Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies

BLACK ACTIVISTS WRITE WHEATLEY AND WASHINGTON

TERRELL, DU BOIS, AND THE DRAMA OF THE 1932 BICENTENNIAL

Lurana Donnels O'Malley

Black Activists Write Wheatley and Washington

This book examines how early twentieth-century Black theatre artists depicted national mythologies of the United States.

White-authored pageants and plays written for the 1932 Bicentennial celebration of George Washington's birthday relegated Black Americans to the periphery through racist stereotyping. Black activists Mary Church Terrell and W. E. B. Du Bois seized the opportunity to place Black people at center stage and to revise contemporary views of Washington and of Black achievement. Terrell's *Historical Pageant-Play Based on the Life of Phyllis Wheatley* and Du Bois's *George Washington and Black Folk* dramatize how the achievements of Black men and women fit into the US origin story. Terrell's script is a biography of the life of the enslaved African poet Phillis Wheatley; Du Bois's pageant is a transgressive revision of the Washington myth.

The book's chapters contextualize these plays within the larger Bicentennial event. O'Malley also includes her edited version of Terrell's script, published here for the first time.

This interdisciplinary book will be a valuable resource for college and university courses in American theatre and performance studies, Black Studies, and Women's Studies.

Lurana Donnels O'Malley is Professor Emerita in Theatre and Dance at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, USA, where she taught in the areas of Euro-American theatre history, research, and directing from 1991 to 2025.

Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies

This series is our home for cutting-edge, upper-level scholarly studies and edited collections. Considering theatre and performance alongside topics such as religion, politics, gender, race, ecology, and the avant-garde, titles are characterized by dynamic interventions into established subjects and innovative studies on emerging topics.

Neil Bartlett
Invitations to Speculate
Edited by William McEvoy and Joseph Ronan

The Practitioner's Essential Guide to Teaching Seated Dance Across the Lifespan
Take Your Seat!
Samantha Jennings

The Physically Disabled Dancer and the Affirmative Model of Disability
Lawrence Shapiro

Theatres of Compost
Performance and Ecology for the Anthropocene
Abby Schroering

Black Activists Write Wheatley and Washington
Terrell, Du Bois, and the Drama of the 1932 Bicentennial
Lurana Donnels O'Malley

Performance and Performativity of Dalit Students Politics in India
The Justice for Rohith Movement
Malavika Priyadarshini Rao

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Routledge-Advances-in-Theatre–Performance-Studies/book-series/RATPS

Black Activists Write Wheatley and Washington

Terrell, Du Bois, and the Drama of the 1932 Bicentennial

Lurana Donnels O'Malley

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2026
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2026 Lurana Donnels O'Malley

The right of Lurana Donnels O'Malley to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-36093-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-37017-0 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-33489-7 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003334897

Typeset in Sabon
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

Contents

Acknowledgements *vii*
Author's Note *viii*
Abbreviations *ix*

Part I
Historical Background and Critical Analyses 1

1 Washington Conscious: The George Washington Bicentennial of 1932 3

2 Idealizing Washington: Portrayals of an Enslaver 35

3 Black Voices and the Bicentennial: Performances By and For Black Citizens 60

4 Visions of Washington in DC: Three White-Authored Bicentennial Performances 87

5 Terrell Chooses Wheatley: The Creation of the Wheatley Pageant-Play 133

6 The Trials of Mary Church Terrell: The Production of the Wheatley Pageant-Play 175

7 Du Bois and the Bicentennial Crisis: George Washington and Black Folk 201

8 Conclusion 225

Part II
Edited Script 229

9 *Historical Pageant-Play Based on the Life of Phyllis Wheatley* by Mary Church Terrell 231

Index 266

Acknowledgements

Permission to include my edited version of *Historical Pageant-Play Based on the Life of Phyllis Wheatley* and to cite other documents from Mary Church Terrell Papers was granted by the Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Washington, DC.

Many thanks to *MELUS* journal for permission to reprint material from my article on Du Bois (O'Malley, Lurana Donnels. "The Witch of Endor Slept Here: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Crisis of the George Washington Bicentenary." *MELUS*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2016, pp. 32–54). The revised material is reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.

Thanks also to *Theatre History Studies* for permission to reprint material from my article on Terrell (O'Malley, Lurana Donnels. "'Why I Wrote the Phyllis Wheatley Pageant-Play': Mary Church Terrell's Bicentennial Activism." *Theatre History Studies*, vol. 37, 2018, p. 225–55.) The revised material is reproduced by permission of University of Alabama Press.

I am grateful also to the editors of these articles (Gary Totten at *MELUS* and Sara Freeman and Brian Cook at *THS*.) My appreciative thanks to Eleanor Svaton of The Desk for her keen eye, Sean T. C. O'Malley for cheering me on, Julie and T. J. O'Malley for graciously hosting me on numerous trips to DC, Teia and Ruby O'Malley for believing in me, Joellen ElBashir of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center for many helpful consultations, and Gwen Sinclair of Hamilton Library for help in locating some hard-to-find documents. I thank also the entire Inter-Library Loan staff at Hamilton Library, Judy Williams of DC's Friendship School, Jessica Smith of the Historical Society of Washington, Dean Peter Arnade for much-needed sabbatical leave support, Jennifer Goodlander for good advice, and many friends and colleagues for answering questions, including Harold Wong, Michelle Bisbee, Hannah Schauer, Julie Iezzi, and Robert Littman.

Author's Note

This book treats many instances of racist representations. Some chapters contain quotations from materials that use offensive racial slurs.

Abbreviations

ASNLH	Association for the Study of Negro Life and History
BC	Bicentennial Commission
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, People of Color
DB SCUA	W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts-Amherst Libraries
DC	District of Columbia
DCBC	District of Columbia Bicentennial Commission
GWBC NARA	Series: Records Collected from England, Genealogical Records, Memorabilia, and Publications, ca. 1924–ca. 1934, RG 148.2 Records of the George Washington Bicentennial Commission 1928–32, RG 148: Records of Commissions of the Legislative Branch, 1928–2007, National Archives College Park
HBCU	Historically Black College/University
LOC 1	First script in MCT LOC
LOC 2	Second script in MCT LOC
MCT LOC	Mary Church Terrell Papers, Library of Congress
MCT MSRC	Mary Church Terrell Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Manuscript Division
M-S 1	*Phillis Wheatley* script (8 pages, legal paper) found in MCT MSRC, 102–6, 160.
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NARA	National Archives
NAWSA	National American Woman Suffrage Association
NWP	National Woman's Party
PPD	Play and Pageant Division
US GPO	United States Government Printing Office

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

Part I

Historical Background and Critical Analyses

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

1 Washington Conscious

The George Washington Bicentennial of 1932

A photograph from 1932. Nine Black children in colonial dress. The littlest one, a seated boy, holds the hand of a larger female student clad in black; although it is not obvious from the photograph, the boy portrays George Washington, holding the hand of his mother Mary Washington. These third and fourth graders from Toner Health School perform a scene from Major R. B. Lawrence's *Mother and Son*, one of many plays created to celebrate Washington's 200th birthday.

Figure 1.1 Children of Toner Health School in *Mother and Son* (*History* 5: 399).

DOI: 10.4324/9781003334897-2

Toner Health School, on 24th and F Streets NW in Washington DC, was "maintained for tubercular colored children" ("School"). These children played both Black and white characters in the story. Mary Washington wears black because she is in mourning for her deceased husband, George's father. The boy on the far right is probably portraying the elderly Black enslaved man, Jasper. Unlike in photographs of white actors portraying Black colonial characters, this child wears no blackface makeup to indicate his race; instead, his hair and eyebrows have grey makeup to show his age. Nor do the children wear white makeup to portray the white characters. The photograph assumes that the viewer will accept the children in these roles, just as those who chose to produce the play assumed acceptance by the teachers, parents, and children of this school, a school segregated by both race and health. Ironically, the story the children enacted was about the dishonesty of a young enslaved Black girl. *Mother and Son* contrasts her transgression with the honesty and ethics of the future president, reinforcing an uncomplicated view of Washington, who has benevolent interactions with the enslaved. These Black children of Toner Health School, struggling against sickness and isolated from the rest of their community, escaped the routines of their daily lives—as did countless other children around the country in 1932—to don costumes and enact a story about their country's founding. Their opportunity to do so was the occasion of the George Washington Bicentennial, the year-long national celebration of the 200th birthday of the first US president.

Black activists Mary Church Terrell and W. E. B. Du Bois each used pageantry to imagine spectacular and embodied acts of Black resistance. The scripts they wrote for the Bicentennial occasion dramatize how Black men and women fit into the origin story of the US. Terrell's and Du Bois's pageants destabilize the status quo, either by de-centering George Washington (Terrell) or directly criticizing him (Du Bois). This book will also analyze Bicentennial performances written and staged by white artists to contrast with the Bicentennial contributions of numerous Black creators (writers, performers, composers, choreographers) who persevered to participate in the Bicentennial celebration of US nationalism despite the barriers to their inclusion.

Many key Bicentennial events and performances took place in DC. Because the legally and socially mandated practices of Jim Crow DC kept white and Black theatre practitioners and audiences largely separated, Black artists seeking a means to participate in the DC Bicentennial celebration faced numerous impediments. Longtime DC resident Terrell, in collaboration with other Black artists, worked to stage an extraordinary Black performance there: *Historical Pageant-Play Based on the Life of Phyllis Wheatley*. Two decades later, in 1953, Terrell was key to ending segregation in DC through her agitation leading to the historic "District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson, Co, Inc." ruling (Fradin and Fradin).

This first chapter provides an overview of the Bicentennial, and of the theatre-related activities of the federal Bicentennial Commission (BC), and of the District of Columbia Bicentennial Commission (DCBC). My discussion

of Major R. B. Lawrence, a prolific white writer of Bicentennial plays, and his interaction with the BC Assistant Historian brings to light issues of dramatic license. I also introduce Marie Moore Forrest, a significant white director whose association with several of the most prominent Bicentennial productions in DC will play a key role in future chapters. I also briefly discuss two Bicentennial films.

In Chapter 2, I analyze the approbatory, white-authored scripts printed and promoted by the BC or by private companies. Despite his status as a slaveholder, Washington is usually characterized as wise and benevolent. In contrast, minstrelsy-derived stereotypes determine the representation of Black characters. Moreover, Bicentennial productions of these plays in the US and abroad typically used white performers in blackface to portray Black characters. The analysis of these white-authored plays and pageants provides necessary context for understanding the counter-narratives of the innovative scripts created by Terrell and Du Bois.

In Chapter 3, I highlight the Bicentennial contributions of other Black writers and artists besides Terrell and Du Bois. Although a few of these performances were integrated into majority-white contexts, most were created for Black community spaces, in DC, New York, and elsewhere.

In Chapter 4, I analyze the three most prominent Bicentennial productions in DC, all authored by white writers: *Wakefield*, *The Great American*, and *The Vision of George Washington.* These highly visible productions reinforced stereotypical characterizations of their Black characters and depended on performance tropes inherited from minstrelsy. For the latter two, director Marie Moore Forrest cast both white and Black performers, but her intention to stage the story of Black soldiers in the Revolutionary War in *Great American* was evidently thwarted. A close look at these elaborate, white-created productions provides important context for understanding the logistical obstacles faced by the production of Terrell's *Historical Pageant-Play Based on the Life of Phyllis Wheatley.*

In Chapter 5, I examine Terrell's unpublished manuscript, comparing Terrell's depiction of Phillis Wheatley and her poetry to current scholars' views of this enslaved eighteenth-century writer. In Chapter 6, I use the substantial archival evidence about that production to interrogate Terrell's choices in altering the historical chronology of events in Wheatley's life. I explore the conflict created when those choices were challenged by Marie Moore Forrest, the director of the premiere production in 1932 at a Black high school in DC. I argue that the production was deliberately scaled back to prevent its being seen by an integrated audience, possibly due to the presence of a Black performer in the role of George Washington. I also chart the parallels between a key theme of the pageant—Wheatley's authentication by outside authorities—and Terrell's challenges in creating a dramatic effect in the face of criticism.

In Chapter 7, I demonstrate how Du Bois's *George Washington and Black Folk* challenges the adulatory ideological project of the BC. This short but rich pageant is a transgressive revision of the George Washington myth, both adopting and subverting the traditional narrator figure through a powerful

Black character—the Witch of Endor—while desanctifying Washington. Du Bois expresses both the pride and dispossession of Black people in the US. In a year of fervent patriotism, this revisionist critique of Washington was not produced as a part of the Bicentennial festivities.

Chapter 8 concludes my historical analysis with a look at post-1932 portrayals of Washington. In Chapter 9, Terrell's *Historical Pageant-Play Based on the Life of Phyllis Wheatley* is published for the first time. My edition is based on the numerous manuscripts in Terrell's papers; my annotations comment on script variations and on the quoted Wheatley poems.

Terrell and Du Bois portray Black characters of talent, heroism, and determination. Each writer brings enslavement's injustices to the forefront, while also pointing to Black achievements in the revolutionary era and beyond. While the white writers of Bicentennial pageants and plays created Black characters who are enslaved, subservient, and ridiculed, Black artists used the occasion of the Bicentennial to perform the past with the goal of cultural restoration.

Exhibition Inhibitions

Holidays are touchstones for the unassimilated. Loyalties and civic competencies are publicly tested through the performance of songs, speeches, and parades. Costumes are often required; flags and bunting complete the decor. National celebrations like the George Washington Bicentennial of 1932 revealed the exclusions inherent in performances of patriotism. In their history of race relations in Charleston, South Carolina, Kytle and Roberts survey the changing relationship of Black people to Independence Day celebrations in the US (*Denmark*). In Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852, the former slave and noted orator Frederick Douglass delivered his speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"[1] He had been invited to speak by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. Addressing his audience throughout as a plural "you," Douglass calls the holiday "the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom" (4). Later in the speech, he makes clear that a Black person in the US has no reason to celebrate. Although the speech is at times a model of careful rhetoric, Douglass sometimes flares into rage and frustration:

> At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed […] I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us […] The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.
>
> (15)

In Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July, James A. Colaiaco notes that since "the Fourth of July is the most important day in the American 'civil religion,' […] Independence Day became an occasion for abolitionists not so

much to celebrate the past and preserve tradition, but to remind the nation of its betrayal" (7–8). Black people in the postbellum South celebrated the day openly in community as a symbol of newly gained freedom. By the 1880s, however, the holiday was reclaimed by white segregationists who wished to root out Black public celebrations; "the African American, noted a Memphis newspaper, now marked the holiday by 'going way off by himself,' celebrating behind closed doors in black churches and cultural institutions or with family" (Kytle, "When"). According to Colaiaco, many Black citizens later began to observe the holiday on the fifth of July as a form of protest.

Writing a century and a half later in a similar vein to Douglass, native Hawaiian scholar and activist Jonathan Kamakawiwoʻole Osorio, in an analysis of the Committee of Safety's overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, explains why many Hawaiians also treat the Fourth of July as an occasion for mourning or protest:

> In 1895, in a particularly spiteful and cynical piece of timing, they [the Committee of Safety] declared their republic on July 4, a "government" that had all of 4,000 mostly white citizens, and declared Sanford Dole president for life. That this "republic" was set up for no other purpose than to encourage the Americans to annex the islands makes it impossible to commemorate the Fourth as a day of independence. I cannot imagine how any Hawaiian, knowledgeable about this history and feeling any sense of kinship with his or her nineteenth century ancestors, celebrates the Fourth of July.[2]
>
> (Osorio)

For many Black, Hawaiian, and Indigenous people in the US, there is—to use Douglass's words—an "immeasurable distance" between those who celebrate independence on that date and those who experience the day as a bitter reminder of the loss of independence. For Black citizens of the US, the cognitive and emotional dissonances created by annual Independence Day celebrations were amplified by the year-long George Washington Bicentennial.

Another example of tension for Black citizens during a prominent celebration was the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition (popularly known as the Chicago World's Fair). Black activist Ida B. Wells (later Wells-Barnett) created a pamphlet (titled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*) protesting the insufficient coverage of Black people's achievements at the exhibition:

> The exhibit of the progress made by a race in 25 years of freedom as against 250 years of slavery, would have been the greatest tribute to the greatness and progressiveness of American institutions. We can only hope that [...] in another great National endeavor the Colored American shall not plead for a place in vain.
>
> (Wells, "Preface")

When exhibition planners created a single "Negro Day" (25 August) to placate critical Black activists, Douglass gave a keynote address, but Wells refused to participate (Lorini 49; Ballard 119).[3]

Over two decades later, in 1921, the America's Making Exhibition, a celebration of the diverse immigrant cultures of the US, presented an opportunity for the Black citizens to again plead for a place. In this case, James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois succeeded in their quest for Black inclusion. The exhibition, which emphasized assimilation and "a single loyalty" to America, was held at Seventy-first Regiment Armory in New York from 29 October to 12 November (Finley). Johnson and Du Bois created the "Americans of Negro Lineage" pavilion, also known as the "Negro pavilion." Its main exhibition booth was designed as an Egyptian temple, with Meta Fuller's sculpture "Ethiopia Awakening" as its focal point. Du Bois, who firmly believed in the power of pageantry as "a means of uplift and education" ("Drama"), wrote a pageant for the occasion. *The Seven Gifts of Ethiopia to America* was performed on 11 November. The success of Johnson's and Du Bois's endeavor for this two-week event may have proved inspirational to the Black artists and activists who faced the challenges and opportunities offered by the George Washington Bicentennial.

In the 1930s, Black activists continued to make their case for inclusion. While millions of Black US citizens had been moving into previously white-dominated urban centers as a part of the Great Migration, they continued to face substantial social obstacles and injustices throughout the country, such as voting disenfranchisement, lynching, and segregation. At the same time, the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s had brought Black artistic styles and themes into the larger US cultural sphere; consequently, the 1930s offered a new and significant opportunity to include the Black stories within a national commemoration. Eighty years after Douglass's speech about the Fourth of July, Mary Church Terrell—journalist, lecturer, activist, and founder of the National Association of Colored Women—and W. E. B. Du Bois—writer, historian, activist, and founder of the Black theatrical pageantry movement—were each determined that Black stories be included within the pale of a unique patriotic celebration: the George Washington Bicentennial celebration of 1932. Each of these two Black writers, when it became evident that plans for the Bicentennial were once again omitting Black US heritage and history, turned to a very public artistic expression: pageant drama.

Although the works of Terrell and Du Bois were ultimately relegated to the periphery of the celebration, these writers and their scripts are at the center of this book. To contextualize and fully appreciate the contributions of Terrell and Du Bois to the canon of Bicentennial pageant plays requires first an introduction to pageantry as a genre of theatrical expression in the US, a layout of the scope and breadth of the 1932 celebrations, and an examination of the motives and intentions of the Bicentennial's white organizers.

Pageantry: The Story of an Idea

Pageants in the US—combinations of scenes, songs, poetry, music, dance, speeches, and quotations from historical documents—were intended to be both educational and entertaining, and were widely produced in civic and educational celebrations in the Progressive Era and beyond. Esther Willard Bates, an early practitioner of the genre, gave a definition in 1912:

> As the term "pageant" is used now, it means a dramatic representation of several scenes, either tableaux or miniature integral dramas which are unified by prologues. The real pageant is given out of doors, its spectators number thousands, genuine distance gives its beauty to the production, the stage is as vast as the eye can reach, and the production aims to reproduce actuality rather than illusion.
>
> (*Pageants* 7)

The next part of her description—"The giving of a pageant is an act of veneration or of patriotism. At present it is done to honor town or hero, and becomes a great civic rite" (*Pageants* 7)— was still applicable by the time of the George Washington Bicentennial in 1932.

Although pageantry and masque traditions can be traced back to civic, religious, and court practices in medieval and Renaissance Europe, pageantry historian David Glassberg traces the modern historical pageant to Louis Napoleon Parker's events in early twentieth-century Great Britain: the Sherborne pageant of 1905 and the Warwick pageant of 1906 (43). In the US in 1908, Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer produced an historical pageant for the Philadelphia Founder's Week celebrations, commemorating the 225th anniversary of the city. The flood of US historical pageants that followed combined historical topics or events, spectacle (music, dance, pantomime, elaborate costumes, and often outdoor settings), and community participation by hundreds or even thousands (providing visual spectacle by sheer numbers). The program of the 1914 *Pageant and Masque of St. Louis* (performed for four nights as part of the city's sesquicentennial celebrations) lists over three hundred volunteer costume and property makers and over seven hundred members of the chorus (St. Louis). Co-directed by Thomas Wood Stevens (author of the pageant) and Percy MacKaye (author of the masque, a more poetic and symbolic distillation of themes), the *Pageant and Masque of St. Louis* was performed for four nights to as many as 100,000 spectators; the total number of performing participants was 7,500 (Prevots 15). Naima Prevots notes, however, that "the involvement of Blacks was almost nonexistent and it is not clear whether organized labor or a multitude of the poorer working class played a significant role" (13).[4]

The *Pageant and Masque of St. Louis* was initiated by Charlotte Rumbold, a member of the city's Public Recreation Commission (Prevots 13). From the start, US pageantry was connected to the Progressive Era's recreation

movement. The Playground Association of America, of which Rumbold was a member, was established in 1906; proponents viewed the playground "as the spawning ground of desirable citizenry" and established "social centers" in public schools as adult alternatives to less desirable leisure pursuits (Finfer 157). Pageants, with their egalitarian principles of amateur community involvement, could engage multi-generational groups of performers and spectators. In 1913, the American Pageant Association (APA) was established to provide guidance and support for the burgeoning national trend. That same year, one of pageantry's early proponents, the playwriting teacher George Pierce Baker (then a professor at Harvard), wrote of the importance of regional specificity: "The best test of the rightness of a pageant is that it should be quite impossible to present it, or something approximating it, anywhere else" (Baker 834). Yet as the form grew in popularity, a homogeneity emerged.

> Held mostly in cities in the Midwest and Northeast, they invariably involved hundreds of local citizens in the dramatization of local history which usually progressed in stages from a point where Indians occupied the land, through a period of pioneer settlement, to an era of modern states, schools, victorious military campaigns, and technological progress.
>
> (Bodnar 171)

Such narratives might either include or erase the stories of Indigenous peoples and immigrants. Oberholtzer's Philadelphia pageant struggled with the representation of the Other.

> Native Americans were mentioned at the beginning of the pageant and African-Americans were included in scenes illustrating the underground railroad, but the pageant did not mention the arrival of any immigrants or ethnic groups after the American Revolution.
>
> (Boyer)

Oberholtzer's description of the Underground Railroad scene focuses on the white savior figures, including "a courageous Quakeress" from Chester County "who drove her own slave wagon" (36). Bates writes pointedly in 1912 that the inclusion of US immigrants is a means of promoting their assimilation: "There is no better way to induct immigrants and their children into a knowledge of American history and institutions than through the medium of historical tableaux given in a setting both dramatic and artistic" (6). Since pageants often involved civic and community groups, immigrants could gain this "knowledge" not only as spectators, but often as performers, embodying their own cultural practices while participating in a larger fantasy of America's history and its imagined future.

Glassberg notes that US pageant creators were by no means unified in their aspirations for the form. Most "patriotic and hereditary societies" wanted

to portray the "restoration of Anglo-Saxon Protestants to the pinnacle of the social order." In contrast, educators and playground proponents wanted to show the "creation of a new democratic and pluralistic society" (Glassberg 112). Mary Porter Beegle and Jack Randall Crawford, two practitioners who developed pageantry curricula at various institutions of higher education (including Yale, Dartmouth, and Teachers College of Columbia University), wrote in their 1916 book *Community Drama and Pageantry*, "Pageantry begins with a conscious attempt to restore to the people a share in the creation and development of dramatic art; in other words, to make drama truly democratic" (7).

Despite these competing interests, a typical narrative structure materialized:

> A spoken prologue introduced the pageant. Vocal and orchestral music were integrated into the presentation, as were expressive and symbolic movement, group pantomime, poetry, and dialogue [...] Dance interludes or dialogue were used to separate one episode from the next and to illuminate the theme. A prologue provided a pageant summary and a "march past" created a heroic and colorful ending.
>
> (Prevots 4)

Formally, the pageant was a new variation on dramatic form that had its own conventions. Bates makes useful distinctions between the typical realistic play of her era and the pageant drama as a genre:

> A play is continuous action on one theme, a pageant is interrupted action on related themes. A play has unities of time, place, or action, while the pageant dispenses with all of these. A play must be given on an indoor or outdoor stage, while the pageant aims to employ the entire landscape, or at least in its approaches and backgrounds. On the whole, we may say that a pageant is a hybrid, bred between the procession and the play.
>
> (Bates, *Pageants* 7–8)

The usual pageant content drew on US historical facts and folk motifs. The "United States appeared to feverishly turn to its past for entertainment, consolation, patriotic renewal, education, and inspiration from the deeds of ancestors" (Bodnar 173). Most pageantry, like international exhibitions and public murals of the Progressive Era, emphasized "national consolidation and social cohesion over pluralism and competing vernacular interests" (Moore 184). Although many celebrations were inspired by regional histories, others—such as the 1920 commemoration of the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth or the 1926 Philadelphia sesquicentennial of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence—took on a national character that would anticipate the country-wide George

Washington Bicentennial. Yet pageants did not only tell the tale of a battle or the founding of a city: for progressive artists and educators, "a pageant was the story of an idea: Peace, Progress, Education, Brotherhood, Liberty, Freedom" (Prevots 4). Pageant writers and directors used allegorical figures, narrators, and symbolic dances to convey this "story of an idea."

Female performers clad in Greek or Roman garb asserted an imagined ancient Western world as the wellspring of America. Glassberg refers to various female Spirit characters of pageantry with the term "pageant woman," describing her as "a woman in classical garb who reappears throughout the pageant [...] the idealized female image represented in public statues, murals, and posters of the period" (136). Some were female embodiments of the US in the form of Columbia. In the play "The Conversion of Mrs. Slacker" by F. Ursula Payne of the Brooklyn Training School for Teachers (published 1919), Columbia is described as wearing a "white robe draped in American flag." Payne's "The Vision of Columbus: A Pageant of Democracy" (also 1919) has a central character named United States; a photograph shows her wearing a crown, draped in a flag, and wielding a sword. Other female narrators took the form of an allegorized Spirit such as the Spirit of Vision, of Home, of America, of Philadelphia, and even the Spirit of Pageantry (Glassberg).

Figure 1.2 Hedwig Reicher as Columbia, in Hazel MacKaye's *The Allegory*, Washington, DC (1913). Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

Such pageant women appeared in countless US pageants. In Hazel MacKaye's suffrage pageant *The Allegory*, staged in 1913 on the steps of the US Treasury building as the climax to the large-scale suffrage march, women in white tunics and girls in white dresses are symbols of a "new crusade of women" (*Official*). Suffragists were among the many progressive activists drawn to pageantry as a propaganda tool; pageantry's democratic structure invited women's participation in ways that professional theatre did not. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, however, Black women were not always welcome in suffrage organization and events, and several key Black activists, including Terrell, successfully fought for inclusion in this 1913 march.

In addition to allegorically personifying ideals, women took the lead as performers and choreographers for dance sequences in pageantry.[5] Margaret H'Doubler, who later created the nation's first dance major (University of Wisconsin 1926–27), was a pioneering educator in the field of expressive dance and its uses in pageantry (Ross). "Expressive dance" or "interpretive dance" are broad terms, often associated both with H'Doubler's educational reforms and with the artistic innovations of Duncan and the Denishawn company.[6] Beegle and Crawford's *Community Drama and Pageantry* devotes a chapter to dance, advocating organic "natural dancing" as the most appropriate style for pageantry (190–233). All the chief creators of what Beegle and Crawford call "innovative dance"—Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan, and Doris Humphrey—performed in pageants, which also featured multitudes of amateur performers. Deborah Jowitt, in an essay on Isadora Duncan's modern dance aesthetic and influences, vividly conjures an image:

> [Duncan] can't, of course, be held responsible for all the pageants and Greek games in American college theater and physical education departments, for the well-meaning girls in bare feet and bunchy tunics tripping over Midwestern grass flourishing the scarves, garlands, and sacrificial bowls that were, by 1914, indispensable in displays of "natural" or "interpretive" dancing.
>
> (28)

All of these "well-meaning girls" made pageantry ripe for parody as the nation's tastes shifted in the post-WWI era, and even today, the term "interpretive dance" is ever-present in parody and meme culture.

Glassberg attributes the decline of historical pageantry to a variety of shifts in post-WWI US culture. Among these changes were a new focus on regional folk performances as a respite from modernity (251), the changed aesthetic tastes of cinema's new spectators, the growing Red Scare's dampening effect on public displays of progressive politics, and the fading popularity of abstract symbolism, which had become a "target for parody" (259).

Perceptively, Glassberg sees pageantry's decline as a function of "a changing public conception of the nature of history."

> Embedded in the pageant form of the 1910s was an emphasis on historical continuity; other forms of representing history in public were better suited to express the theme of dramatic discontinuity between generations that came into prominence in the 1920s and after.
>
> (288)

While Glassberg views pageants' peak in the US as 1910–17, and Prevots dates the "last important vestige" to 1925 (9), pageants continued into the 1930s in educational contexts and for occasions of "state centennials, town anniversaries, and civic celebrations" (Bodnar 171–72) such as the George Washington Bicentennial. Plays and pageants created for the Bicentennial gave historians, politicians, teachers, and ordinary citizens the opportunity to either use Washington as a symbol for larger ideologies or to re-characterize Washington as a flesh-and-blood human. Once the Bicentennial year was concluded, Will Rogers (a humorist of Cherokee descent) wrote to Bicentennial director Sol Bloom:

> You had to be a historian, a salesman, a diplomat, and a bandit (to get the money out of congress to do it on) but you did it. You are the only guy ever made a party run nine months, and you did it in dry times too. Sol you made this whole country Washington conscious [...] we had just pictured him as a man standing up in a boat when he ought to be sitting down.
>
> (qtd. in Bloom, *Autobiography* 220)

The George Washington Bicentennial

In 1932 in the US, George Washington was on every school bulletin board, on the radio, in the newspapers, in movies, and on stages indoor and outdoor. And on a new twenty-five-cent coin with his likeness. In December 1924, Calvin Coolidge signed a Congressional joint resolution known as the "Washington Bicentennial Bill," thus creating the "United States Commission for the Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington" (Bruggeman 67). The Bicentennial celebration (officially held between 2 February and 24 November 1932) was a federally sponsored initiative to commemorate the first president's date of birth through publications, educational outreach, and public events. The year-long celebration was "a high point for the orchestrated promotion of patriotism that pervaded the era after World War I" (Bodnar 174).

The BC employed 175 staff at its peak in early January 1932, with salaries making up over $500,000 of the total BC budget. The total of $1,270,716 appropriated by Congress between 1925 and 1932 for all aspects of the Bicentennial celebration was considerably offset by the sales of commemorative

stamps and of Washington's writings. In all, the BC estimated the total net cost of its activities to be $208,171, meaning that the Bicentennial made a profit of over one million dollars (*History* 5: 24–25). The BC's final report does not break down how much was spent on plays and pageants, although details of pageant spending by the DCBC are available (District).

The commission's associate director and driving force was New York congressional representative Sol Bloom. Bloom was no doubt appointed in part because of his prior association with the entertainment industry; most notably, he had coordinated the Midway Plaisance entertainments for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. As for-profit World's Fairs gave way to historical pageantry as an expression of civic duty and patriotism, pageantry became ever more closely tied to governmental agencies and support. The Battle of Yorktown Sesquicentennial in 1931—the immediate predecessor of the George Washington Bicentennial—included a battle reenactment and a pageant; the US Congress partially funded both events (Bodnar 173).

Figure 1.3 Costumed children with Sol Bloom. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

In 1927, the BC appointed noted US scholar Alfred Bushnell Hart (1854–1943) as the official Historian of the Bicentennial. Hart was the author of the three-volume *Epochs of American History* (1891–93) and the editor of the twenty-eight-volume *The American Nation: A History from Original Sources by Associated Scholars* (1904–18), among many other publications; he retired from Harvard in 1926 but remained an active writer and editor. Hart created or supervised many of the historical materials issued in conjunction with the celebration, including two series of pamphlets: *Honor to George Washington* and *Reading about George Washington* (*History* vols. 1–3). He has been called "Sol Bloom's private tutor in Washington history" (Marling 357). Hart "retired from active connection" with the BC's History Department in February 1932 as the celebration began, and Assistant Historian David M. Matteson took over (*History* 5: 264). With Hart's pamphlets distributed across the nation, Bloom and the BC encouraged schools, clubs, and civic organizations to create a variety of public programs such as observances, speeches, ceremonies, plays, and pageants to be overseen by local commissions. Bloom estimated that "an average of some sixteen thousand individual programs—by churches, schools, civic bodies, patriotic societies, and fraternal orders—were held in all parts of the United States each day of the nine months' Celebration," totaling a staggering 4,760,345 "separate and distinct" programs honoring Washington nationwide (Bloom, Preface, *History* 5: xii). In the words of historian John Bodnar, "The zeal and promotional thrust of the Washington commission, as it sought to embed images of the first president and what he stood for into the minds of citizens, knew no boundaries" (174). In summation from businessman and legislator Sol Bloom himself,

> If it were humanly possible, I wanted the celebration to pay for itself. It did pay for itself. It continued over a period of nine months, during which more than four million separate ceremonies were held, by national, state, and municipal organizations; by learned societies and fraternal orders; in the churches, colleges, and schools. More than 750,000 life-size color reproductions of Gilbert Stuart's "Athenaeum" portrait of Washington were distributed gratis, one for every public-school *room* in the United States. Millions of copies of monographs, speeches, and memorials were given out for use in connection with the various exercises. Commemorative publications covering the several aspects of George Washington—soldier, explorer, businessman, patriot, statesman, and human being—were issued. A great scholarly work, *Definitive Writings of George Washington*, in thirty-nine volumes, was prepared under the guidance of John C. Fitzpatrick of the Library of Congress. And still the celebration paid for itself.
>
> (*Autobiography* 217)

Verda Woods, a researcher for the Commission, posited to Sol Bloom that the programs of the Bicentennial, "reaching into every State of the Nation, is the nearest approach ever made to George Washington's cherished ideal of a National University." For Black citizens, however, participation in that "National University" was limited, and its curriculum was full of misrepresentations and omissions.

Play and Pageant Division

In addition to sponsoring public ceremonies, publications, and educational programs, the federal government actively sought to encourage theatrical representations of Washington's life and achievements. Percy J. Burrell, a well-known pageant director, was the first head of the Bicentennial Commission's Play and Pageant Division (PPD). According to the official *History of the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration*, Burrell had to resign in March 1932 due to illness, at which point a new PPD head was appointed: Burrell's assistant, James K. Knudson, aided by Ethel Claire Randall (*History* 5: 561). But a November 1931 letter from Knudson to Sol Bloom makes it clear that Knudson had already taken over at that point ("Status"). Knudson had graduated from the University of Utah in 1930; he later graduated from the George Washington School of Law in 1935 ("James"). I do not have evidence of Knudson's other involvement with pageantry or theatre beyond writing a single George Washington play in 1931, *The Blue Goblet*. In 1950, President Truman appointed Knudson as head of the Interstate Commerce Commission. Other PPD members included the writers Percy MacKaye, Maj. R. B. Lawrence, and his daughter Virginia Lawrence (*History* 5: 19).

The BC published several booklets in 1931 to encourage theatrical representations. Bates, who had written *The Art of Producing Pageants* in 1925 as a comprehensive guide to all aspects of pageant production, created a new guide titled *How to Produce a Pageant in Honor of George Washington*.[7] John Tasker Howard, a historian of US music and head of the Commission's Music Department, produced two resource books in 1931: *The Music of George Washington's Time* and *A Program Outline of American Music*. The former gave a historical overview as well as suggestions of where to find published music for use in bicentenary events. The *George Washington Play and Pageant Costume Book* provided illustrations of various characters who might appear in programs, plays, and pageants throughout 1932, such as a frontiersman, a surveyor, British and Colonial soldiers, and George Washington in various phases from boyhood to the presidency. One section describes the materials ordered for "servants" in 1759 (14), and a group of "Early Indians" is featured in a final cumulative costume sketch that includes townspeople, soldiers, and settlers; no enslaved persons are depicted in the illustration (24).

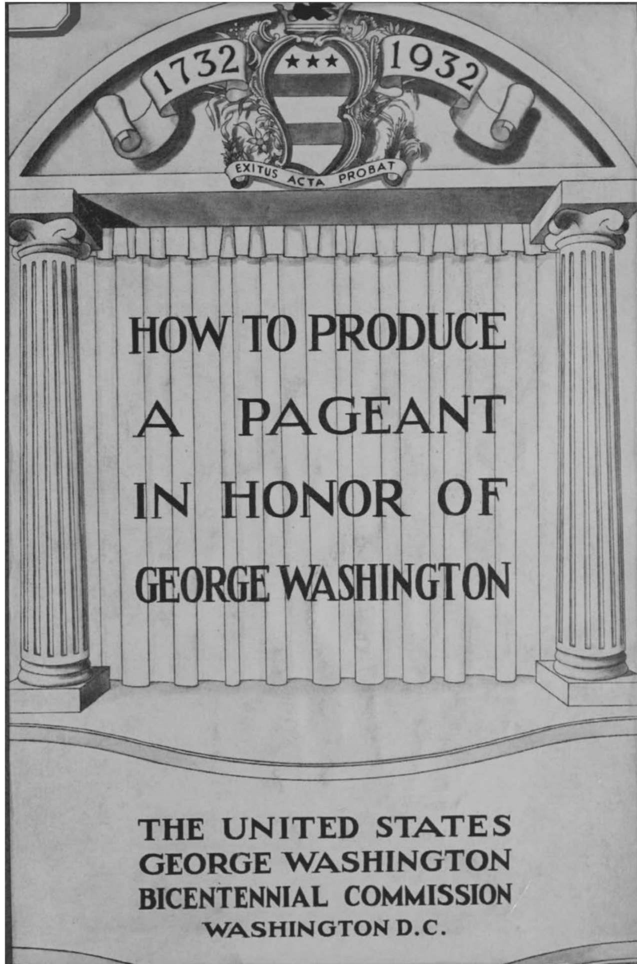

Figure 1.4 Cover, Esther Willard Bates's *How to Produce a Pageant in Honor of George Washington*.

Another 1931 booklet, *Pageants and Plays Depicting the Life of George Washington and His Time*, gives information on fourteen Washington-related pageants and eighteen plays that were "especially prepared for and issued by the Commission" (United States). Major R. B. Lawrence, head of the Play Division (a subset of the PPD), wrote fourteen of the plays. Each of these pageants and plays were published in separate Government Printing Office editions in 1931–32. All the plays were reprinted in Volume 1 of the *History of the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration* in 1932, and nine of the pageants were reprinted in Volume 2. The booklet *Pageants and Plays Depicting the Life of George Washington and His*