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PROJECT Negroes of N.Y.

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By Ralph Ellison,

Chas. Alexander
Editor.

Henry Sipkins: A Biographical Sketch

Facts concerning Henry Sipkins are extremely evasive; a broad, but by no means exhaustive, examination of records of his time have so far revealed but two sources making mention of his activities. One of these, which appears to have been his only published work, was "An Oration On The Abolition Of The Slave Trade", which was delivered in 1809 at New York City.

The second of these sources was an eulogy carried in the Colored American, issues of November 17th and 18th, 1838, following Sipkins' death in September of that year. Of the two sources, this contained the most biographical material; but the difficulty here is that only one of the issues containing the eulogy is accessible.

In discussing Peter Williams, a contemporary of Sipkins, in his work "The Negro Author", Loggins states :

" Sipkins delivered his own ORATION ON THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE, simpler and perhaps better than Williams' speech on the same subject, in the same church a year later. But apparently nothing from Sipkin's pen got into print after he grew to maturity, and we do not know why he was called the "Jefferson" of his people".

Loggins gave Sipkins age at the time of the oration as nineteen years. In 1808 he had introduced Williams at a meeting, on which occasion Williams had delivered an oration on the same subject.

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The oration, in the florid style of the period, made use of an elaborate vocabulary to the point of virtuosity, but in its limits Sipkins was able to essay a brief history of slavery, the irony of the Negroes position in America, and appealed with deep emotion for the abolition of the slave trade.

The eulogy throws some light on the reason why Sipkins was called the "Jefferson" of his people. It stated that Sipkins had a hand in every enterprise affecting the uplift of Negroes, and more specifically stated that he led a remonstrance at the State Convention in 1821 against a proposed revision of the constitution which would have deprived Negroes of the election franchise. This remonstrance caused the body to deliberate for twelve days and finally effected the extension of suffrage with reservations.

Sipkins, it states, was one of those who attended the convention of The Free People Of Colour. Further, he organized an Improvement Society, and a Mechanics society, both of which were unsuccessful. He was more successful with the Mutual Relief Society, which was said to have been the first incorporated benevolent society in the State of New York. This society was a bitter opponent of the African Colonization Society, against which it directed an attack of orators and pamphlets. Many of its remonstrances and findings ~~of the same nature~~ were used by Garrison in his writings against the Colonization Society.

It is at this point the eulogy was continued to the next issue. However, it is not too much to say that Sipkins was a highly conscious Negro, as were many of his time, who labored for abolition and the humanitarian treatment of Negroes. The brief facts establish him as an aggressive individual possessing ability as an organizer ^{and as one} who made the most of his education in articulating the hopes and strivings of the Negro people. He died Sept 30th 1838.

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