Heavy is the Hair: Evolution of African Hair in America from the17th c. to the 20th c.

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DISCLAIMER

> *When we shift our emphasis from historical recovery to rigorous and responsible creativity, we recognize that archives are not just the records bequeathed to us by the past; archives also consist of the tools we use to explore it, the vision that allows us to read its signs, and the design decisions that communicate our sense of history's possibilities.*
>
> — Vincent Brown,
>
> "Mapping a Slave Revolt: Visualizing Spatial History through the Archives of Slavery"

- Due to the nature of early African-American history, much of what we know of its intimate culture is anecdotal and passed down through oral tradition.
- While there are a wealth of observations of African-American life during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, these observations are largely made by White explorers, slaveowners, scholars, and bystanders whose perspectives are not necessarily accurate to the lived experiences of enslaved people.
- Because of this, reference to oral sources will be prefaced with "allegedly" and "supposedly," or used in context with other such language to differentiate what has been observed by either side.
- As with all history, it is important to consider what perspectives we are hearing from and which ones we are not.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, then State Senator Holly Mitchell brought forth California Senate Bill 188, titled The CROWN Act, to protect against professional discrimination towards natural hair, especially that of citizens of African descent.

In 2021, this bill was introduced for consideration to become Federal law, and as of 2022, has passed in the House.

Several states have already passed The CROWN Act and its variations since.

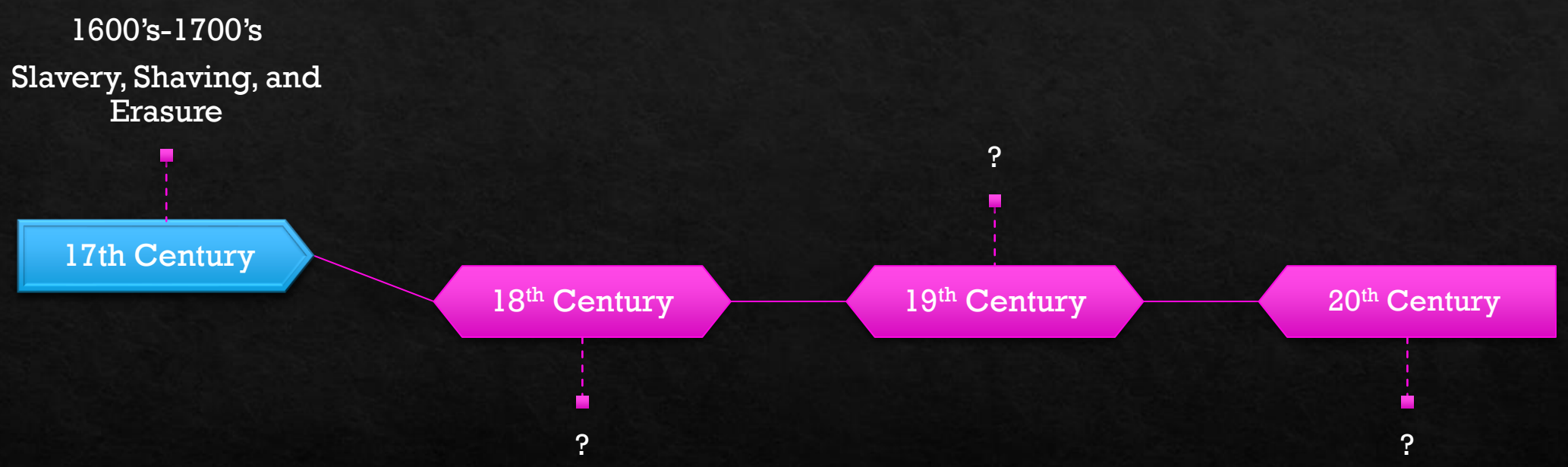
African-American hair has been a topic of controversy in America since before the term African-American was even coined.

From the ships of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the territories of the United States of America that African-Americans now call their stomping grounds, African-American hair has been degraded, forcefully removed, mocked, appropriated, criticized, and envied.

This richness in history has been documented throughout the following Library of Congress' digital collections: The *Gladstone Collection of African American Photographs*, *African American Photographs Assembled for 1900 Paris Exposition*, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938*, *Images of African American Slavery and Freedom*, and selections from the *Occupational Folklife Project: Hairdresser and Beauty Shop Culture in America*.

De Solis, H. (1603). *Tipus orbis terrarum* [Map]. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3200.ct007037/?r=0.389,0.284,0.722,0.358,0

TIMELINE


1600's-1700's
Slavery, Shaving, and Erasure
17th Century
18th Century
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19th Century
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20th Century
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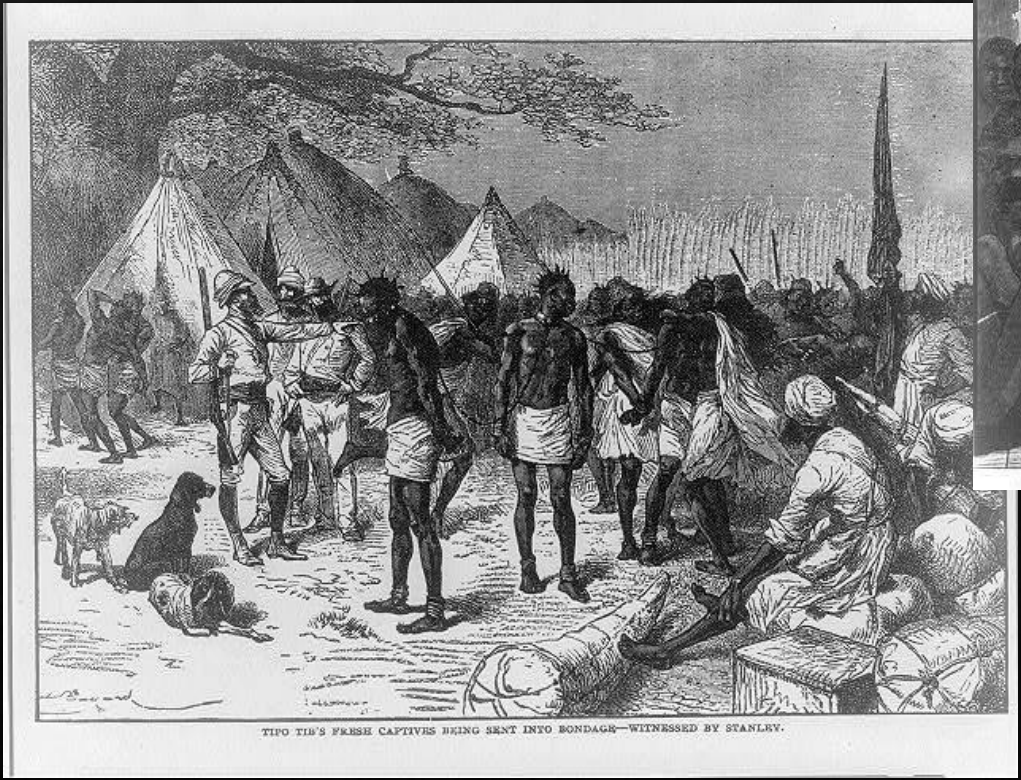
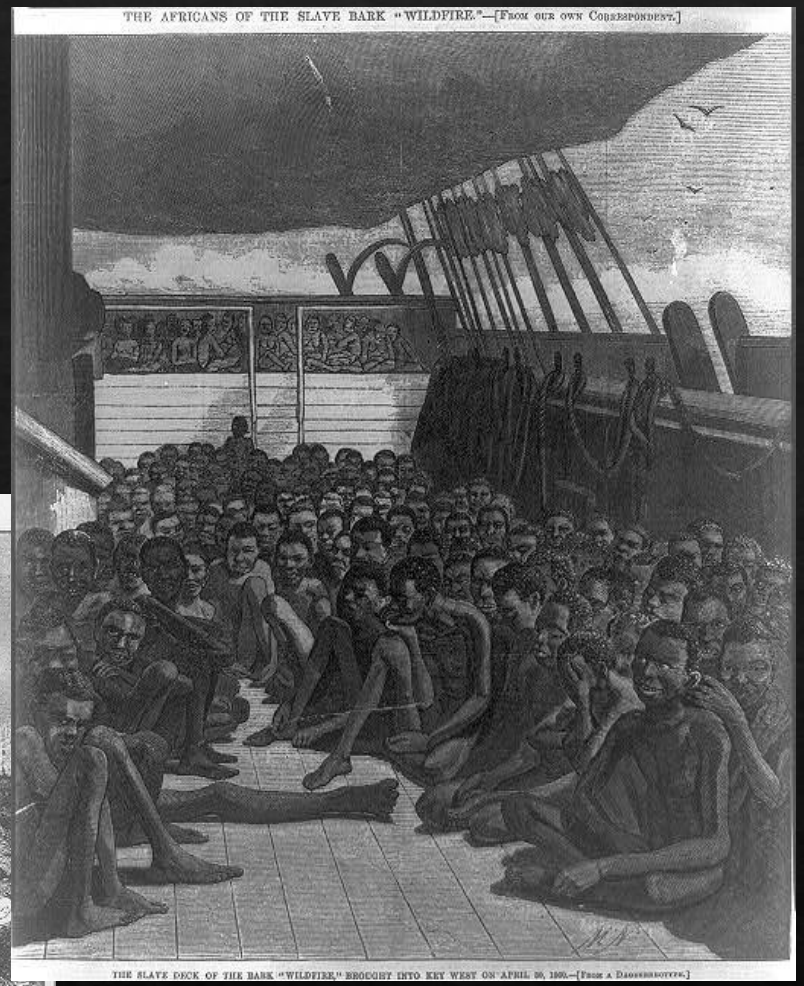
From the beginning of the Transatlantic slave trade, enslaved people were denied their humanity. They were beaten, belittled, killed, and subjected to unimaginable forms of cruelty. A factor in this cruelty included denying Africans their most basic expressions of identity. From being separated from their tribes and families, to having their names changed to fit Euro-American standards, to being forced into speaking new languages and renouncing their cultural religions, among these denied expressions of identity was hair.

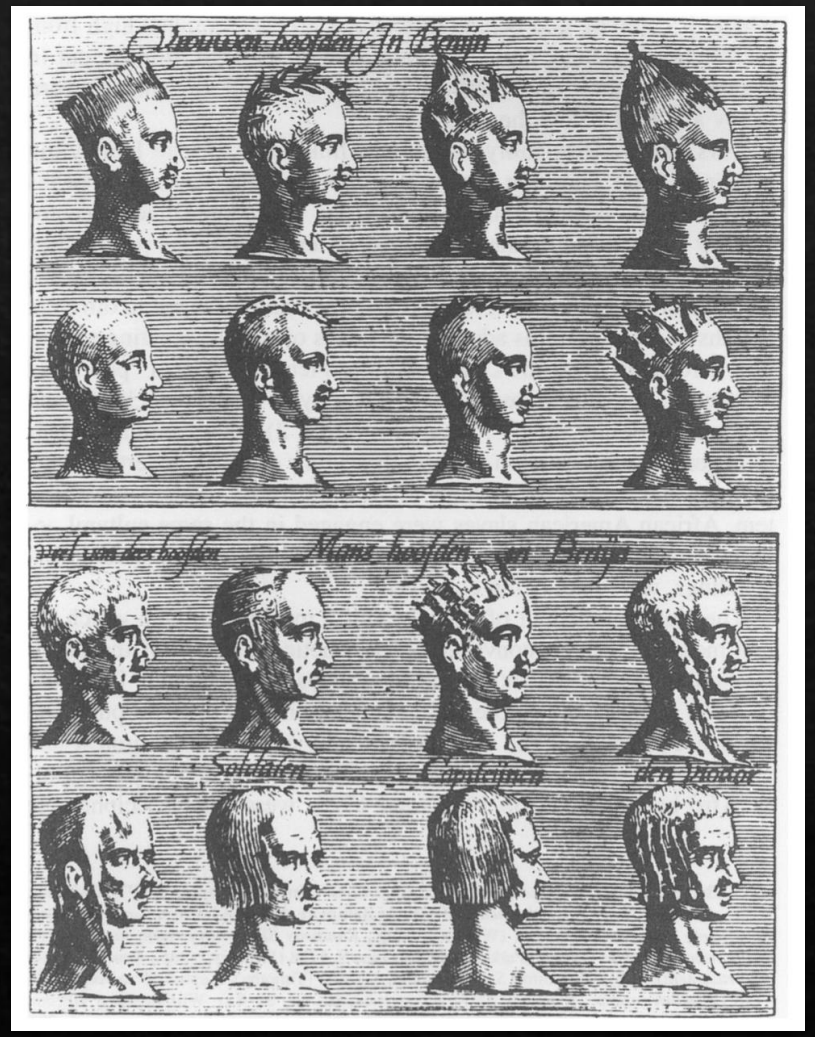
Hair was often shaved or shorn low upon sale and transport to the New World. Though slave traders would claim this kept the spread of bacteria low on ships, forced hair shaving was a form of punishment for slaves, as well as a way to remove what was seen as a marker of pride for most Africans.



Buel, J. W. (1890). *Tipo Tib's fresh captives being sent into bondage - witnessed by Stanley* [Photograph]. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98510178/



The Africans of the slave bark "Wildfire"-- The slave deck of the bark "Wildfire" [Wood Carving]. (1860). Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a42003/



Drawings of Benin women's and men's hairstyles from 1602. From "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," by S. White & G. White, 1995, The Journal of Southern History, 61, p. 52. https://doi.org/10.2307/2211360

Drawings of African women's and men's hairstyles [Drawing]. (1604). Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/guide/afr-encounters.html

Shaved hairstyles weren't unfamiliar to Africans, however. Dutch explorer Pieter de Marees took note of many African hairstyles in Benin that took advantage of braids, decorative hair tying, and of course—shaving. Among these hairstyles, several featured shaved sides with hair on top or shaved tops and long hair in plaits on the sides. A near identical depiction was found in engraver Johann Theodor de Bry's *India Orientalis pars VI. Veram et historicam descriptionem avrifeie* in 1604.

In several African countries as well, completely shaved heads held a multitude of cultural meanings. Some cultures shaved after birth and death, while others shaved after marriage. In subgroups of the ethnic group Nguni in South Africa, the shaving of hair was seen as part of one's mourning process.

The concept of shaving hair as a form of mourning could be seen in a new light thanks to the slave trade. Hair styling was a way to communicate status, emotions, and beauty all across Africa. The forced removal of hair communicated that the Africans—whoever they were before they had been taken—no longer existed. Their cultures were to be stripped from them in the same way their hair had been. This was imperative in demonstrating the Africans' new position in the West: the lesser.

But even after their heads had been shaved, slaves found ways to express individuality through their hair. Sarah Heaton references Diane Simon, author of *Hair: Public, Political, Extremely Personal*, who says Africans would use soap and broken glass to shave celestial bodies like stars and moons into their hair (Heaton, 2021).

> Yet Africans proved resilient in maintaining their traditions of adornment. Author of *Hair: Public Political Extremely Personal*, Diane Simon, quotes an eighteenth-century observer who noted that slaves, newly arrived in Suriname on the northeast coast of South America, had shaved figures of moons and stars into their heads with broken glass and soap during the Middle Passage.[9] Far from frivolous, this styling was perhaps a critical

This allowed slaves struggling through their collective trauma and forced anonymity to express themselves with what they had. However, without access to the haircare essentials readily found in Africa, African-Americans struggled to care for their hair as it grew. What materials they could find included kerosene and allegedly bacon grease and butter, which were more accessible but not necessarily efficient.

Efficiency was paramount on plantations where slaves had little time to care for themselves, especially when slaveowners expected to be cared for first and foremost. Because of this, many slaves had only one day a week—Sundays—to dedicate time to their appearance.

Benjamin Henry Latrobe, an architect, painted this scene of four Black people preparing their hair and shaving on a Sunday. In Benjamin's description of the event, he says that the person on the barrel had their hair in "twists" (most likely braids or plaits), which the person standing behind them was meticulously undoing and combing.

Hair was prone to matting without the proper tools to care for it, which often meant hair was either kept short for convenience, tied up with cloth, or braided/plaited out of the way.

Braids and plaits were especially popular as they were simplistic, easy to achieve, and kept the hair tamed for several days. For slaves, being able to keep hair out of the way when working was of the utmost importance.

Braids could not be elaborately adorned like they were in Africa, but they were practical.

Latrobe, B. H. (1797). Preparations for the Enjoyment of a Fine Sunday Evening, Accurately Copied from the Upper Room of Drymane's Tavern, Norfolk [Watercolor]. Maryland Center of History and Culture Museum. https://www.mdhistory.org/resources/preparations-for-the-enjoyment-of-a-fine-sunday-evening-accurately-copied-from-the-upper-room-of-drymanes-tavern-norfolk/

Braiding

The act of braiding dates back to 3000 B.C., spanning cultures from Indigenous America, early Europe, and Egypt. The concept of the name "cornrows" refers to the uniform, tightly braided nature of the hairstyle, often occurring in linear rows. In areas like the Caribbean Islands (Trinidad, Jamaica, and more), cornrows were also known as canerows in reference to the trade of sugar cane.

Foreman-Bey, N., Bey Al-Rasul, F., & Taylor, C. A. (2012). *Nzinga with a client Kaida*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2012035.afc2012035_00406_ph07/?r=-0.273,-0.013,1.621,0.734,0

In popular African folklore, it is said that female slaves would have their hair braided into derivative forms of cornrows to depict escape routes for runaways.

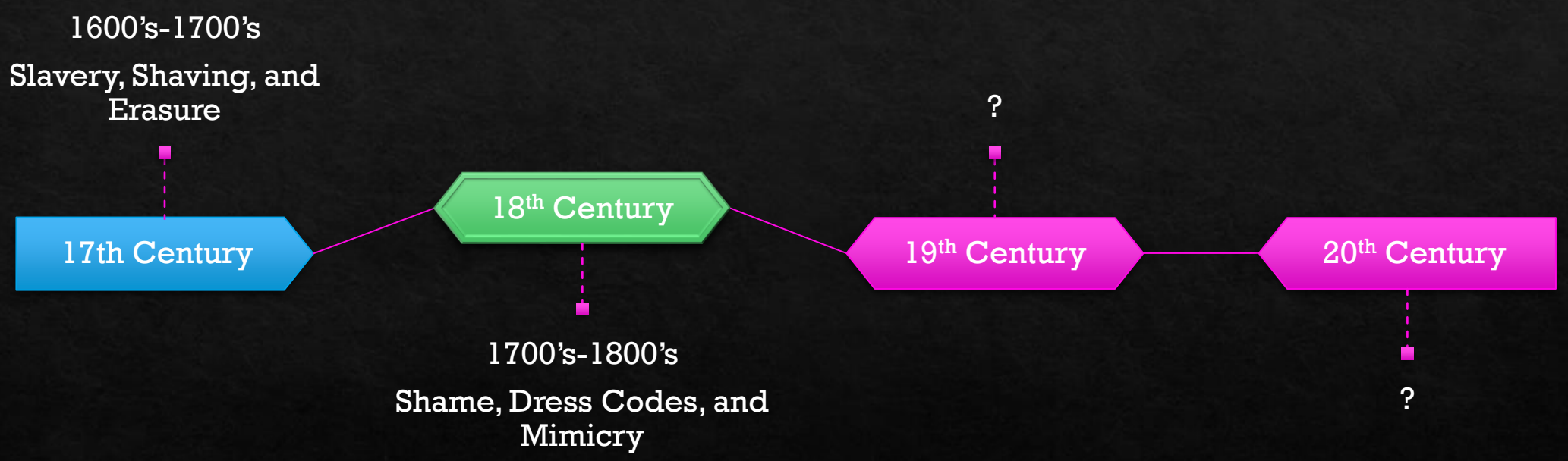
Ziomara Asprilla Garcia, an Afro-Colombian woman invited to the 2011 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, demonstrated cultural braiding techniques from her country, as well as explained the history of braiding by Afro-Colombian women as a means of communicating escape routes.

Garcia also explained that braids hid valuable resources like "gold and [hid] seeds which, in the long run, helped them survive after they escaped."

Foreman-Bey, N., Bey Al-Rasul, F., & Taylor, C. A. (2012). *Close up of Ifama's braids*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2012035.afc2012035_00406_ph03/

Aside from practicality and communication, braiding was another way in which African-Americans could express themselves through their hair. The intricate techniques of the cultures that passed them down were a way for African-American women to preserve some of their history, as well as possibly share with those from different territories of Africa.

TIMELINE


1600's-1700's
Slavery, Shaving, and Erasure
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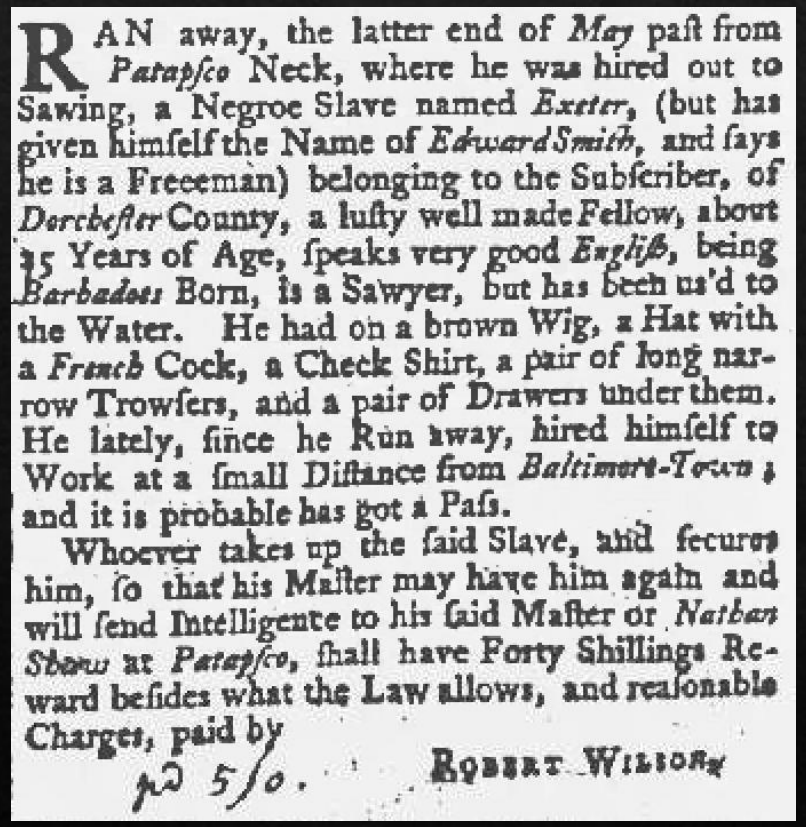


RAN away, the latter end of *May* paſt from *Patapſco* Neck, where he was hired out to Sawing, a Negroe Slave named *Exeter*, (but has given himſelf the Name of *Edward Smith*, and ſays he is a Freeeman) belonging to the Subſcriber, of *Dorchester* County, a luſty well made Fellow, about 25 Years of Age, ſpeaks very good *Engliſh*, being *Barbadoes* Born, is a Sawyer, but has been us'd to the Water. He had on a brown Wig, a Hat with a *French* Cock, a Check Shirt, a pair of long narrow Trowſers, and a pair of Drawers under them. He lately, ſince he Run away, hired himſelf to Work at a ſmall Diſtance from *Baltimore-Town*; and it is probable has got a Paſs.

Whoever takes up the ſaid Slave, and ſecures him, ſo that his Maſter may have him again and will ſend Intelligence to his ſaid Maſter or *Nathan Shaw* at *Patapſco*, ſhall have Forty Shillings Reward beſides what the Law allows, and reaſonable Charges, paid by

pd 5/0. ROBERT WILSON.

Ran away. (1755, June 26). Maryland Gazette. https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc4800/sc4872/001279/html/m1279-0736.html

By the 1700s, periwigs became popular amongst the White elite, signaling high status. Expensive to afford, they could lend credence to anyone capable of possessing one.

In some runaway slave ads from the 1700s, we see descriptions of slaves who are seen wearing wigs as a way to pass as freedmen.

It is also said that slaves might've sometimes styled their own hair in the fashion of a periwig, creating a pompadour by brushing their hair up and tying it in a similar way to the white men they observed.

Famous slave-turned freeman Olaudah Equiano's hair, depicted in his narrative, resembles that of the powdered wigs and toupees popular at the time.

Frontispiece and title page from: The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano [Photograph]. (1794). Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/98501896/

TIGNON LAW OF 1786

Fleischbein, F. (1837). *Portrait of Betsy* [Painting]. Historic New Orleans Collection. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tignon#/media/File:Painting_of_Betsy,_1837,_Franz_Fleischbein.jpg

Aman, J. (c1840). *Creole in a red headdress* [Painting]. Historic New Orleans Collection. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacques_Aman_Creole_in_a_Red_Turban.jpeg#/media/File:Jacques_Aman_Creole_in_a_Red_Turban.jpeg

In 1786, Governor Esteban Rodríguez Miró passed the Tignon Law in Louisiana to enforce hair wrapping for all African-American women, enslaved or free, with the intention of restricting expression and eliminating class differentiation between women of African descent, effectively homogenizing them all under a single picture of the working class or the "other."

Freed women made a workaround of this law, however, by wrapping their hair with fine textiles, adorning them with jewelry and feathers, or styling around them with lavish clothing.

- After the Fugitive Slave Clause of 1793, there was an influx of advertisements describing enslaved people's hair.
- Language around African-American hair showed the struggle for White colonizers to conceptualize the unfamiliar texture and shape, often resorting to words like "woolly" or "bushy." These terms created images of hair that was unkempt and unpleasant to look at/touch.
- These terms also highlighted African-American hair as something that one should be ashamed of and needed to control.

Ranaway.

FROM the subscriber, near Claiborne, Jasper County, Miss., on the 25th of last month, a mulatto negro boy named CHARLES, about twenty-one years of age, medium height, slim made, bushy hair, blue eyes, sprightly and quick spoken.—Any information of said boy will be thankfully received, and all the expenses of his arrest and confinement in jail so that I can get him again will be freely paid.

J. L. GANDY.

Claiborne, Miss., March 29, 1861. 23-tf

Ranaway. (1861, July 9). *The Eastern Clarion*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020047/1861-07-19/ed-1/seq-3/

SIXTY DOLLARS REWARD.—Ranaway from the subscriber, about the 10th of March, a negro boy, WILLIAM, and on the 17th of June, ABRAM. William is 21 years old, dark, copper colored, with thick lips and bushy hair; is about five feet ten inches high, with no special marks recollected, except a rupture. Abram is black; 17 years old; stoutly built; round face, and pleasing countenance; about five feet five or six inches high, and has a very large scar from vaccination, and possibly two. Fifty dollars will be given for William if taken out of the county, or $10 for William or Abram each if taken in the county, and returned to me, or secured so that I get them.

MARTIN JAMES, Lock Lomond P. O.,
je 25—dlaw6w* Goochland county, Va.

Sixty Dollars Reward (1862, August 2). *The Daily Dispatch*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024738/1862-08-02/ed-1/seq-4/

Thirty Dollars Reward.

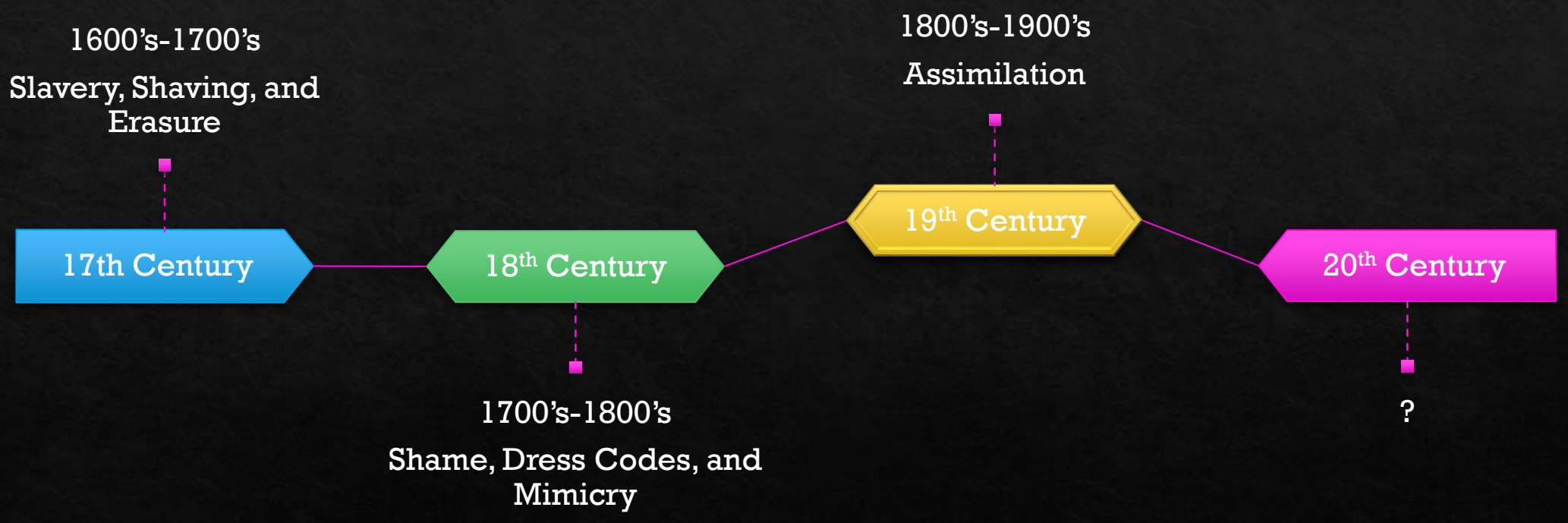
RUN AWAY, ſome time in Auguſt 1789, a yellow NEGRO MAN, named ABRAHAM, late the property of *Nathaniel Wickliff*, deceaſed—about forty-five years of age, about five feet eight or nine inches high, pretty well ſet, with a large woolly head and large beard, walks with his knees bent, often complains of pains in his feet and ancles—by trade a bricklayer, ſtone maſon and plaſterer. He is a very handy fellow as a houſe-waiter, and is fond of ſuch buſineſs. He is a great diſſembler, and no doubt pretends he is a freeman. He has been eloped ſo long that no deſcription of his preſent clothing can be given. It is ſuppoſed that he went to the Northern States, as he often mentioned having friends there.—Twenty Dollars reward will be given to any perſon that will ſecure ſaid Negro in any jail, ſo that the ſubſcriber may get him again; and reaſonable charges will be paid—or Thirty Dollars will be given if he is brought to Prince William County, Virginia, to Mr. JOHN KINCHELOR, by

CHARLES WICKLIFF, Adminiſtrator.

October 12, 1791. (12w9w)

Thirty Dollars Reward. (1791, November 2). *Gazette of the United States*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83030483/1791-11-02/ed-1/

TIMELINE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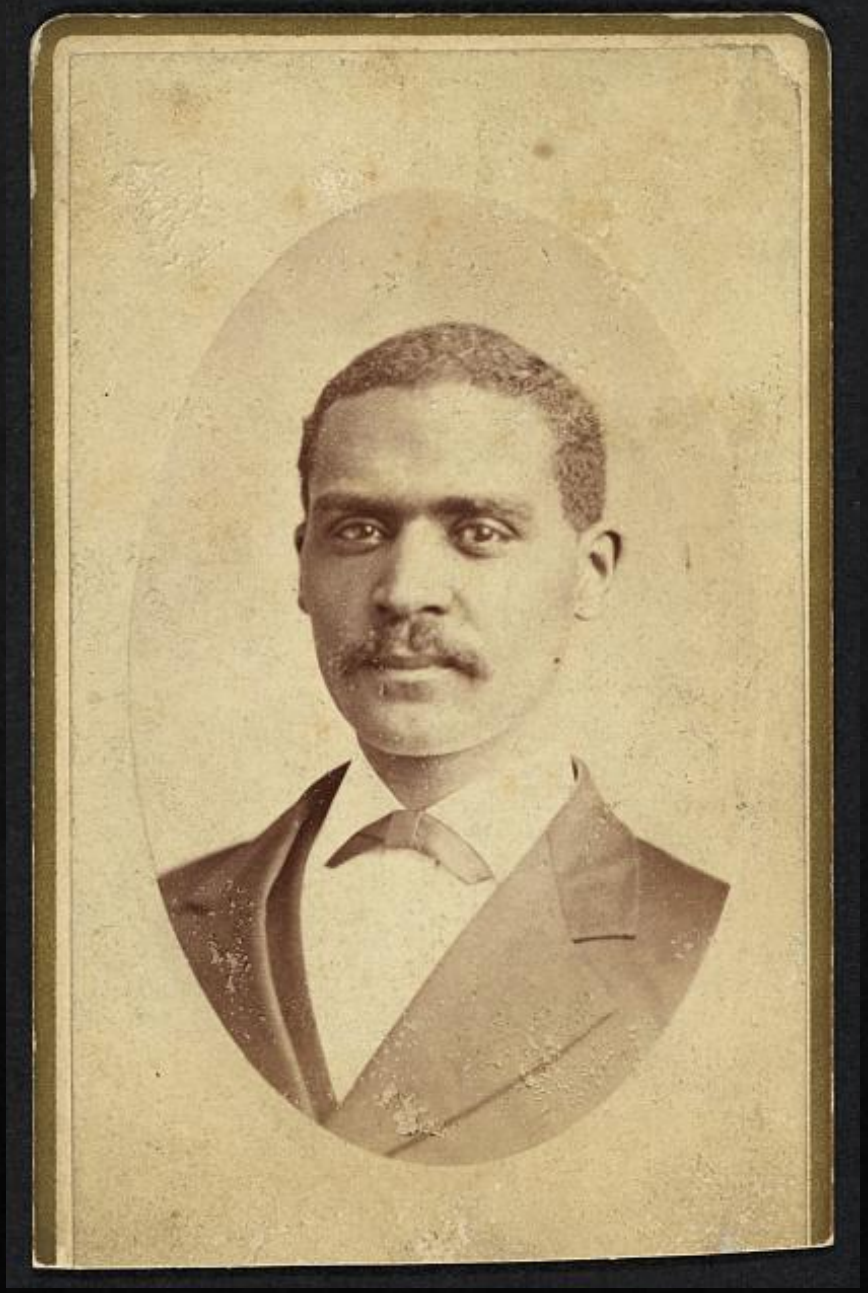
17th Century
18th Century
1700's-1800's
Shame, Dress Codes, and Mimicry
1800's-1900's
Assimilation
19th Century
20th Century
?

Entering the nineteenth century, hairstyles became more conservative in both Black and White spaces. It was more common to see African-American women with braided or laid down, tied back hair, while it was common to see men with short hair, typically styled with a distinct part down the side.

This was also reflected in fugitive slave ads of the 1800s: aside from a few, many ads did not bother mentioning the hair of the runaway slaves, implying that many enslaved people were keeping their hair relatively short and unremarkable.

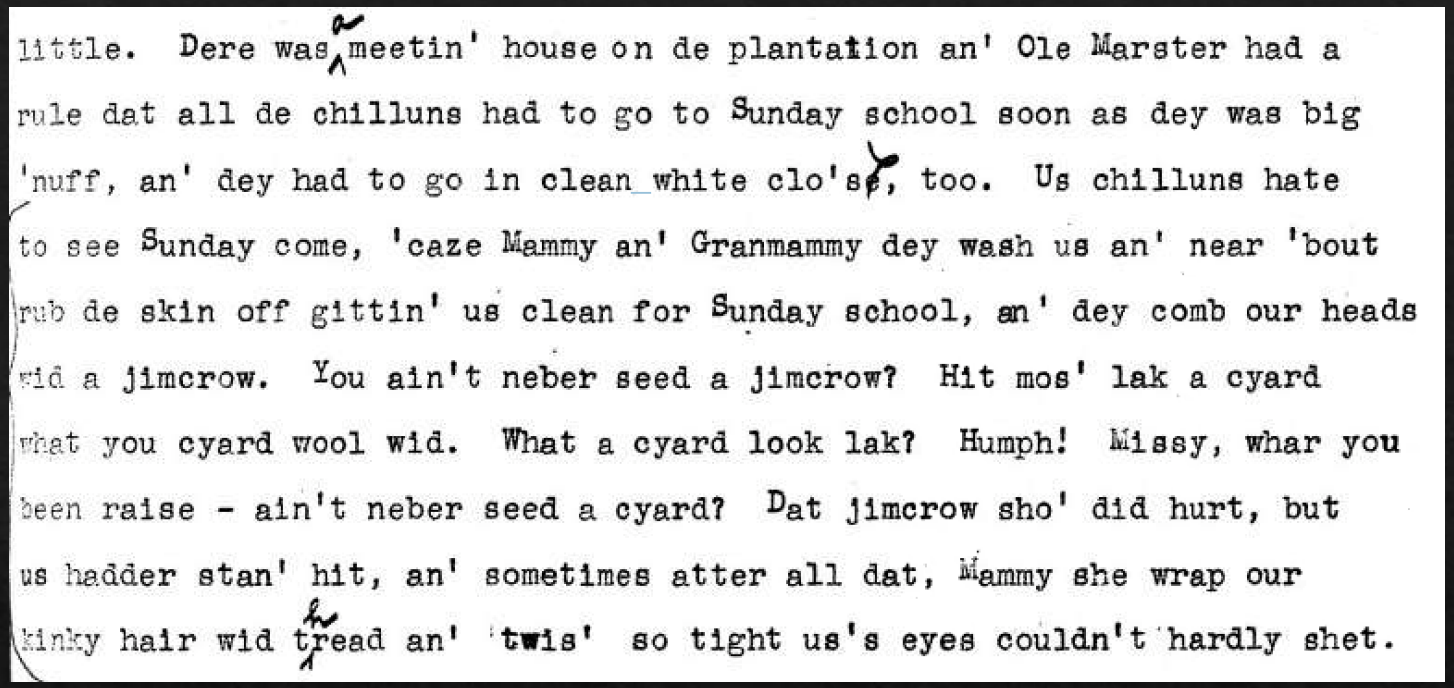
Roger Williams university--Nashville, Tenn.--Normal class [Photograph]. (1899). Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/00651764/

Lawton, D. G. (Between 1870 and 1880). *Half-length portrait of an African American man facing right* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2010647832/



Wolfe, M. (Between 1870 and 1880). *African American man in suit, head-and-shoulders-portrait, facing front* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2010647830/

Forshew, F. (Between 1870 and 1880). *Three-quarter-length portrait of an African American woman facing front* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2010647831/



little. Dere was a meetin' house on de plantation an' Ole Marster had a rule dat all de chilluns had to go to Sunday school soon as dey was big 'nuff, an' dey had to go in clean white clo'se, too. Us chilluns hate to see Sunday come, 'caze Mammy an' Granmammy dey wash us an' near 'bout rub de skin off gittin' us clean for Sunday school, an' dey comb our heads wid a jimcrow. You ain't neber seed a jimcrow? Hit mos' lak a cyard what you cyard wool wid. What a cyard look lak? Humph! Missy, whar you been raise - ain't neber seed a cyard? Dat jimcrow sho' did hurt, but us hadder stan' hit, an' sometimes atter all dat, Mammy she wrap our kinky hair wid tread an' 'twis' so tight us's eyes couldn't hardly shet.

Federal writers' project: Slave narrative project, vol. 1, Alabama, Aarons-Young [Manuscript/Mixed Material]. (1936-1937), p. 91. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn010/

Because Sundays were the only day of rest for enslaved people, and thereby the only day for haircare, doing hair communally became a tradition among many African-Americans. In the Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, "Aunt Tildy" Collins describes having her hair prepared for Sunday school by her mother and grandmother, who would use a "jimcrow" to comb their hair before threading it with fabric (or sometimes with cotton) or plaiting it, both techniques devised to achieve defined curls when undone.

While Collins doesn't give a description of what a "jimcrow" is, it is most similar to a wool carder: a paddle brush with sharp metal teeth used for detangling wool fibers. It was most likely kept on hand for work. It may also have been considered the most sensible option given that African hair was often described as having a wool-like texture, and most combs (if there were any to be accessed) were not created to work through coils effectively (or gently).

Pictured here is who is assumed to be Sarah McGill Russwurm, sister of Urias Africanus McGill and part of the free, wealthy McGill family known for their trading business. This photo was believed to be taken around 1854-1855.

It was not uncommon for members of the African diaspora to possess naturally straight hair, often a result of interracial relationships with White and Indigenous populations, but the ability to straighten hair artificially was also steadily becoming an option.

Washington, A. (c1854-1855). *Woman, probably Sarah McGill Russwurm, sister of Urias Africanus McGill, three-quarter length portrait, facing front, holding daguerreotype case* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004664345/

For more wealthy African-Americans, haircare tools would have been more accessible. While the hot comb had yet to be invented at the time of this photograph, there were still ways of straightening hair.

It's possible that McGill might have straightened her hair with an early form of a modern-day straightening iron using hot plates heated over a fire or stove and passed over the hair. This technique was efficient, but dangerous due to how close one needed to get to the scalp.

TIMELINE

1600's-1700's

Slavery, Shaving, and Erasure

17th Century

18th Century

1700's-1800's

Shame, Dress Codes, and Mimicry

1800's-1900's

Assimilation

19th Century

20th Century

1900's-2000's, A Brave New World

It's said that the invention of the hot comb was inspired by French inventor Marcel Grateau's line of heated hairstyling tools in the mid to late 1800s, being used across Europe for White women before reaching the Americas.

While the actual patent for the hot comb in America belonged to multiple individuals, it was an all-around popular tool for decades to come, especially in the African-American community.

The concept of "good hair" and "bad hair" became popular as more African-Americans began gaining tools to straighten their hair. There was an increased interest in achieving "good hair" which was interchangeable with straight hair at the time. Options to achieve straight hair included the hot comb: a metal comb heated over fire, a stove, or in a hot comb heater and combed through hair to flatten texture.

Electrical hot comb heater and hot comb [Photograph]. (c1920). National Museum of African American History & Culture, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2011.59.48ab

“Bad Hair”

In the early 1900s, African-American businessman Garrett Augustus Morgan accidentally created the world’s first hair relaxer in an attempt to create a solution to protect fabrics from scorching in his sewing shop. After testing the solution on a neighbor’s curly-haired dog and then on himself, he patented the straightening cream and began selling the product to African-Americans across the country.

Evidenced in an advertisement for the treatment, the language used around relaxing hair included terms like “bad hair” to refer to curly/coiled textures. Most likely, this was a result of internalized attitudes toward Black hair throughout slavery, intending to create a solution for the collective trauma associated with failing to meet a Euro-American beauty standard.

STRAIGHT HAIR IN 15 MINUTES

LEARN HOW TO EARN AND TO SAVE MONEY

and improve your appearance
USE
AND
SELL
The G. A. Morgan Hair Refining Co.'s Improved Preparations
to dress your own and other peoples hair

YOU don't have to have bad hair, if you don't want it. Why should you continue to have Bad Hair. You can be your own hairdresser and save money.

SELF TREATMENT GIVES BEST RESULT

One Treatment of Our Improved Hair Refiner Cream for straightening Men's Hair in 15 minutes, will last 60 days and will not turn the hair red.

BE YOUR OWN HAIR DRESSER

START A BUSINESS IN YOUR HOME

WE SHIP ANY AMOUNT TO ANYONE, ANYWHERE AT ANY TIME

"I have tried them all. There is nothing that does the work quite as well as G. A. Morgan's Refiner Cream for straightening the hair."
Duke Ellington

We have eliminated 80% of the heat and added 50% to the straightening qualities of our Improved Hair Refiner Cream.

With every order for 1 doz., we give 2 of the articles FREE. Hair Refiner Cream sold in 50 cents and $1.00 sizes. $3.50 and $7.00 per dozen. Hair Grower Pressing Gloss, Hair Lay Fine and Brilliantine are made in 25 cents and 50 cents sizes; $2.00 and $4.80 per dozen. Hair Pressing Caps 50 cents each; $4.00 per doz. Black Hair Stain and Dandruff and Tetter Ointment 50 cents each; $3.00 per dozen. Refiner Soap 25 cents each; $1.80 per doz. Italian Hair Oil 35 cents each; $2.40 per dozen.

THIS ADVERTISEMENT IS WORTH 25 CENTS ON EACH ORDER OF $1.00 OR MORE WHEN MAILED DIRECT TO COMPANY

We ship No Goods C. O. D. unless DEPOSIT is received with order. All orders shipped F. O. B. Cleveland, Ohio. Send money order, cash, stamps, or check.

ASK YOUR DRUGGIST FOR OUR GOODS OR WRITE
FOR 28 YEARS, THE SAME NAME AND ADDRESS
The G. A. MORGAN HAIR REFINING CO.
5204 HARLEM AVE., CLEVELAND, OHIO
ESTABLISHED 1905

W E

Straight hair in 15 minutes. (1933, February 10). *The Weekly Echo*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/sn87065408/1933-02-10/ed-1/

The emergence of hair products aimed at African-Americans to straighten their hair, making it “good”, had an added benefit of improving social status. For African-Americans who could afford it, this pushed them one step closer to whiteness and—in many ways—safety.

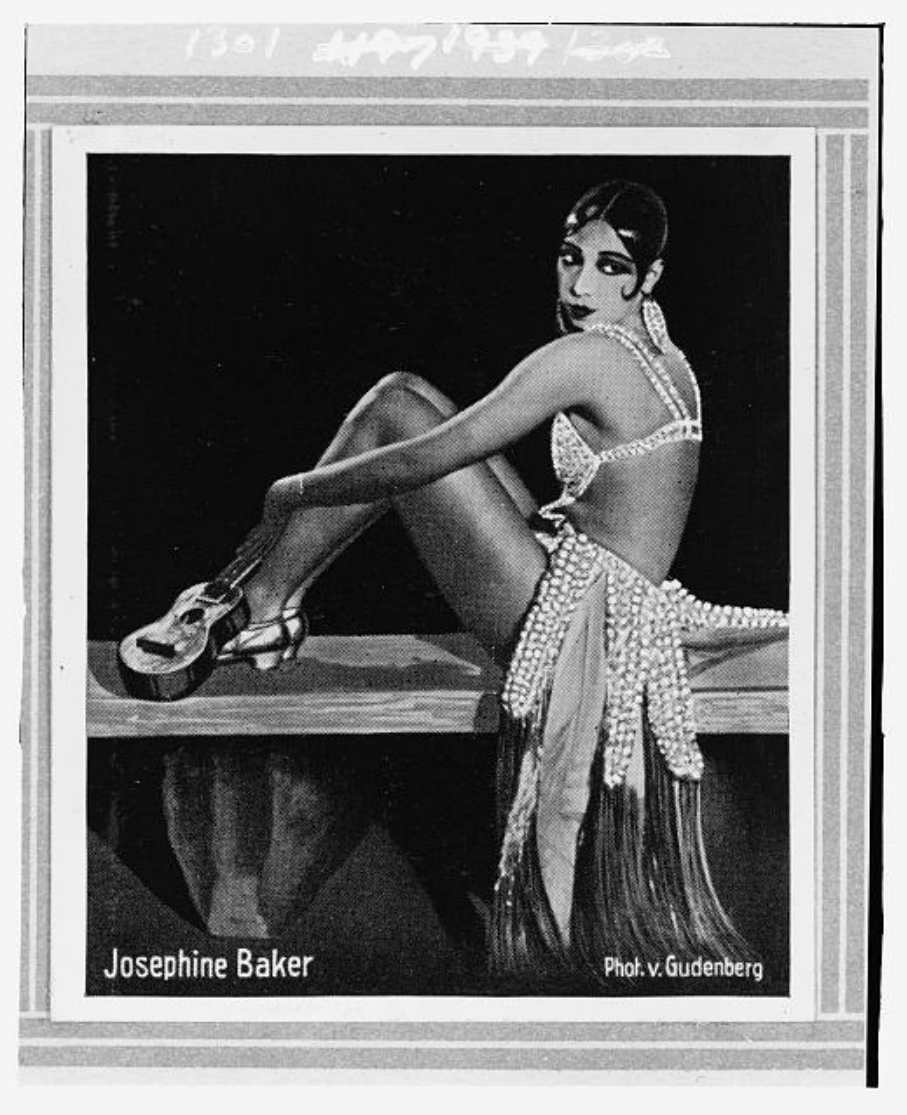
The Conk

Chuck Berry, half-length portrait, facing left, playing guitar [Photograph]. (1959). Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/00650700/

Stein, H. (1941). *Eddie South, violinist, half-length portrait, facing right, holding violin* [Photograph]. Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2004672424/

- Popular amongst African-American men of the 1920's and beyond, the Conk hairstyle was a type of relaxer made of potatoes, eggs, and Red Devil Lye (a chemical drain-cleaner at the time).
- In Malcolm X's autobiography, he described his first Conk treatment. The mixture was said to burn badly, and if left on for too long, could leave sores on the head: "The congolene just felt warm when Shorty started combing it in. But then my head caught fire. I gritted my teeth and tried to pull the sides of the kitchen table together. The comb felt as if it was raking my skin off." (X & Haley).
- The mixture did what it was intended to. Paired with Vaseline to achieve a glossy, slick style, many Black musicians of the time used the Conk to achieve a mostly straight, laid hairstyle that was all the fashion.

Advertisement for Bakerfix featuring and signed by Josephine Baker [Drawing]. (1930). National Museum of African American History & Culture, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2016.135.1

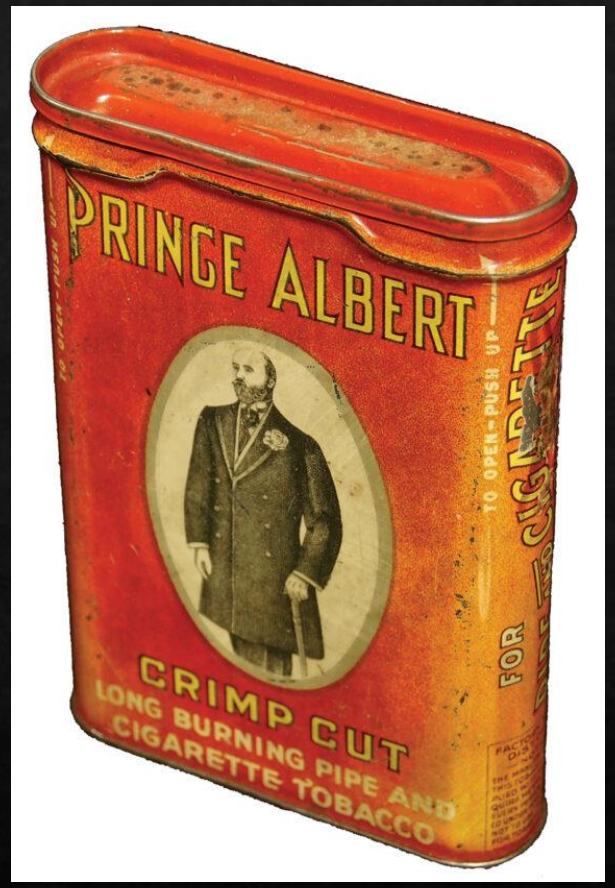


Josephine Baker [Photograph}. (n.d.). Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2002723912/

A similar hairstyle took off with women in the same time period thanks to entertainer Josephine Baker who popularized extremely gelled down, cropped hair. While little is known of the actual products used to create her original hairstyle, Baker created and sold a hair gel capable of emulating the look called "Bakerfix."

For women in the working class, hairstyling required more ingenuity. Without access to combs that could comfortably and efficiently work in coiled hair, African-American women had to make do with household items. Women like Mamie Barnes and Marie Davenport—interviewed by Kimber Thomas, Library of Congress Senior Innovation Specialist and scholar of African-American studies—who hailed from rural Mississippi where "[n]inety-nine percent" of the population was made up of African-Americans, recalled having their hair combed with eating forks.

Davenport also recalled her grandmother's memories of heating up eating forks on the stove to use as a makeshift hot comb on her hair. Similar to the generations that came before them, African-American women of the late 19th and early 20th century also used a mixture of lard and lye to help straighten hair without access to commercial relaxers.

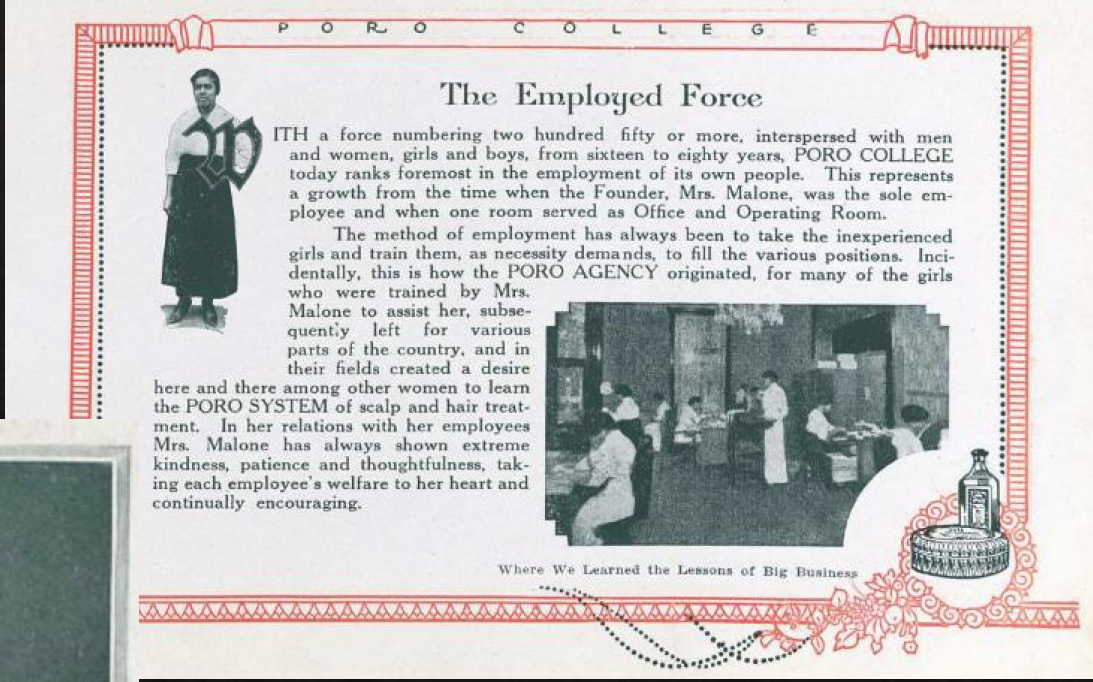


Ballard, C. G. (2021, December 3). *Prince Albert tobacco can* [Photograph]. Farm Collector, https://www.farmcollector.com/looking-back/overlooked-farming-lore-zm0z22janzram/

When shiny curls were desired, these women would get even more ingenious: using Prince Albert Tobacco tins, women would cut the tins into strips, roll the strips in pieces of brown paper bags (to protect their hair from being cut by the metal) from the grocery store, and then roll pieces of hair in the strips to create curls. Women would also lather their hair in lard to create a shiny, conditioning effect on the hair (similar to the use of bacon grease and butter from the 1600s), and the paper bag strips doubled as absorbers of excess lard.

The vintage tin cans which, on one website, sells now for over $600, were easy to find "discarded by both Black and white men at the Crossroads, sat at the intersection of waste and roller, trash and styling tool, and while they were useful in curling hair, they also held the mahogany-colored, burley-based, air-cured tobacco that caused disease and sustained plantations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in North America."

Another aspect of hair discrimination relied on hair length. For those with curly/coiled hair, these textures naturally led to the appearance of shorter lengths. This did not even account for the impact that a lack of haircare products and tools would've had on hair health, resulting in breakage, hair loss, or stunted growth. Long hair was desirable, and many women wanted to achieve this.



PORO COLLEGE

The Employed Force

WITH a force numbering two hundred fifty or more, interspersed with men and women, girls and boys, from sixteen to eighty years, PORO COLLEGE today ranks foremost in the employment of its own people. This represents a growth from the time when the Founder, Mrs. Malone, was the sole employee and when one room served as Office and Operating Room.

The method of employment has always been to take the inexperienced girls and train them, as necessity demands, to fill the various positions. Incidentally, this is how the PORO AGENCY originated, for many of the girls who were trained by Mrs. Malone to assist her, subsequently left for various parts of the country, and in their fields created a desire here and there among other women to learn the PORO SYSTEM of scalp and hair treatment. In her relations with her employees Mrs. Malone has always shown extreme kindness, patience and thoughtfulness, taking each employee's welfare to her heart and continually encouraging.

Where We Learned the Lessons of Big Business

Hair entrepreneur and first African-American female millionaire, Annie T. Malone, began selling her own original haircare products alongside tools like Marcel's hot comb for an African-American audience.

Her cosmetology school and retail headquarters, Poro College Company, educated African-American women on haircare alongside door-to-door sales practices.

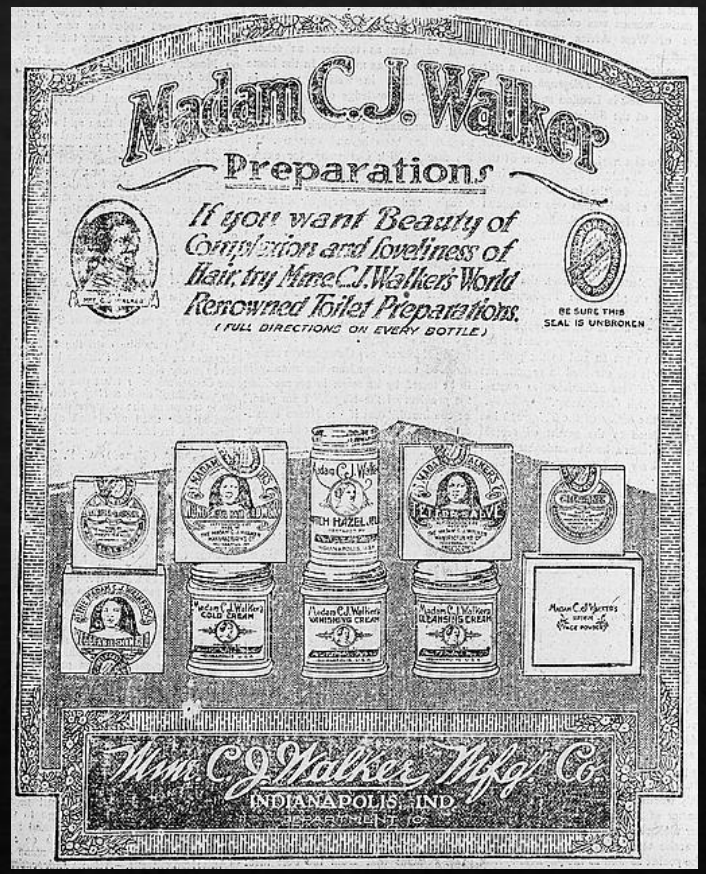
Her most notable product was the "Wonderful Hair Grower," which she made herself and recruited "Poro agents" to sell in neighborhoods with free demonstrations.

Souvenir booklet about Poro College Company [Photograph]. (c1920-1927). National Museum of African American History & Culture, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2011.170.18

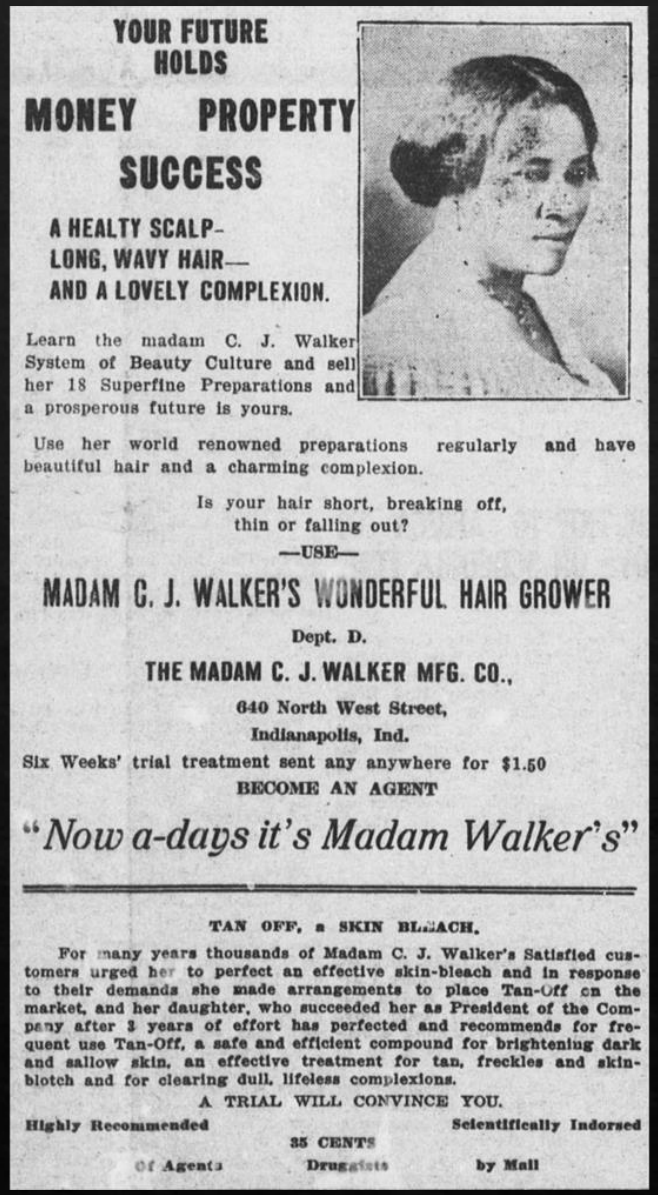
One of Malone's students, born Sarah Breedlove and later changed to Madam C. J. Walker, created a hair growing formula inspired by Malone's products to battle her hair loss and began selling them as part of her own business in the early 1900s.

The formula utilized ingredients like petroleum jelly and sulfur, said to combat dandruff and eczema (both conditions Walker suffered from).

While the formula raised accusations of plagiarism from former mentor Malone, it skyrocketed Walker into self-made billionaire status and cemented her as an African-American historical icon.



Madam C.J. Walker—Preparations [Photograph]. (1920). Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2002716791/



YOUR FUTURE HOLDS

MONEY PROPERTY SUCCESS

A HEALTY SCALP-
LONG, WAVY HAIR—
AND A LOVELY COMPLEXION.

Learn the madam C. J. Walker System of Beauty Culture and sell her 18 Superfine Preparations and a prosperous future is yours.

Use her world renowned preparations regularly and have beautiful hair and a charming complexion.

Is your hair short, breaking off, thin or falling out?

—USE—

MADAM C. J. WALKER'S WONDERFUL HAIR GROWER

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THE MADAM C. J. WALKER MFG. CO.,

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TAN OFF, a SKIN BLEACH.

For many years thousands of Madam C. J. Walker's Satisfied customers urged her to perfect an effective skin-bleach and in response to their demands she made arrangements to place Tan-Off on the market, and her daughter, who succeeded her as President of the Company after 3 years of effort has perfected and recommends for frequent use Tan-Off, a safe and efficient compound for brightening dark and sallow skin, an effective treatment for tan, freckles and skin-blotch and for clearing dull, lifeless complexions.

A TRIAL WILL CONVINCE YOU.

Highly Recommended — Scientifically Indorsed

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Of Agents — Druggists — by Mail

Madam C. J. Walker's Wonderful Hair Grower [Photograph]. (1921, November 5). The Dallas Express. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025779/1921-11-05/ed-1/seq-8/

Barbershops

Delano, Jack. (1942). *Mr. Oscar J. Freeman, barber, owns the Metropolitan Barber Shop, 4654 South Parkway, Chicago, Illinois. He has been in business fourteen years* [Photograph]. Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2017830016/

- Later becoming a staple of social and beauty culture in the Black community, Black-run barbershops started out as establishments for exclusively White clientele in the late 19th and early 20th century.
- These shops would employ both freed and enslaved African-American men.
- Though segregation forced many Black barbers to segregate their clientele, African-American barbers would fine-tune their hair-cutting and shaving skills on white clients until African-American men were able to own and run barbershops in their own neighborhoods.
- Barbershops operated both as a business and a community space. Barbers could build relationships and trust with their clients, often creating loyal customers who would return from childhood well into later adulthood.
- The culture of these barbershops facilitated a feeling of pride in African-American men by allowing them to express themselves through their hair, while also allowing them to commune in informal, jovial contexts.

The rise of the Black Panther Party ushered in an era of African pride. Black activists were abound as the Civil Rights Era and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 empowered many African-Americans to embrace a new cultural identity free of shame and social assimilation into white spaces: Black Power.

Activists of the time and supporters of the Black Panther Party were regularly shown wearing afros, a hairstyle that, while utilizing natural hair texture, often needed to be maintained through haircuts and meticulous shaping with an afro comb pick. This hairstyle intended to embrace taking up space, creating a look that was hard to ignore.

Shearer, J. (1970). *Image from LOOK - Job 70-5607 titled Black Panthers* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2021687274/

Afro hair comb with black fist design [Photograph]. (2002). National Museum of African American History & Culture, https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2014.125.1

In 1976, Jenkins vs. Blue Cross Mutual Hospital Insurance was a case brought before the U.S. Court of Appeals by Beverly Jeanne Jenkins who alleged she was discriminated against by her workplace for wearing an afro and that this was in direct violation of the Civil Rights Act. Although she won, discrimination toward natural hair in the workplace did not end here.

That hairdo caused a lot of consternation in the summer of 1971 among executives at WABC television. “The day before I was supposed to cover Tricia Nixon's wedding at the White House, I got my hair changed to a natural—previously, I'd been having it straightened—and can you believe they actually told me I couldn't appear live in the studio unless I changed my hair back to the way it used to look? They said I looked less attractive—less feminine. But it was their standard of femininity, not mine.”

She refused to straighten her hair and she was told she could not sit in the studio behind the long table with Grimsby and Beutel to do a wrap-up of the weekend wedding. “They didn't want me to appear on the tape either,” Melba recalls, “but it couldn't be avoided. I wasn't about to go back to straightening my hair and I probably wouldn't be at WABC today if it hadn't been for an article in The New York Post letting people know what was going on.”

Campbell, Barbara. (1973, February 18). *Melba? She's the toast of the town*. The New York Times.
https://www.nytimes.com/1973/02/18/archives/melba-shes-the-toast-of-the-town-melba-tolliver.html

In 1971, then news anchor at WABC in New York City, Melba Tolliver, appeared on national television with an afro to cover Tricia Nixon’s wedding. It was the first time a person had worn an afro on live TV, and it swiftly resulted in the termination of Tolliver from the station. That is, until word spread through the New York Post about her termination and she was eventually asked back for a different position.

This defiant decision to appear with her natural hair was a turning point. After decades of subjugation and forced assimilation, African-Americans were not only embracing their hair outside of white American beauty standards, but also demanding to be seen doing it on a large scale.

Afros were not the only form of hair resistance at the time. Dreadlocks were popularized in America around the 1960s, although historically were found throughout the world for years (namely Jamaica). The hairstyle, which consists of sectioning the hair and twisting or rolling into separate locks, were probably best known thanks to Jamaican-born musician Bob Marley.

Dreadlocks, much like the afro, also faced much discrimination for what was considered to be an "unruly" or "unclean" hairstyle. According to owner of Khamit Kinks hair salon, Anu Prestonia, even the way they were referred to within the Black community carried varying connotations ("dreads" = negative, considered untamed, "locks" = positive, considered "proper").

Foreman-Bey, N., Bey Al-Rasul, F., & Taylor, C. A. (2012). *Portrait shot of Folosade* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2012035.afc2012035_00406_ph01/

Prestonia, A., & Taylor, C. A. (2012) *Locks* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc2012035.afc2012035_00526_ph06/

In an interview with African-American hairstylists Nzinga Foreman-Bey and Folosade Bey Al-Rasul for the Occupational Folklife Project, Foreman-Bey and Al-Rasul discussed hair culture in their area of Philadelphia from the late 80s up until the 2010s. Foreman-Bey discussed her hair journey with dreadlocks and the political statement behind natural hair at the time, saying that locks were considered "not good looking," but their mother wore her locks uncovered despite being Muslim to show that locks were not a negative thing.

CT: What did you like about it? Did you ever want to do anything else? What was the process?

AP: The full story is that I had a traumatic experience as a ten-year old child moving to New York from the south. We were all excited to find out that we were going to get perms. I had a perm and my hair, you know was fine that first time around and then when my mom found out six-weeks later that we needed a touch-up. She was balking about the price and I was like, "Oh wow, I don't want her upset about the price, so I'm going to figure out a way to make it last longer." So when the stylist came around to see if my hair was burning I would tell her "no" because I thought the longer it was on my head, the longer my perm would last. That was the psychology of a ten-year old [laughing]. So when she asked me if it was burning I kept telling her "no" and finally she said, "We're going to rinse it out." Weeks later I had sores in my head. I had pus oozing out the sores. My hair was all broken off so my mother cut all my hair off. And I was just devastated because I always wanted long, you know, wavy curly hair and now I had no hair [lauging].

Prestonia, A., & Taylor, C. A. (2012) Anu Prestonia interview conducted by Candacy Taylor, -09-05. -09-05. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2017655363/

The embracing of natural hairstyles grew, but did not diminish a desire for straight hair. In the 80s and 90s, Black female celebrities especially leaned into straight perms and relaxers.

Straight perms, unlike regular perms, had a similar effect to relaxers: a chemical treatment would be placed on the hair that would straighten out the curl pattern of the hair. Unlike relaxers, straight perms would only last for a few months before hair eventually reverted back.

Relaxers made a big return in the 90s, especially among women, as a permanent straightening solution, going so far as to be marketed to children with brands like *Just For Me*.

Perms and relaxers did not come without their dangers, though they had improved somewhat from G. A. Morgan's original idea. These formulas could cause severe burning sensations on the scalp all the same, and sometimes result in hair loss, scalp irritation, and open sores. This didn't diminish their popularity.

There was a saving grace for African-Americans who wanted to style their hair without the use of chemical treatments or heat, and that was using hair that wasn't their own.

Artificial hair and real hair alternatives were (and still are) popular in the African-American community, with many African-American women investing in wigs dating back to the 1940s.

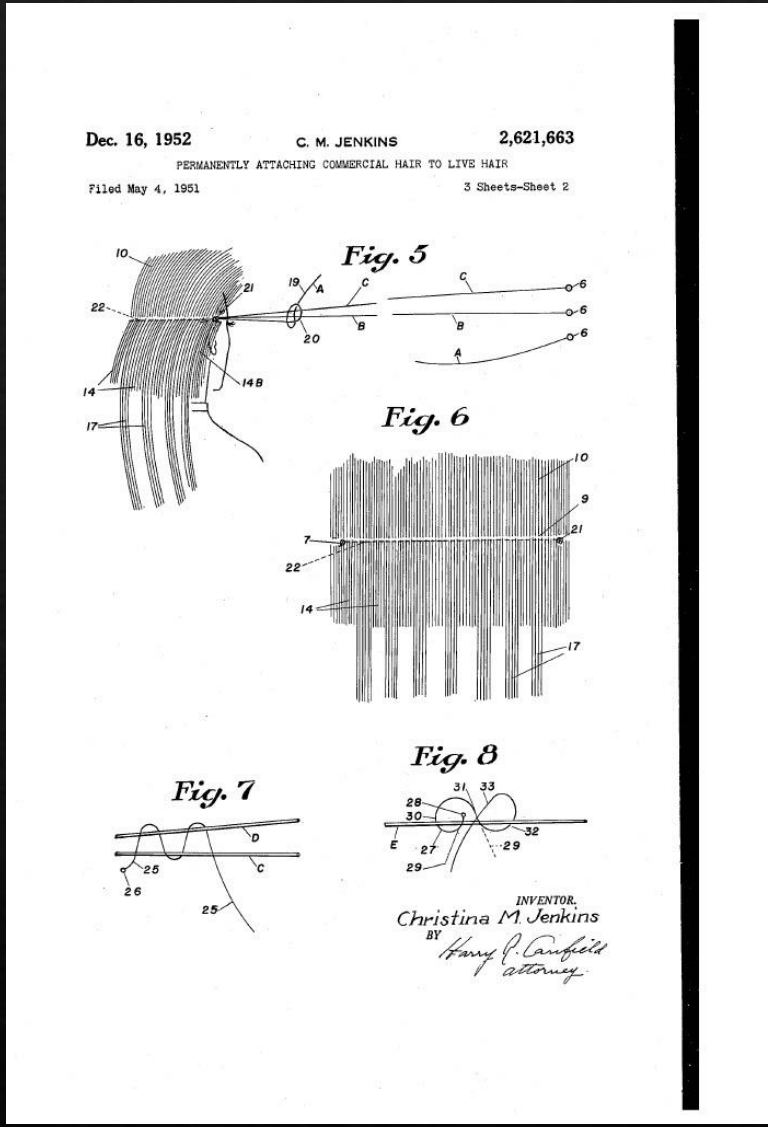
Wigs were a simple, quick way for women to wear hair in any range of styles, length, or color. Wigs especially became popular amongst Christian African-American women, as the culture of "Sunday Best" in the Black community gave women the chance to style themselves to their heart's content and essentially elevate their style for one special day of the week.

This tradition also calls back to the tradition of enslaved people using Sundays as their day to style their hair and dress in their nicest clothes.

Sloan, J. (1975). *Wig shop, Nashville* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2020630169/

Weaves were a more long-lasting and realistic-looking alternative. In 1949, hairstylist Christina Mae Jenkins, née Thomas (who, at the time, was researching more effective ways to secure wigs while working for a wig manufacturer), came up with the concept of weaving "commercial hair to the human head to supplement live hair thereon."

While her patent was challenged and overturned in 1965, it introduced the technique of hair-weaving to African-American women, giving them the ability to experiment with different lengths and textures of hair in a similar but more secure way than wigs could.



Jenkins, C. M. (1952). *Permanently attaching commercial hair to live hair* (U.S. Patent No. 2,621,663). U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. https://thirstyroots.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/US2621663.pdf

When "installing" a weave with Jenkins' technique, the wearer's hair would be interwoven into the hair being added. Other ways of installing weaves feature the wearer's hair being braided up in rows, covered by a wig cap (that would then be glued to the hairline with hair glue), and then artificial or real hair extensions (tracks) would be sewn into the braids or glued directly onto the wig cap.

Makeup is also integral to wig and weave installs. Women use makeup to match the netting of wigs or extensions to their skin tones, creating a near-flawless look. Pieces of the wearer's natural hair may also be blended into the extensions to increase seamlessness.

The high-top fade (or hi-top fade) was a hairstyle that evolved from the flattop haircut popular among White men in the 1950s (and is similar to the crewcut). This haircut was particularly popular in the 80s and 90s amongst African-American men.

The haircut utilizes a "fading" effect by shaving close to the head at the base of the neck or higher and then moving away the closer you get to the top of the head, effectively blending the shorter hair into the longer hair that is shaped flat across the top of the head. An iconic depiction of this hairstyle is worn by Will Smith in the 1990s hit sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, as well as model and singer Grace Jones who wore the high-top fade as a signature haircut for years.

Interestingly, we see early forms of this hairstyle both in the 1600s with the depictions of Benin men and women, but also in the photographs of African-American men in the 1800s.

Cooper, M. (1994). *Louis McDowell gives Michael Young a haircut, the cut is called a "high-top fade"* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/afcwip002632/

Cooper, M. (1994). *Louis McDowell gives Michael Young a haircut, the cut is called a "high-top fade"* [Photograph]. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/afcwip002634/

Smith, J. M. & www.celebritiy-photos.com. (1997). *Brandy* [Photograph]. https://www.flickr.com/photos/kingkongphoto/5113076360/. CC BY-SA 2.0

Perhaps the most influential hairstyle in the 1990s was braids. While cornrows and the like had not entirely left the African-American cultural eye since their introduction in the 16th and 17th century, the introduction of Black hair salons, Black beauty culture, and an influx of accessible hair extensions made braids a big hair staple for both men and women of the 90s.

Celebrities like Brandy, Alicia Keys, and Xzibit were known for their intricate braided hairstyles that both protected their own hair while allowing them creative control of it. Braids became known as a "protective style," much like wigs and weaves, because they allowed wearers to style their hair without causing damage to their hair texture.

With the inclusion of hair extensions, braids were able to range in size (micro-braids, box braids, etc.), color, and even texture (braids left undone at the ends and straightened/curled for effect).

In a way, the return to braids as an artistic expression of the self in the African-American community was a loving homage to a hairstyle that had persisted throughout African-American history for generations.

CONCLUSION

> *As long as your hair is natural, it's good hair. If your hair is healthy, it's good hair. The good hair/bad hair situation, I see it as hair that's healthy or as hair that is not healthy, hair that's kept or hair that is not kept. As long as you wear your hair proudly and healthy, you have good hair.*
>
> — Folosade Bey Al-Rasul,
>
> "Folosade Bey Al-Rasul and Nzinga Foreman-Bey interview conducted by Candacy Taylor, -08-24. -08-24"

- In a socio-political context, African-American hair has had a metamorphosis in both style and statement. The concept of good and bad hair still looms over the African-American community. There is much debate internally over how African-Americans ought to style their hair.
- Historical context continues to clash with the still turbulent political climate, and so the choice to relax, twist, lock, protect, or none of the above carries the weight of more than just individual choice. These are individual choices based on comfort, accessibility, and safety, but these individual choices are seen as reflections of an entire community.
- In the same way that we can understand relaxers were created to elevate African-American social status in the 1910s, we can also understand the physical and psychological toll relaxers carried for many African-Americans decades after.
- The choice of hairstyle carries centuries of deep-rooted racism, regardless of being "natural" or not. There is no correct choice, but there *is* a choice.

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