

"This beautiful Hayti on whose soil and among whose people I have passed so many happy days."—E. D. Bassett

America's First Black Diplomat

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THE first black Chief of Mission in US diplomatic history was appointed on April 29, '69. 1969? Wrong by 100 years—it was 1869.

Nominated by President Grant as American Minister to Haiti, Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett (once a student at Yale College and in 1869 principal of Philadelphia's prestigious Colored High School) is not only America's first negro diplomat but appears to have been the first black presidential civil appointee in the federal government.

Second oldest republic in the western hemisphere, Haiti in 1869 was nonetheless a land of endless turmoil. Winning control over their third of Hispaniola in 1804 (the only successful slave insurrection in history), the Haitians had slaughtered virtually every French man, woman, or child remaining in the country. Yet 1804 was but a curtain-raiser to the blood that was to flow. Over fifty plots, coups and revolutions were recorded between 1804 and 1869.

Although Haiti's freedom had been uncontested (and incontestable) since 1804, her independence was not recognized by the great powers of Europe until 1825, while, under the adamant veto of slave-holding southerners on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the United States (despite thriving profits on Haitian coffee, logwood, sugar, rum and molasses) withheld recognition until the outbreak of our Civil War.

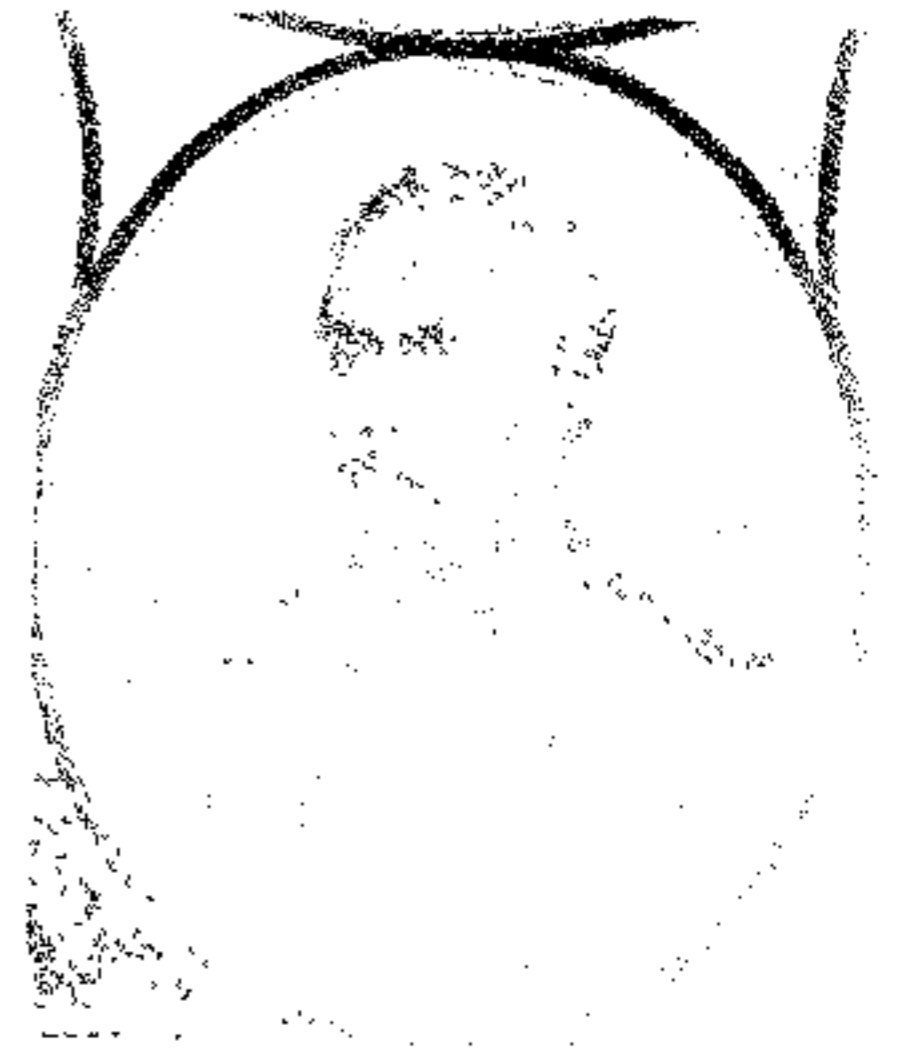
On December 3, 1861 Abraham Lincoln recommended recognition of Haiti and Liberia. Senator

Charles Sumner of Massachusetts triumphed over border-state opposition in the Senate on April 23, 1862. On June 5th Lincoln signed a bill for the appointment of commissioners to Haiti and Liberia. Six weeks later Benjamin F. Whidden of New Hampshire became the first US diplomatic representative accredited to Port-au-Prince.

No one knows what inspired Ebenezer Bassett's interest in Haiti. It could well have been pride of race. Whatever prompted him, from the eight tumultuous years Bassett and his family spent there (1869-1877) he clearly gained more understanding for and love of Haiti than many of his successors.

His letters to the Department often refer in frustration to "this peculiar people," or despairingly plead "send a man-of-war" (the security blanket of the diplomats of that gunboat era); but when, in 1877, he leaves Haiti for what he is convinced will be the last time, sadness suffuses his farewell to his friend, President Boisrond-Canal, as he expresses regret that he will probably never again see the President, his many Haitian friends, ". . . or indeed this beautiful Hayti on whose soil and among whose people I have passed so many happy days."

A surviving picture shows Bassett as a handsome, square-cut man with a receding hairline, and twirling mustaches that would be envied today. Born in Litchfield, Connecticut, on October 16, 1833, he was the son of Ebenezer and Susan Bassett, his father a mulatto and his mother a Pequot Indian. He attended Wesleyan Academy at Wilbraham, Mass., and graduated with honors from Connecticut State Normal School. Later he studied at Yale College where he seems to have been held in wide respect. No less than 12 Yale professors supported his application for the nomination to Haiti. French was one of his lan-



guages, later to be perfected in Haiti where he also mastered Creole—essential to a real understanding of that country and its people.

From 1857 to 1869, Bassett was principal of "The Institute for Colored Youth" in Philadelphia—a Quaker school for "the Education of Colored Youth in School Learning and to prepare them to become teachers." The then mayor of Philadelphia refers to it, under Bassett's management, as "widely known and unquestionably the foremost institution of its kind in the country." In addition to his duties as principal, Bassett taught mathematics, natural sciences and classics.

In 1855, while still in New Haven, Bassett married Eliza Park. Some of his five children, two daughters and three sons, were born in Philadelphia, though it would be pleasant to think that there was at least one Haitian in the family—perhaps the youngest, Frederick Douglass's namesake, who died in childhood.

In 1868 the new administration of U.S. Grant showed itself amenable to opening government service to qualified negroes. Surviving cor-

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response between Bassett and his friend, Frederick Douglass, discloses that Bassett suggested in 1867 that a negro should represent the United States as American Minister to Haiti. Bassett so proposed to Douglass who in effect rejoined—why not you? and thereupon proceeded to back him for the post.

The quality of the candidate appears in letters of recommendation to the White House in support of Bassett and still in the National Archives. As a result of these efforts and evidently of the national reputation he already enjoyed as an educator, Bassett was appointed American Minister and sailed for Port-au-Prince, to be joined later by his family.

When Bassett reached Port-au-Prince in June 1869, Sylvain Salnave was fulfilling the often fatal but still much sought-after role of President of the Republic. A New York HERALD editorial of that year had called him “. . . the blackest, ugliest and bravest African of the lot . . . the Richard the Third of Hayti, remorseless, cunning, warlike.”

In fact Salnave was not black (he was a mulatto), nor for that matter was he ugly, but in manner and appearance to the contrary, handsome. Brave, remorseless, cunning and warlike, however, he surely was—all, unfortunately, essential characteristics for gaining and holding power in 19th century Haiti.

In the summer of 1869 the President was in the field doing just that, and the new American Minister could not present his credentials until September.

For Bassett, after a miserable ten days at sea, the sight of the green *mornes* of Haiti was a welcome one. Among many on the landing to greet the new, and first black, American Minister, was an Episcopal missionary and old friend, the Reverend J. T. Holly, only five years later to become the first black American bishop in the Anglican Church. The sights and sounds of Port-au-Prince were overwhelming and the heat staggering, and Bassett was dismayed to find his first night as Reverend Holly's guest spent “in a hand-to-hand contest with an army of mosquitoes, bedbugs and little gnats.”

Yet the next day, riding up to

call on his predecessor, Gideon Hollister, he was overwhelmed by the beauty around him—“This is truly a wonderful country,” he wrote. “From the mountain tops to the sea the island is one great paradise of flowers and fruits which perfume the air and meet the eye everywhere.”

The American Minister's residence was on the Chemin Lalue in Turgeau, uphill from the center of the city. Bassett must have been enchanted by the rambling, many-galleried house that had been built as a summer palace for Haiti's former Emperor Faustin Soulouque. Samuel Hazard, traveller and writer of the day who was to spend some time as the Bassetts' guest, describes it as having superb views in every direction, “. . . charming in its luxuriant vegetation and with fresh breezes from the neighboring mountains.” In the garden there “was a marble bath large enough for swimming with water fresh and cold from the mountain stream” (a luxury which as late as 1963 the American Ambassador to Haiti did not enjoy).^{*} Hazard also mentions delightful mountain rides with “Mr. Bassett and his lady.”

After assuming charge, under political conditions in a regime that Bassett's British colleague later characterized as “one long revolution,” the new Minister was soon to voice, and often repeat, the plea for “a ship,” and was always pleased to see an American man-of-war on the horizon (though British, French or Spanish colors were a more frequent sight).

Salnave, first of Bassett's four Haitian presidents and one with whom Bassett mentions being on intimate terms, was not destined

** The bureaucratic struggle to obtain a swimming pool for the American Embassy residence in Port-au-Prince (a city of notoriously temperamental water-supply where every home of any consequence has its “bassin”) frustrated four ambassadors unable to overcome adamant resistance in Washington until, in 1963, the US Marine Corps engineer advisor in the Naval Mission drew official attention to the grave fire hazards and lack of fire protection in the city and designed a suitable reservoir, complete with diving board and filtration plant (as it later developed), to protect the Residence against conflagration.*

long to survive.

In December 1869 Salnave, finally overthrown, fled Port-au-Prince stopping breathlessly at the US residence en route. Eventually captured “well into Dominican territory,” Salnave was dragged back to the capital and Bassett had his first glimpse of a justice far different from that advocated by the Society of Friends. In a despatch he reported: “Salnave was brought to the city today. His grave was dug in the Salines, a kind of Potter's field, two days ago . . . he was subjected to some sort of drumhead court-martial, lasting a couple of hours, and of course sentenced to be shot immediately. This sentence was carried out amid jeers and insults of the rabble. He faced death in a bold and manly manner. The principal officers who followed him in his flight were put to death in the plains before reaching the city.”

After the execution of Salnave, Nissage-Saget (once a barracks tailor) became president, and Bassett was to learn much more about executions, imprisonments, refugees, to say nothing of plots and counterplots, which he came to accept if never approve as the way of life of “this peculiar people.”

Haitian politics, polarized then and always on lines of race—élite mulattoes (*mûlatres*) exploiting resentful blacks (*noirs*)—dismayed Bassett. Colored, and proud of it and of his own achievements, Bassett recognized the futile and destructive character of a political tradition which substituted race for party, coups d'état for elections, and relied on betrayal, conspiracy, and racial malevolence as moving forces. Yet he accepted Haiti as it was and pursued the interests of the United States with realism and understanding.

If there ever can be ordinary days in Haiti, what were the everyday concerns of the American Minister in the 1870s?

Grant persistently sought to annex Santo Domingo or at least to obtain a naval base there. With this went diplomatic probes for a coaling station at Haiti's Môle St. Nicolas. Both ideas affronted Haitian nationalism, which left Grant unperturbed but gave his minister endless difficulty.

Claims by American citizens

against the Haitian government were tedious, time-consuming and usually to little avail. The great game of "What is my *cher collègue* up to?" was, of course a constant factor.**

Perhaps most troublesome was the stream of political refugees seeking asylum, to which Bassett was introduced in 1869 when the legation, in November, was filled with refugees including a Minister of State and his entire family and several generals. A month later Bassett writes Washington that there are more than a thousand (sic) refugees in his residence, "... mostly women and children all in a state of terror and confusion that beggars description." This was when Port-au-Prince was under siege and being bombarded by rebel forces and when, not for the first time nor the last, the National Palace was ultimately blown skyhigh by random detonation of ammunition and explosives in the President's basement.

Bassett's most distinguished and longest-term uninvited guest was General, later President, Boisrond-Canal. Target of incumbent President Domingue's wrath in May 1875, Boisrond-Canal arrived wounded, in the middle of the night, for a five month stay. Under intense pressure to hand over Boisrond-Canal and his younger brother, Bassett had also to cope with a Secretary of State and a Department unenthusiastic, when not outright unsympathetic, to the question of asylum. In one despatch justifying his action, Bassett speaks

*** What the chers collègues were up to, in Bassett's time, amounted to roughly the following. Britain (ably represented by the imperious, condescending and often Machiavellian Sir Spenser St. John) was trying to frustrate extension of US influence in Haiti and Santo Domingo. France was continuing to collect (or try to collect) the crushing indemnities resulting from the Haitian War of Independence and its sequelae of slaughter and confiscation. Spain was hostile because of Haitian support for the Dominican rebellion in the 1860s, while Germany, new-born after 1870, was politically supporting aggressive commercial penetration of Haiti by German merchants and traders. There were hardly any Latin American chers collègues as of 1870.*

of the government as "men maddened by passion, inflamed by rum, and elated by the consciousness of armed power," and adds "... for me to close the door upon the men pursued, would have been for me to deny them their last chance to escape from being brutally put to death before my eyes."

During this period the residence was surrounded by hundreds of government troops with orders to keep up a constant clamor night and day. Rumors circulated on the *telediol* (Haiti's grapevine telegraph) that Bassett had been disavowed by the US government, that the residence no longer enjoyed diplomatic immunity, that the soldiers surrounding it were so excited they were beyond control, and that the government could no longer guarantee the safety of the Bassett family. Yet all ended happily. When he had heard that a US warship was on the way, Domingue relented and the Canals were allowed to embark for Jamaica. After receiving a fervent embrace from his departing guests, Bassett notes: "A rather disagreeable French custom."

For some time Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, Bassett enjoyed the respect and friendship of his colleagues. That his popularity was indeed widespread is evidenced by his election, in 1875, to the presidency of the exclusive "Cercle de Port-au-Prince."

Bassett's health was frequently bad. He complains of aches, fever and biliousness—of what the Haitians called "*La mauvaise fièvre*"—perhaps malaria, or dengue, or both. In July 1876 ill health prevented him from attending the inaugural of his former house-guest, now President Boisrond-Canal. In the National Archives there remains a dashing photo of the President wearing a large fedora, inscribed: "A mon ami E. D. Bassett."

Maybe it was ill health (or possibly a new administration in Washington) that caused Bassett to submit his resignation in 1877. That the family returned to New Haven with nostalgia is certain. Like many yet unborn Americans who were to love Haiti in their turn, the Bassetts probably felt that they had been cast out of the Garden of Eden.

Succeeding years never recaptured the magic. From 1879 to

1888, Bassett was Consul-General of Haiti in New York—the Haitian Consulate was then at 22 State Street. He did manage one trip back to Haiti on consultation but his dream to return again as American Minister was never realized.

In 1889 Bassett was back in New Haven and things were not going well. To Frederick Douglass he wrote that circumstances impelled him to seek a Foreign Service appointment and that his preference would be Haiti. Alas, the post had already been offered to and accepted by Douglass himself. The chagrin seeps between the lines of Bassett's generous congratulations. Nevertheless he swallowed his pride and offered his services as Douglass's secretary, at \$850 per annum.

Douglass was over 70, a national figure and a prima donna. In his definitive "Diplomatic Relations of the United States with Haiti" Dr. Rayford Logan states that Bassett was to all intents and purposes again the American Minister. His position must have been difficult. Intrigue over possible US acquisition of Môle St. Nicolas was again at peak and the American press in uproar. Douglass resigned on July 30, 1891.

Bassett never received his Foreign Service appointment and his last years seem to have been sad ones. The family moved from New Haven to 2121 N. 29th Street, Philadelphia, where America's first black diplomat died poor and obscure. His last letter to Douglass, January 18, 1894, speaks of a heart condition and "an annoying affection of my eyes which are never in good trim." The letter is unhappy for it replies to a dunning note from Douglass asking payment on a loan, but worse, stating that he had "learned" that, while in Haiti, Bassett accepted \$6000 from President Hyppolite to influence Douglass's decisions as minister.

Besides credulity and naiveté in believing any such accusations, Douglass was cruelly unfair to an old and loyal friend. He could not know that the *telediol* would circulate, and many Haitians would credit, the identical rumor about every American chief of mission to this day.

By 1961 the figure named had risen to \$100,000! ■