

Not Written in Black and White: American National Identity and the Curious Color Transformation of Henry Moss



On a hot July day in 1796, curious citizens of Philadelphia pushed and shoved as they lined up under the sign of the Black Horse, which hung outside Mr. Leech's tavern on Market Street. They were all there to witness a "Great CURIOSITY": a man named Henry Moss who was born "entirely black" but after thirty eight years had miraculously "become as white and fair as any white person." According to a broadside dated July 23, it was reported that Moss's "natural colour began to rub off" and his "wool" was being replaced by "straight hair similar to that of a white person." How, they wondered, could this be true? From eight in the morning until eight in the evening, Moss entertained visitors, who plunked down a half shilling for the chance to view this wonder.

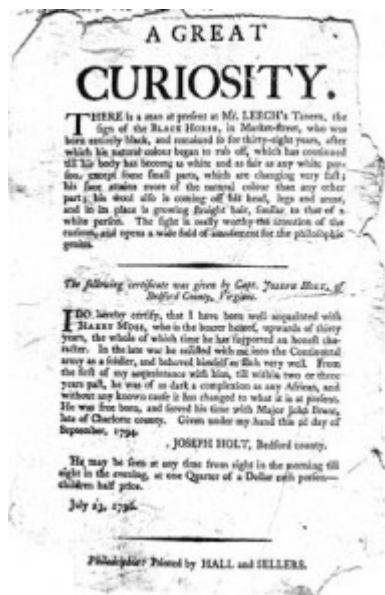


Fig. 1. The Moss broadside, courtesy the American Philosophical Society

The public's preoccupation with Moss was unmistakable. According to Dr. Charles Caldwell, for at least those two summer months, the people of Philadelphia were utterly transfixed by the spectacle of Moss. As Caldwell noted in his *Autobiography*, "[T]he cause of this singular change of complexion was a theme of wonder to everyone." The doctor went so far as to assert that Henry Moss's name was as well known to periodical readers as that of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Although Caldwell was prone to exaggeration, we do know that Moss's popularity prompted him to take his show (which was literally himself) on the road. He toured several American cities where he also drew crowds of curious onlookers.

Today we can glean only secondhand glimpses of this common man's uncommon life from several conflicting accounts scattered throughout the records of the period. The "spectacle" he created not only sparked the curiosity of the average citizen in search of a thrill; it garnered the attention of the new nation's leading intellectuals, who speculated, debated, and published their differing views on Moss's color transformation. Unfortunately, as far as I am aware, Moss did not leave any written documents of his own. Therefore, we cannot turn to him for information. However, we can examine the social and cultural implications behind the differing theories that people in America had about his changing color and speculate on what their keen interest in him can tell us about pressing issues of the period, such as race relations, religion, slavery, and the formation of an American national identity.



Fig. 2. Benjamin Smith Barton, painted by Samuel Jennings c. 1810, courtesy of the American Philosophical Society

First, let us take a look at who was interested in Henry Moss. Like Caldwell, the prominent physician Dr. Benjamin Rush plunked down his admission fee for the opportunity to see Moss for himself. He wrote an account of his visit dated "1796, July 27" and painstakingly pasted a broadside advertising the show into his personal letterbook, which can be found today in the collections of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. The ad for Moss was one of only two items that the busy doctor and civic leader chose to paste into his book. (The other item was the eulogy of George Washington.) Rush was so impressed by what he saw that he discussed the man who had "lately travelled through this city, and was exhibited as a show for money" in an article published in 1799 in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*. Moss's condition prompted Rush to propose leprosy as the cause of the "Black Color (as it is called) of the Negroes." Rush was not the only well-educated Philadelphian to speculate on the causes of Moss's unusual condition. Benjamin Smith Barton, who, like Rush, was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, was also fascinated by the man whom he described in an 1806 publication as a "white negro." The Reverend Samuel Stanhope Smith, moral philosopher and the seventh president of Princeton (at that time called the College of New Jersey) also commented extensively on Moss's case in an 1810 republication of his work *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, a work I will return to later.

The few facts regarding Henry Moss's life that emerge from the records of these eminent men conflict with one another in puzzling ways. Most intriguing, was Moss a slave or a free black man? Smith asserted that Moss was a slave who bought his freedom with the money he earned displaying himself to the curious public in various American cities. If this version of Moss's life story was true, then for enslaved Africans, white curiosity was a commodity that could be used to buy that most precious, priceless commodity of freedom. Others describe

Moss as a free black who was a veteran of the American Revolutionary War. Rush described Moss as a slave, but the broadside he pasted in his book maintained that Moss was born a free man. As proof, the advertisement mentioned a “certificate given by Capt. JOSEPH HOLD, of Bedford County, Virginia,” which states that Moss “was free born.”



Fig. 3. Benjamin Rush, painted by Thomas Sully c. 1812-15, courtesy of the American Philosophical Society

Even more confusing are the various explanations proffered for his miraculous change not only of skin color, but also in what people at the time considered significant somatic markers of race such as hair texture. As Rush put it, “[T]he wool which formerly perforated the cuticle has been change into hair.” Moss’s most unusual case was cited whenever authors wanted to speculate on the complex and confused topic of the explanation for man’s racial variation. Barton attributed it to another medical “affliction” called *Leucaethopia humana*; and in the most influential of the works on Moss, Smith used his case to present his theories about the effects of the natural and cultural environment on skin color. Just as Moss aroused controversy regarding his status as free or enslaved, so he transgressed racial categories in ways that Anglo-Americans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century found both intriguing and alarming. Like all curiosities, he demanded explanation.

This piece then will focus on providing part of that explanation, not of Moss himself, but of the intense curiosity he generated; not of his medical condition, but of the cultural conditions of the post-Revolutionary United States. Moss captured the imagination of the American people in the very first years of the republic because these new Americans were grappling with the struggle to define the racial identity of the new nation. The idea that environmental factors could change a man’s race was an extremely threatening concept to elite Anglo-Americans residing, as they did, on the far edge of an

Atlantic world whose cultural centers were in Europe. Only a few years before, they had formally severed their political affiliation with their “brethren” in Great Britain, the strongest European imperial power of the period. While ties to Britain had come to represent a noose of political and economic oppression during the war years, ties to England were also the cultural and material lifelines for Anglo-American settlers. Many settlers believed that access to fine objects and refined ideas elevated them above the Indians and Africans who were now their near neighbors.



Fig. 4. View of Independence Hall and the State House Yard, by William Birch, 1799, courtesy of the American Philosophical Society

In the years following the Revolution, Americans teetered between the promise of a glorious future as an independent nation and the cultural insecurity held over from their colonial past. Although undeniably proud of their newly won political independence, the former colonials still aspired to many of the European cultural and material standards of refinement and civility. The Founding Fathers placed a great deal of importance on purchasing the proper and most up-to-date furnishings to outfit their bodies, homes, and cities. Aware that many Europeans thought they inhabited the outer edges of civilization, many Americans bristled at signs of disdain at their lack of refinement both personal and material. Taking his cues from the popular imported etiquette books of the period, the young George Washington, in an effort to try to make up for the lack of an English education, painstakingly copied out tenets from *Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*. Self-conscious about his lack of British training and desirous for a career in the British military, he wrote out maxims such as “Sleep not when others Speak;” “Put not off your Cloths in the presence of Others;” and “Kill no Vermin as Fleas, lice ticks & c in the Sight of Others.” Years later, in the midst of fighting Revolutionary battles, General Washington took time out of his military planning to supervise the purchase of the most fashionable porcelain dishes from Loyalist merchants to decorate his headquarters. Far from being a superfluous detail, the general knew that if the rebels were victorious, he would need to have the proper imported objects befitting a gentleman and a

leader of a civilized new nation. Washington understood that fine objects had diplomatic uses, for a fine set of china would help earn the respect of his British counterparts who had treated the colonial militia with very little respect during the French and Indian War. These issues were painfully important to a man who while aspiring to climb the ranks as a British officer experienced discrimination due to his colonial status.

It was not only the American Revolutionary leaders who felt the effects of cultural insecurity. Washington's desire to make an impression with fine objects was not unusual. When travelers came to the United States from across the Atlantic they often remarked upon how eager their hosts were to gain their approval. For instance, Margaret Hall, the wife of a visiting British naval captain, wrote to her sister in London that her American hostesses were continually asking her if the food they served and the entertainment they provided were comparable to fashionable dinner parties in London. Although Mrs. Hall politely declined to give an answer, when writing to her sister she noted that if they had to ask if they were equals, then they were obviously not.

Boastful expressions of national accomplishment often took the form of matching or outdoing the accomplishments of the British. Foreign visitors also commented upon how much the average Americans bragged about even the smallest of national "firsts," from inventions such as the banjo clock to the production of lead pencils using domestic graphite. While these markers of material development may seem minor when judged by today's standards, at the time they signaled material growth and development in a nation that still depended upon British imports not only for luxury items of refinement and polish, as is often assumed, but for necessities of everyday life, such as tools, textiles, pottery, books, scientific journals, and medical equipment. Not only did Britain regain the pre-Revolutionary American market after the war, the amount of trade grew significantly due to increased consumer desire for British goods. Although politically independent, the United States of America continued to be tied materially, culturally, and economically to Great Britain.

Self-consciousness about fashion and manners was just one of many concerns about life in a new nation. As in other emerging nations, American society and culture was characterized by insecurity and instability. It is in this milieu that race, and in particular, the color of the skin, took on new and charged meanings for Anglo-Americans. While it is not within the purview of this brief piece to untangle the skeins of the various arguments about racial theory, nor to evaluate the merits of the various medical explanations proffered regarding Moss's transformation, I would like to suggest some of the social ramifications for the American nation that were at stake in the debate about the Moss's curious change in color.

Clearly, the debate about the origin of racial differentiation was not simply an academic matter, without social consequences; the origin of racial difference was integral to determining the relationship between the races. The public curiosity about Moss and the keen scientific interest in his condition

can be explained as expressions of the anxiety experienced by white settlers in America. If black Africans and tawny Indians could become white when their environments changed from condition of savagery to civilization, as some hypothesized was the case with Moss, might then the opposite happen? Would those who were now white become dark when they ventured into savage surroundings? What Anglo-Americans were not nearer savagery than refined Europeans?

Early racial theory in America reflected a triangular relationship among "civilized" Europeans, "uncivilized" Natives and blacks, and uncertain white Americans in between who could potentially move in either direction. When Henry Moss put himself on display he offered the American public an opportunity, not just to see a curiosity, but to indulge their curiosity and their fears about just what kind of a nation and a people they were now and were in the process of becoming. Moss made money because race and nation were tangled in fascinating ways. While Americans, literate and illiterate, turned out to see (and touch) Moss, Europeans interested in America and its racial puzzles turned to Samuel Stanhope Smith, who produced one of the very few works by an American author read at this time by Europeans. In his *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* Smith engaged the increasingly heated debates about the origins of mankind and the question of racial differentiation. The topic had both scientific and religious significance because those who believed the divide between races deep enough to cut men into different species seemed to challenge the Mosaic account of man's common descent from Adam and Eve. To Smith, this seemed heresy. Reflecting his belief that the principles of religious and scientific truth were compatible, Reverend Smith defended the Biblical account of man's origin by arguing that all men had indeed descended from common ancestors, but exposure to different "climates" and "states of society" had altered men's physical appearances. His rather simplistic theory asserted that exposure to the "savage state" roughened and coarsened features and darkened the complexion, while conversely the civilized and highly cultivated state served to polish and refine features and lighten the skin.

While Smith's theory may have defended the Biblical tenet of man's common origin, it raised dangers of a different sort. If he was right, then what would happen to Anglo-Americans living in the rough environs of the New World? It would seem that the author was aware of the rather alarming implications of his theory, for he twisted his line of argument into some rather inelegant contortions in order to avoid implications about the looming possibility of white degeneration.

An important part of his argument involved an explanation of how Anglo-Americans had maintained their superior level of "civilization" and physical "beauty" while living in a dangerously uncultivated environment, side by side with Indian "savages" and African slaves. According to Smith, the superiority of Anglo-Americans living in the wild environs of the new United States depended on their high degree of civilization. Smith assured readers that

"society in America" was increasing in "refinement." Yet the uncomfortable fact remained that at the time that Smith was writing, the degree of cultivation of the so-called "arts of civilization" achieved by the new nation was a far cry from that of Europe. Smith insisted, however, that even if the worst happened, and Anglo-Americans were to "sink into a state of savagism," their European decent would prevent them from complete regression to savagery.

The key to Smith's argument, then, was the physical features of Anglo-Americans. White skin and other features that were shared with people in Europe were equated with the civilized attainment of European societies. Conversely, the dark physical features of Natives and enslaved Africans were equated with savagery. Smith argued that physical features were a reflection of long-term exposure to a particular geographic "climate." But the physical features were also influenced by what he called the "state of society," which entailed such things as "manners" and "language," and for Europeans, entailed the "arts of civilization." According to Smith, the "state of society comprehends diet, clothing, lodging, manners, habits, face of the country, objects of science, religion, interests, passions and ideas of all kinds, infinite in number and variety." He argued that "each of these causes makes small variations on the human countenance" and that the "different combinations of the whole" as well as local climate "will be adequate to account for all the varieties we find among mankind." Smith's argument contained both hope and fear—hope that Americans could become more refined by attaining the arts and manners of Europe, but also fear that living in the same uncultivated environment that had made Natives into savages might also make Anglo-Americans uncivilized.

Smith looked to physical evidence to discern both the possibilities for a higher civilization, as well as signs of degeneracy into savagery. As proof of the attainment of civilization in the climate of America, Smith cited examples of Africans living in the United States. He noted the lighter skin of "domestic servants" (as opposed to "field slaves"), who worked and lived in close proximity to more civilized Anglo-Americans. Smith used Henry Moss as a prime example of his theory in practice. Moss was not a man with a disease. He represented the future of a dark race become intimate with civilized refinement. The physical proximity of African Americans like Moss to civilized Anglo-Americans in increasingly refined American cities would produce men and women with lighter skin color.

But what of Anglo-Americans who lived with Natives? Were they in danger of reverting to savagery and darkening into savages? While conceding that the harsh natural conditions of North America did affect Anglo-Americans, by darkening their complexions, Smith assured readers in an extended footnote, "The Anglo-Americans . . . will never resemble the native Indians. Civilisation [sic] will prevent so great a degeneracy either in the colour [sic] or the features. Even if they were thrown back again into the savage state the resemblance would not be complete; because, the one would receive the impressions of the climate on the ground of features formed in Europe." According to Smith, the physical features of Anglo-Americans who lived in

proximity to savage tribes protected them against degeneracy. Because the physical features they bore were originally created in the climate of Europe, even when not reinforced by a continued practice of the civilized arts, Anglo-Americans would be protected against complete reversion to savagery.

Samuel Stanhope Smith's book was more than an early example of American theories of white racial supremacy; his ideas reflected the triangular structure within which white Americans in the post-colonial period defined their lives. Vulnerable to charges of being inferior to Europeans, they faced such fears by defining darker people as being less civilized. In trying to refute definitions of America as primitive and uncivilized, Anglo-Americans distanced themselves from African Americans and American Indians, displacing the taint of savagery solidly onto other groups. The visceral fear that white Americans expressed about becoming savage was tied to the insecurity of their hopes for becoming more civilized and for measuring up to the higher standards of Europe and Great Britain. People in the early republic were vulnerable to being measured and dismissed within the hierarchies set in place during the colonial period.

Smith was concerned about the possibility of Africans becoming more civilized, since it reflected on the Biblical tenet of the unity of mankind, but he was also addressing the need for Americans to establish the new United States as a civilized nation. Could savage peoples, born in inhospitable climates, be made more refined? His answer was yes. And if savages could become tamer in the wild climate of America, then surely white Americans were in no danger of regression into a lower state of society. The need to reassure European audiences that Anglo-Americans would not degenerate was evident, and it was here that white supremacy based upon physical features functioned most clearly. It was whiteness, embodied in blood ties to Europe, that protected one's civilized status.

The fascination of American men of letters with Henry Moss, the African American seeming to turn white, however, mirrored their denial of the possibility that whites might turn black. Henry Moss brought them good news, of a sort. Black men in good circumstances could turn white. But this was a culture profoundly inconsistent in its grants of whiteness. According to some, encounters with civilization were turning Moss white. But more intimate encounters with "civilization" produced pale children who were not called white. No child produced in coerced sexual liaisons between enslaved women and white slave masters could be considered white. The very possibility (denied through legal enforcement and intellectual erasure) would have signaled an acceptance that whiteness was not the refined object that would protect Americans of European descent against degeneracy. Such was the hope produced in a post-colonial moment of insecurity and vulnerability in America.

Whether or not Henry Moss was aware of the particular debates on racial theory going on at the time, he was undoubtedly sensitive to the curiosity he provoked and the money he could earn from it. His ability to profit from putting himself

up for display is a literal illustration of how whiteness was a commodity in American society at this time. The intense intrigue with his miraculous transformation in color suggests uncertainty and anxiety about the permeability of racial borders in the first years of the nation's existence. Although concerns about racial hierarchies clearly existed throughout the colonial period; independence changed the nature of the debates in significant ways. Now the racial identity of the new United States of America—which was tied to international pronouncements of what nations were considered civilized and what savage—was at stake. The same fears that spurred the interest over Moss's uncertain racial and physical condition lead to efforts to legally secure white supremacy in the U.S.

It is in this context that we can understand the Naturalization Law of 1790, which limited citizenship to “free white persons” who had resided in the United States for at least two years and were willing to swear loyalty to the Constitution. What might have remained a permeable boundary between white and black, free and enslaved, necessitated by the proprietary practices of slavery, was transformed by this law (which incidentally remained on the federal books until 1952) that explicitly limited eligibility for citizenship to whites. This piece of legislation reflected the hopes that Americans could successfully erect what they considered one of the main pillars of the project of nation building—that of securing the nation's racial frontiers. Moss's case, just a few short years later, revealed the difficulties and perhaps impossibility of that task. The vulnerabilities of the nation in a period when its very survival was still uncertain created the desire for an object to protect the aspirations to civilization, and whiteness as a commodity became the foundational possession of national belonging in post-colonial America.

And so our story ends where it began, with the American public's curiosity about a man called Henry Moss. As I have suggested, he represented a New American of a troubling sort—a man of mixed and confusing racial signs, with an ambiguous past and an uncertain future. The same perhaps can be said about the nation as a whole. We cannot be certain whether Moss was black or white, slave or free. What we do know is that like many Americans of his generation Moss discovered ways to turn uncertainty and curiosity to profit in his new nation's capacious markets. In his commercial ambitions and in his odd ambiguities, perhaps Moss was the quintessential American, the “new man.”

Further Reading:

Today's readers can read a reprint of Samuel Stanhope Smith's, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), originally published in 1787 and revised in 1810. Winthrop D. Jordan's introduction to this work is particularly informative and well presented. A classic popular work that treats some of the issues raised here is William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-59* (Chicago, 1960). For a study on the construction of “whiteness,” see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color:*

European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), in particular chapt. 1, "'Free White Persons' in the Republic, 1790-1840." For an article on the significance of the concept of "whiteness" in the American legal system, see Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993).

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