

Panel Proposal:

Practice and Perception of Black Classicism: Chavis, Tolson and Eezzuduemhoi

Part I of the Presidential Panel in Honor of Michele Valerie Ronnick, CAMWS President

Category: (PC = Pedagogy Classical)

Organizer Michele Valerie Ronnick Presiding, TBA

This panel will explore the work using power point presentations of three scholars of African descent whose careers were deeply influenced by their study of Greek and Latin, but whose contributions have heretofore been unknown to many classicists. Foundational profiles such as these giving the who, what, where, when, fill in the missing materials on the history of black classicism, and they not only expand classicists' understanding of their own discipline *per se*, but also give their colleagues from other scholarly disciplines a better and fuller appreciation of their work as it fits into the larger academy.

- 1) John Chavis, African American Latin Teacher in the Antebellum South.
- 2) The Pindar of Harlem: the life and work of Melvin B. Tolson (1898-1966).
- 3) A Twenty-First Century African-US Collaboration on a New Beginning Greek Text.

Respondent: Catherine A. John (University of Oklahoma), Professor of Afro-Caribbean and African American Literature and Culture, department of English.

(Note: the respondent has enthusiastically confirmed her participation)

Requested time: 90 minutes

Abstracts

Paper # 1 John Chavis, African American Latin Teacher in the Antebellum South

John Chavis was freeborn in Granville County, North Carolina, about 1763. He is reported to have been exposed to Latin and Greek by age ten during his indentured service to an attorney with a substantial classical library (Parramore). He seemed to have studied with Henry Pattillo, a pastor to congregations of mixed race in Granville and Orange counties, 'an excellent classical scholar for his day,' and a sponsor of Chavis' ministry (Othow 37-8). Presbyterian and Princeton records corroborate Chavis' sponsorship for higher education by Granville gentlemen under a fund for 'poor and pious' youth. An idea found in late nineteenth and early twentieth century commentators (and still in circulation today) holds that his attendance at Princeton derived from a wager between white neighbors whether a 'Negro would take a collegiate education (see Othow, Knight, Shaw).' He did, though in 1795 when he transferred to another Presbyterian institution closer to home, Washington Academy in Lexington VA, whose curriculum had been adapted from John Witherspoon's at Princeton. Freedmen's records of 1802 document Chavis' progression through 'a regular course of accademical (sic) studies

(Franklin 170, Othow 45).’ In 1800 Chavis earned ministerial status with a Latin exegesis on the theme *in quo consistat salvatio ab peccato*.

His ministry to blacks and as a preacher to white congregations led him home to North Carolina, where his teaching career began to flourish. By 1805 he had established an integrated school for white and free black students near Raleigh. But some of his white clientele forced him to segregate and by fall 1808 he advertised that the students of color would thereafter attend evening classes (Othow 65). Over the next thirty years, John Chavis taught future North Carolina governors, US senators and congressmen, judges, attorneys, ministers and doctors at several different schools in Chatham, Granville, Orange and Wake counties. Most of these students would go on to the University of North Carolina, where the classical curriculum held sway under President Swain. Chavis’ extensive correspondence with his former students, especially the important Whig senator Willie P. Mangum, expresses his conservative, Federalist, Presbyterian views on political issues, social conventions and the condition of free and enslaved blacks, business transactions and ‘networking,’ as well as educational theory and practice.

My paper will conclude with a sample of the accolades made by his former students. But regardless of these students’ praise and Chavis’ success, the Nat Turner revolt of 1831 stirred up new terror of black men, and left John Chavis debarred from preaching and teaching blacks. This effectively removed his earning capacity among the white aristocracy at the age of seventy. In the life of this little known 18th century African American Latinist lies an important, yet forgotten, victory for academic freedom and civil rights in the U.S.

- Delaney, Theodore. 2001. ‘John Chavis: Washington & Lee’s First African American Student.’ Unpublished Founder’s Day Lecture, delivered January 19, 2001. Accessed at <http://ir.wlu.edu/factbook/AboutW&L/history/chavislecture.htm>, August 7, 2009.
- Dobler, L., E.A. Toppin. 1965. *Pioneers and Patriots: The Lives of Six Negroes of the Revolutionary Era*. Garden City NY.
- Franklin, J.H. 1943. *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860*. New York.
- Kaplan, S., E.N. Kaplan. 1989. *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*. Amherst MA.
- Knight, E.W. 1930. ‘Notes on John Chavis.’ *North Carolina Historical Review* 7.326-45.
- Othow, H.C. 2001. *John Chavis: African American Patriot, Preacher, Teacher and Mentor, 1763-1838*. Jefferson NC.
- Parramore, B.M. 1979. ‘John Chavis,’ in W.S. Powell, ed. *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, 1.358-59. Chapel Hill NC.
- Shaw, G.C. 1931. *John Chavis, 1763-1838*. Binghamton NY.
- Weeks, S.B. 1914. “John Chavis. Antebellum Negro Preacher and Teacher.” *Southern Workman*. Feb. 1914.101-106.

Paper # 2 The Pindar of Harlem: the life and work of Melvin B. Tolson (1898-1966)

In his mature work Melvin Beaunorus Tolson (1898-1966), the hero of Denzel Washington's recent movie "The Great Debaters (2007)," produced two volumes of odes in the Pindaric tradition, each of them comparable to Hart Crane's "The Bridge" and William Carlos William's "Patterson." The first was his *Libretto for the Republic of*

Liberia, commissioned in 1947 to commemorate the centennial of the founding of the Republic, (published finally in 1953 to critical acclaim), poem entitled “The Man from Halicarnassus” published in Poetry Magazine in 1952, and in 1965 the first volume of *Harlem Gallery*, consisting of 24 odes, each numbered after the 24 letters of the Greek alphabet (Taylor). He was a graduate of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and that connection would work very well for Tolson throughout his career. His Master’s thesis written at Columbia on the Harlem Renaissance was the first critical history of that scene and its players, most of whom he knew very well. He taught at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas from the 1920s until after World War II, numbering among his students the future Civil Rights leader James Farmer, then moved to Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma, where he spent the rest of his career.

My paper will defend the idea that Tolson is the Pindar of Harlem for these three reasons: his evolution as a poet and his cosmopolitan career as a literary and political critic, the cosmopolitan circumstances in which he produced his greatest poetry, and the enviable reputation his mature work quickly earned for its prodigious learning and baffling obscurity. He died of cancer in 1966 in the middle of his appointment as an Avalon Professor of the Humanities at Tuskegee, leaving what might have become one of the monumental projects of twentieth-century American poetry unfinished.

Taylor, John, “Poetry Today: Harlem Gallery and Other Poems of Melvin B. Tolson,” *The Antioch Review*, (June 22, 2005): 590-93.

Paper # 3 An African-US Collaboration on a New Elementary Text for Ancient Greek

A Fundamental Greek Course is the brainchild of the Nigerian scholar Dr. James Eezzuduemhoi who earned his Ph.D. in Greece. Several years ago Dr. Eezzuduemhoi wrote to the Classics Department of the University of Iowa offering to send his manuscript of an elementary Classical Greek text for possible publication. Professor Glenn Storey after examining the manuscript agreed to edit the text did the tedious work of making an electronic version using IOWAGREEK, a Greek font developed by Frank Kohout of the University of Iowa. Contracted with the University Press of America, the published text will appear at the end of 2009.

Intended mostly as a collegiate text useful even in composition courses, the book’s main focus is to explicate intensively grammatical principles as clearly as possible, and to illustrate them with copious examples. Verbal forms are alternated with substantive forms chapter by chapter in order to enable students progressively to acquire vocabularies from the different parts of speech. Adverbial forms and numeration are subjected to full analysis including many details of interest. Full paradigms (including irregular nouns) are provided continuously throughout the chapters and appendices. The Exercises at the end of each chapter, which include inflectional questions, parsing, word, phrase and sentence translations, and various facets of accidence, are gleaned mainly from the literary works of ancient Greece and address topics such as history, education, religion, philosophy and ethics, agriculture, commerce, geography, geology and more. A Key to the Exercises has been completed and is available on a CD.

This project is an elegant and striking example of how the intricacies of the ancient Greek language can serve as a unifying element in the cross-cultural study of language and history, uniting far-flung continents via the Classical Tradition.