

## Marcus Garvey

### Garvey, Marcus



#### Record Information

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#### Description:

Born in Jamaica, Marcus Garvey gained an awareness of the worldwide oppression of black people during his travels as a young man. To promote pride and hope among black people around the world, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In 1917, he moved the UNIA headquarters to New York City and quickly built an international following. Garvey's belief in racial purity and segregation drew vehement criticism from members of the integrationist National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In his worldwide efforts to help people of African descent achieve political and economic autonomy, **Marcus Garvey** established one of the largest and most influential organizations geared toward such efforts in black history.

Born on August 7, 1887, in St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica, **Garvey** was the youngest of 11 children. However, nine of his siblings died during childhood and, aside from his parents, he grew up with his older sister, Indiana. His mother, Sarah **Garvey**, and his father, **Marcus Garvey, Sr.**, were both descended from Jamaica's famed rebel fighters, the Maroons. **Garvey, Sr.**, was a skilled mason, a farmer, and the owner of a sizable personal library that allowed him to sometimes serve as a lawyer for his friends and neighbors.

Young **Marcus Garvey** grew up as a colonial in a Jamaica still governed by Britain, which meant that a population of approximately 15,000 whites exercised rule over 168,000 of mixed ancestry and more than 630,000 blacks. The association of color with power was one **Garvey** never forgot, and he often charged that worse than color prejudice between the races was that color prejudice that existed among the members of the black race itself.

**Garvey** became an apprentice printer by the time he reached his teens and at 14 ended his formal education. At the age of 20, he moved to Kingston. There, he worked in a printing shop with his godfather and advanced to become the youngest foreman printer in the city. He underwent one of his first tests as a leader when the printers' union went on strike for higher wages. The strike failed and cost **Garvey** his job. He

wound up blacklisted and skeptical regarding labor politics. He eventually found another job in a government printing office.

Kingston also provided Garvey with exposure to a culture where individuals often engaged in eloquent public debate over the state of their affairs. He studied and adopted modes of oratorical skill practiced in such common places as on the waterfront, in churches, in stores, and in barbershops, which later served him well when persuading others to his political way of thinking. He studied poetry in the same manner and eventually used it to such powerful effect in his speeches that W. E. B. DuBois, one of his severest critics, placed him among the more dynamic leaders of his time based solely on his eloquence.

In 1910, Garvey took his printing skills a step further and published his first newspaper, *Garvey's Watchman*. While he did achieve a circulation of 3,000, *Garvey's Watchman* proved the first in a line of newspapers intended to represent blacks living in the British island empire but ultimately proved to be short-lived. The second was *La Nacion*, founded in Costa Rica where he worked as a timekeeper on the United Fruit Company's banana plantation. In Costa Rica, Garvey witnessed what he reported as British indifference to the severe working conditions of West Indian immigrant laborers. Through the pages of *La Nacion* he attempted to hold the British consul accountable for those conditions. Moving to Panama, he saw a similar situation regarding Jamaican laborers working on the Panama Canal and created the newspaper *La Presna* to file reports on the plight of his countrymen.

The image of people of color laboring under extreme conditions to realize the goals of Europeans was repeated many times over as Garvey traveled through Ecuador, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Honduras. In 1911, he returned to Jamaica before traveling to England in 1912 to join his sister Indiana, who was working there as a nursemaid. In England, Garvey joined the staff of the pan-African journal *African Times and Orient Review*, published by an Egyptian nationalist named Duse Mohammed Ali. Exposure to Ali and others at *African Times* expanded Garvey's awareness of racial conditions worldwide. It also introduced him to the philosophies of Booker Taliaferro Washington, whose ideas on black self-reliance were supported by Ali. As Garvey put it, reading *Up from Slavery* generated for him an epiphany during which he realized his true calling to become "a race leader."

*Up from Slavery* also provided Garvey with a living hero in the form of Washington himself. He stated full agreement with Washington's assessment that the oppressive political and economical condition of blacks was less important than the black race's own willingness to work hard, improve itself, and earn the respect of other races. Garvey developed with Washington a correspondence that resulted in an invitation to visit Washington's stronghold, the Tuskegee Institute. Washington died before Garvey's visits to Tuskegee in 1916 and 1923, and much of his admiration for the older leader later turned to somewhat scornful criticism. In refuting the accommodationist teachings of Washington, Garvey spoke often of the *New Negro* several years prior to the publication of Alain Locke's anthology of the same title.

Still greatly inspired by Washington in 1914, **Garvey** returned to Jamaica to establish his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and African Communities League. The UNIA was designed to construct and maintain economic and cultural links between the communities of the black diaspora.

Jamaica, **Garvey** arrived in the United States on March 23, 1916. Reportedly on a visit to give lectures and raise funds to build an industrial school in Jamaica, **Garvey** became outspoken concerning what he called a lack of black leadership in the United States. Instead of returning to Jamaica, he completed a tour of almost 40 states and then went to New York City. With assistance from the city's West Indian population, he shifted the base of his operations from Jamaica to Harlem, where he opened the first U.S. branch of UNIA.

The year 1919 proved a pivotal one for **Marcus Garvey**. By his estimates, the membership in the UNIA had grown to almost 4 million. Branches were forming throughout the United States as well as in South America, the West Indies, and Central America. He purchased a large auditorium on 138th Street in Harlem, named it Liberty Hall, and used it for UNIA-sponsored events, political as well as social and religious. He also started the Negro Factories Corps, which not only produced an extensive line of commodities in the United States and abroad but provided jobs for thousands of black workers.

Moreover, **Garvey** founded the *Negro World*, destined to become the most successful newspaper of his publishing career and one of the most successful black periodicals of the 1920s, lasting well until 1933. The newspaper's motto declared it was "A Newspaper Devoted Solely to the Interests of the Negro Race." On the strength of that promise, backed with articles on black history and culture, stories detailing events surrounding the UNIA, and front-page editorials by **Garvey**, the paper reached a circulation of 200,000. Editions were published in English, French, and Spanish with distribution in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Just as the U.S. government at times blamed Robert Abbott's *Chicago Defender* for unrest in the United States, so did the British name **Garvey's Negro World** as one cause of the 1919 race riots that swept through Jamaica, Trinidad, and British Honduras.

Also in 1919, **Garvey** launched one of UNIA's most ambitious projects: his now legendary Black Star Shipping Line. With a fleet of four used ships, the stated purpose of the Black Star Shipping Line was to conduct a Pan-African shipping trade among the United States, the West Indies, Africa, and Latin America. It was also made available to blacks for business and pleasure trips without the stigma of Jim Crow racism that characterized transportation services offered by whites. **Garvey's** critics writing in the black and white press sought to ridicule him by charging that the ships had been purchased to transport African Americans "back to Africa." Amy Jacques **Garvey**, **Marcus Garvey's** second wife, stated that the only return to Africa advocated by her husband was a spiritual one. The leader did, however, seek permission to establish a colony of skilled blacks in Liberia to contribute to the country's and the African continent's ongoing development. He was not allowed to do so. So persuasive was **Garvey** in his call for blacks to rise to the challenge of a glorious destiny that his followers often called him the "Black Moses" or even John the Baptist.

The UNIA, by the mid-1920s, had achieved the unprecedented feat of opening 700 branches in 38 states and 200 more in the international community, making it the largest organization on record dedicated to the economic and political advancement of people of African descent. As Garvey himself became more influential, he also became more daring. In 1921, he met with Edward Young Clarke, the Ku Klux Klan's Imperial Kleagle of Georgia. Reasoning in terms of the autonomy it would allow blacks, Garvey remarked that he agreed with Clarke's stand on a separation of the races, targeting Africa for blacks and the United States for whites. The statement was widely publicized and Garvey's critics interpreted it as an endorsement not just of philosophy but of the practice of lynching promoted so vigorously by the Ku Klux Klan during that period. Owen Chandler of the *Messenger* stated in a headline that Garvey had become the "Messenger Boy of the White Ku Klux Kleagle."

Controversy over Garvey's public statements had less of an impact on the organizations he had created than mismanagement and weaknesses within the structures themselves. Operational expenses and extensive maintenance required for the ships of the Black Star Line placed the operation in debt for \$500,000 after limited sailing for four years. The UNIA with its network of factories began accumulating debt that eventually hit \$200,000. Any opportunity to reverse these trends ended when Garvey and three of his associates were arrested in 1922 on charges of mail fraud. The charges were based on information provided to the Bureau of Investigation (later the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]) largely by Cyril V. Briggs through his monthly magazine, *The Crusader*, an organ of the radical group African Blood Brotherhood. Garvey spent three months in New York City's Tombs Prison in 1923. On February 8, 1925, he entered the Atlanta Penitentiary, where he stayed two years. Originally sentenced to serve four years, the sentence was commuted by President Calvin Coolidge. In December 1927, Garvey was deported from the United States as an alien convicted of a felony. For a time, he held various public offices in Jamaica and tried to regain the earlier strength of his UNIA organization there but failed to win the kind of support he had received in the United States. In 1934, he moved to London, where he died on June 10, 1940, at the age of 52.

Garvey's first marriage was to Amy Ashwood. In 1922, he married for the second time to Amy Jacques Garvey, who led a national campaign for her husband's release from prison when he was arrested. In addition to serving as associate editor for the *Negro World*, she published two volumes of Garvey's speeches, entitled *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, in 1923 and 1925. The couple had two sons, Marcus, Jr., and Julius. When Garvey moved to London, his wife chose to remain in Jamaica. In 1963, she wrote his biography, *Garvey and Garveyism*.

## References and Further Information

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