenezer Bassett as Consul General of Hayti.

Bassett was once again without a position. Benjamin Harrison had been elected President and was making appointments and Bassett hoped he would be named to one. The fact that he had been employed by a foreign government worked against this. The Bassetts' economic situation was very difficult and he desperately was looking for a position. Rather than name Bassett to the post in Hayti, President Harrison chose Frederick Douglass. Bassett, though disappointed, offered his services to Douglass on the basis that he was familiar with the language, customs and politics of Hayti. When Bassett suggested that he be Secretary to Douglass, Douglass accepted. Douglass and his second wife, Helen, departed for Hayti on October 1, 1889. Ebenezer Bassett as Secretary accompanied them. They arrived in a country again under a new government. The first year was uneventful and both returned home to the United States for the summer of 1890. Douglass, who was in his seventies, had endured the tropical climate but his health had suffered. In correspondence from New Haven, Bassett kept Douglass informed of events in Hayti. His loyalty to Douglass was best stated in his own words: "... my plans are more for returning with you. I'll stick it out down there with you just as long as you wish to stay."



Frederick Douglass

On instructions from the State Department, Douglass was to negotiate a lease for the Mole St. Nicholas, a small area in northeast Haiti on which the French had built a fort. Complications arose when Admiral Gherardi of the U.S. Navy said he had been given authority to negotiate the lease. Disputes between Gherardi and the Haytian officials resulted in the collapse of talks. Douglass' health and fear of violence from the Mole negotiations caused him to leave Hayti and eventually to resign his post despite Bassett's pleas that he remain firm. Personal attacks on Douglass and Bassett by the U.S. press were of a very vile nature. Douglass resigned as minister. Bassett was once again without a position. However, his knowledge of Hayti was respected and acknowledged when he was asked to write a book by the Bureau of the American Republics to be used by their diplomats – *Hayti: State Department Bulletin Number 62*.

Bassett resided at this time in New Haven and was active in Republican politics in Connecticut. Ebenezer and his wife, Eliza, would frequently visit their daughter, Charlotte, in Philadelphia. His beloved wife, who had borne him eight children and supported his efforts throughout the years, passed away in August 1895. She is buried in the Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven, CT.

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Ebenezer stayed active in civil rights issues. The “separate but equal” ruling by the Supreme Court in 1896 (Plessey v. Ferguson) was threatening advances blacks had made under Reconstruction.

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Ebenezer stayed active in civil rights issues. The “separate but equal” ruling by the Supreme Court in 1896 (*Plessey v. Ferguson*) was threatening advances blacks had made under Reconstruction. Bassett urged his fellow black citizens to act according to the law and not stoop to violence. He stressed the need of the black population to educate themselves for they were often relegated to menial jobs.

When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, the Haytian government feared that their country would be annexed by the United States. Because of his experience, Ebenezer Bassett was reappointed Vice Consul General, a post he held until his death.

He spent his remaining years with his children only five of whom had reached adulthood. He must have been gratified to note that they had followed him into education. Ebenezer D. Bassett passed away on November 13, 1908 at 146 Fulton Street in Brooklyn, NY. He is buried with his wife and children in the Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven, CT.

This extraordinary American deserves to be remembered and better recognized as a trailblazer for blacks in education and the diplomatic service. The publication of this booklet marks the one-hundredth anniversary of his death and honors his memory. It pays tribute to a man who received the foundations of his humanitarian, intellectual and courageous character in Derby. He himself acknowledged: “My success in life I owe greatly to that American sense of fairness which was tendered me in old Derby, and which exacts that every man whether white or black, shall have a fair chance to run his race in life and make the most of himself.”

AMERICAN EPILOGUE

On November 4, 2008, in the centennial year of Ebenezer D. Bassett’s death, the people of the United States of America elected Senator Barack Obama the first black president. What changes 100 years have brought to our great nation! Public education is crucial in instructing our citizens on the important lessons of tolerance, equality, and values. Ebenezer Bassett understood the value of education. He understood that education opens doors and fulfills dreams. He lived an exemplary life devoted to educating and serving others. It is through education that the United States continues to grow into the words that gave birth to our nation, “All Men Are Created Equal.” Bassett would have been proud of the results of this election in this new century. This publication honors and celebrates the memory of Ebenezer D. Bassett, who despite the obstacles of race and inequality in the nineteenth century, lived an accomplished and remarkable life.

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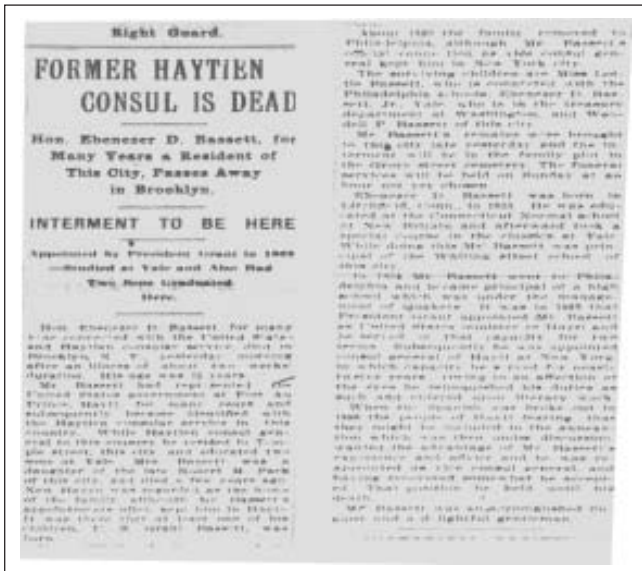
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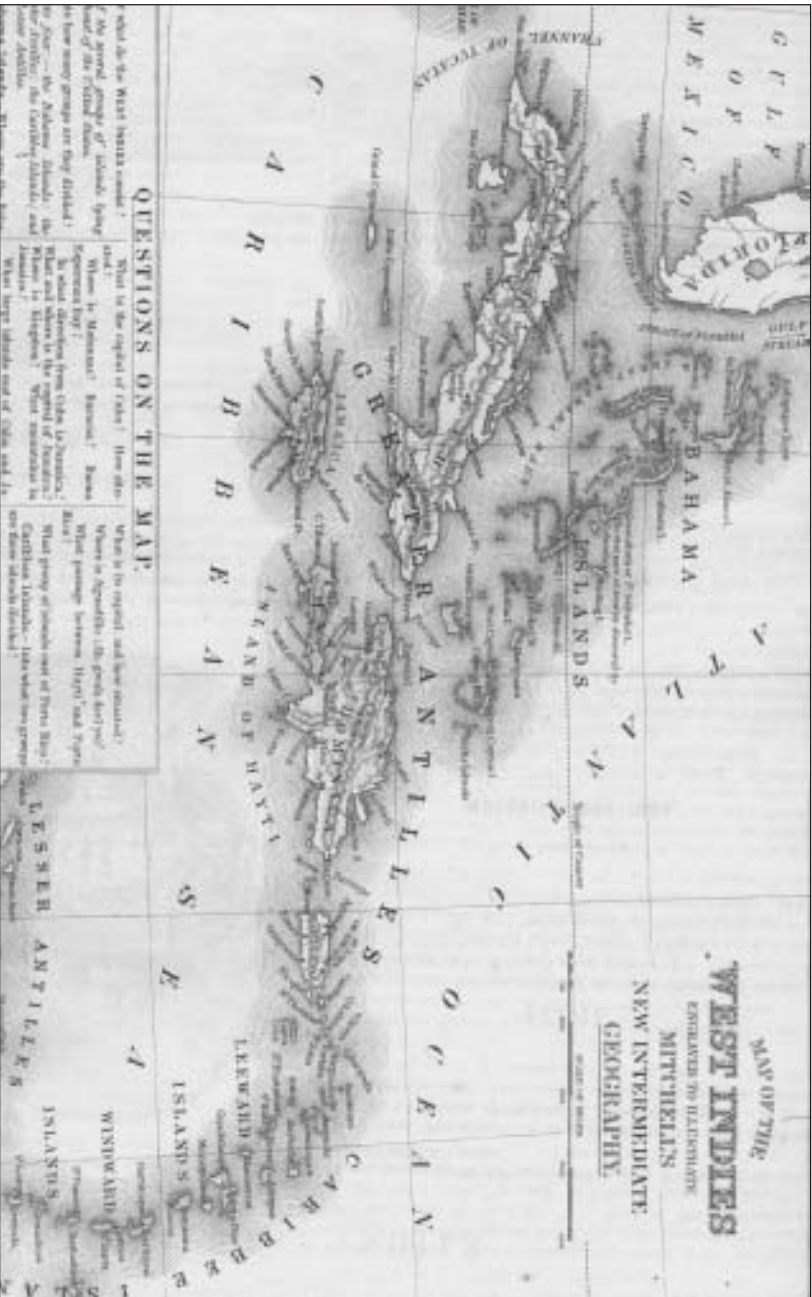
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Monuments at the Bassett family plot in the Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven, CT. Courtesy of Marian K. O'Keefe.

Back Cover Photo: *Distinguished Colored Men*. published by A. Muller & Co. [ca](#) 1883, Chicago, IL. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D. C. Names of Center: Frederick Douglass; upper left corner: Robert Brown Elliott; upper right corner: Blanche K. Bruce; above Douglass and in a clockwise direction; William Wells Brown, MD; Prof. R.T. Greener; Rt. Rev. Richard Allen; J.H. Rainey; E.D. Bassett; John Mercer Langston; P.B.S. Pinchback; and Henry Highland.



QUESTIONS ON THE MAP.

What is the capital of Cuba? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of Haiti? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of Santo Domingo? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of Puerto Rico? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of Saint Kitts-Nevis? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of Barbados? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of the Leeward Islands? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of the Windward Islands? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

What is the capital of the Virgin Islands? How do you find the general groups of islands lying west of the Florida Straits?

MAP OF THE WEST INDIES
 ENGRAVED BY HILDEBRAND MITCHELL'S
 NEW INTERMEDIATE GEOGRAPHY

WINDWARD ISLANDS
 LEeward ISLANDS
 VIRGIN ISLANDS
 GREAT ANTILLES
 LESSER ANTILLES



Distinguished Colored Men

A. Muller & Co., circa 1883, courtesy of the Library of Congress