

"Of the antiquity of the Negro there can be no doubt," George Washington Williams wrote confidently in his two-volume *History of the Negro Race in America* (1883). His emphasis on Africa as the ancestral homeland of black Americans stood prominently within a black literary tradition of poems, theological essays, and historical narratives dating from the eighteenth century. Noting the presence of African people at the "first dawn of history," Williams spoke of ancient African civilizations much like the white educated elite spoke of the greatness of Rome and Greece. "Before Romulus founded Rome," Williams proclaimed, "before Homer sang, when Greece was in its infancy, and the world quite young, 'hoary Meroe' [in present-day Sudan] was the chief city of the Negroes along the Nile." With a divinity degree from Newton Theological Institution, Williams sought to vindicate his racial heritage as did other late nineteenth-century trained African American Protestant clergy who mined biblical and classical Greco-Roman texts for their comments on the ancient African kingdoms of Egypt, Ethiopia, Kush, Nubia, and Meroe. Such texts served as the basis for writing books that countered racist images of a continent devoid of civilization, governments, and culture.

Because of his professed commitment to objectivity and his extensive use of footnotes and quoted original sources, Williams is considered the first serious historian of the African American experience. Writing in the 1880s, the erudite Williams benefited from the new facts and findings to emerge during the nineteenth century. Archaeological discoveries and travel accounts broadened his knowledge of Africa, making it possible for him to write about West African kingdoms, as well as previously unknown western and southern states. He described cities, rivers, armies, and even languages. He stated in the preface to his massive study that "whatever science has added, I have appropriated."

Today, social scientists and natural scientists have much to say about the African past. Archeological, environmental, linguistic, and genomic studies have played a noteworthy role in overturning the once-popular notion of Africa as the "Dark Continent," meaning without a known or knowable history. Genomic scientists largely agree that humans started their evolutionary journey in Africa several million years ago and from there migrated to different parts of the earth. Given that centuries of New World enslavement closed off personal hereditary knowledge of a specific ethnic lineage in Africa, it is no less than astounding that genomic sequencing now makes possible the ability to find one's roots. Equally fascinating is the cultural and social legacy of "new" African Americans, specifically, the successive generations of persons born of immigrants who came to the United States from every part of Africa and its diaspora during the twentieth century and particularly since the mid-1960s. They comprise an integral part of the contributions of African-descended people to the history of this nation and world, the most notable example being Barack Obama of Kenyan ancestry, the forty-fourth president of the United States.