In 1451, Europeans began their explorations of the west coast of sub-Saharan Africa. From Senegal to Angola, the Europeans discovered African people who were by all accounts, expert watermen and “the best swimmers in the world.” The Europeans attributed these extraordinary swimming skills to constant exercise and “from being brought up, both men and women from infancy, to swim like fishes.”

While most people today associate slavery with fields of cotton and tobacco, enslaved African swimmers were essential to early colonization of the Americas. African watermen taught the colonists maritime skills and new or more effective ways to hunt whales and catch fish, crabs, and clams. They earned great fortunes for their owners by harvesting rich pearl beds.

In every major port city, such as Havana, Veracruz and Cartagena, teams of enslaved African underwater divers were kept aboard salvage vessels ready to depart on short notice to recover treasure and other valuable cargoes lost in shipwrecks.
1700-1865 Swimming: An African-American Tradition

At a time when most Whites did not know how to swim, while many slaves, even those born on plantations, learned to swim young. Most plantations were located near waterways to facilitate the transportation of slave-produced goods to market. Thus, slaves had ready access to swim and it was one of their favorite pastimes. Numerous accounts describe enslaved children who were between seven and twelve years old swimming. Frederick Douglass recalled that near where he lived in Maryland in the 1820’s, when he was seven or eight, “there was a creek to swim in... a very beautiful playground for children.” Professor Kevin Dawson estimates that in the 18th Century, as many as 80% of Blacks knew how to swim while only 20% of Whites could.

Mamout Yarrow, a freed slave and practicing Muslim, was reportedly over 100 years old at the time of this painting by Charles Wislon Peale in 1819. During his lifetime he was regarded as “the greatest swimmer to ever have swum in the Potomac River.”

Paul Cuffee, son of an African born slave who earned his freedom in Massachusetts, joins the whaling fleets at 16, rises to the rank of captain and became, perhaps, America’s first Black millionaire.

York, the slave of William Clark, was the only African American to serve on the “Corps of Discovery.” He was also the expedition’s best swimmer.

Whether organized by slaves themselves or by slaveholders, slaves of both sexes competed in swimming contests. Some slaves fused swimming to blood sports when they fought sharks, alligators and manta rays to amuse themselves or their owners, and to demonstrate their skill and strength - and perhaps their manhood.

In the 19th Century, as it became known that the ability to swim could be used to escape from slavery, many slave owners prohibited slaves from swimming.

Escaped slaves and free Blacks able to swim, found economic opportunities in the merchant and whaling fleets of the northern states. In 1863, African Americans made up 25% of the Union Navy.

The Underground Railroad

In 1831, Tice Davids, a runaway slave from Kentucky, dives into the Ohio River with his owner in hot pursuit. Davids swims for his life across the great river while the other man seeks out a boat to row after him. When Davids disappears from view and his owner presumes him drowned, he tells another man that the slave must have got to where he was going on “an underground railroad.” Davids, however, makes it to Ripley, Ohio and freedom. Although generally associated with Harriet Tubman, it was a swimming feat that gave birth to the term “Underground Railroad.”
1866-1945 Swimming: For Whites Only

After the Civil War, Jim Crow laws create a segregated society. Whites exclude Blacks from beaches and segregated swimming pools, which are built in nearly every city and small town in America. The pools of this era are enormous aquatic playgrounds that become the epicenter of summer social life for White society. National Learn-to-Swim campaigns, offering free lessons, are launched. African Americans are, for the most part, kept off the beach and out of the water. As a result the rich tradition of swimming is thus excised from African American culture. At the start of WWII, a study shows that 85% of Black sailors were unable to swim, compared to only 10% of Whites.

Steeplechase Park's swimming pool was the most popular attraction at Coney Island, N.Y. It was one of hundreds of giant aquatic playgrounds that attracted White people to swimming across America, in the first half of the 20th Century.

Swimming is a glamorous pastime with special emphasis on White women and children learning to swim for health and water safety.

Above: “Colored” pools were not “separate but equal.” Where communities did provide swimming facilities for Blacks, they were typically little more than shallow wading pools, without the amenities and attractions found at White pools.

Right: WWII hero Charles Jackson French is a curious footnote from the era of Jim Crow segregation.
1946-1964 Swimming: Civil Rights

According to Professor Marvin Dunn, of Florida International University, the start of the modern civil rights movement can be traced to the demand by Black veterans for equal access to beaches and other swimming facilities after WWII. With the possible exception of Miami, and the establishment of the Virginia Key “Colored Beach,” virtually every attempt to integrate swimming pools and beaches resulted in violence, even after the Supreme Court overruled segregation with the landmark decision of Brown vs. Board of Education.

Opening Pools to Negroes Starts St. Louis Race Riots
In St. Louis, on May 30, 1949, two athletic coaches—James Naismith and John Wooden—started the first Negro swimming team. The team was composed of Negroes from the local high schools.

In 1946, a group of Black, outraged at the drowning of several black children at the local “colored swimming hole,” demand access to the town’s municipal pool that was for “Whites Only.” Threatened by an angry mob of 5,000 Whites, Robert Williams threatens the whites with his gun and the situation is diffused. His actions in self-defense and subsequent book, "Negroes With Guns" is credited with the start of the “Black Power” movement.

As congress was debating the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a group of integrationists staged a “Swim In” at the Monson Motel in St. Augustine, Florida. This photograph of the motel’s manager pouring muriatic acid on the demonstrators made front page news across the country and is widely credited with influencing the passage of the Act.

INTEGRATING SUNLITE POOL

8 NEGROS ARRESTED

The Sunlighte Pool at Cincinnati’s Coney Island was the site of the 1932 Men’s Olympic Trials.
1965-Present Swimming: Safety, Health and Gold Medals

With integration and its accompanying racial tensions, the idyllic “Golden Age of Swimming” ends for whites. In New Orleans, city officials closed the Audubon Park Pool rather than comply with legal mandates that required Black and White children to swim together. The pool reopened in 1971 as the Whitney Young Pool, named after the Civil Rights leader who drowned during a trip to Africa, but it is never again popular. As was the case with public pools across America, Whites abandoned them for the safer havens of private clubs and newly affordable backyard pools. With few people patronizing the pools, they lost money and closed for financial reasons.

Swimming facilities built after the 1960, like the International Swimming Hall of Fame, catered primarily to competitive swimming enthusiasts and offered few of the inducements and amusements that attracted non-swimmers to pools in the first half of the 20th Century. Not surprisingly, most swimming pools today are as segregated as they were before 1964.

One tragic consequence of the African-American swimming experience, once one of the most important African Traditions – is that today, African Americans drown in significantly disproportionate numbers when compared to Whites. Another, is that many African Americans will never experience the pleasures and health benefits of recreational pastimes made possible by the acquisition of swimming skills.

Today, modern aquatic facilities welcome everyone and descendants of the African Diaspora have overcome genetic stereotypes by excelling at the highest levels of competitive swimming. The only obstacle preventing individuals from learning to swim and enjoying all the health, recreational and safety benefits of swimming is the desire to get in and swim.

Black Pioneers in Swimming

4. Sabir Muhammad, 10 Time NCAA Champion & American Record Holder.
7. Cullen Jones, Olympic Champion & World Record Holder.