Today in History - May 25

May 25
Select date: May 25 Go

Today's Stories: **Ralph Waldo Emerson** | **Bill "Bojangles" Robinson**

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Ralph Waldo Emerson

Essayist, philosopher, and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston on **May 25**, 1803. Son and grandson of Protestant divines, Emerson attended Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School, entering the Unitarian ministry in 1829.

> *There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion;...The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does anyone until he has tried.*
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," in *Essays*[1], First Series. Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1841. p. 38

Ralph Waldo Emerson, , c1884. Prints & Photographs Division

A popular, if unconventional preacher, young Emerson's sermons consisted of personal reflections on spirituality and virtue. He avoided expounding doctrine or engaging in controversy, preferring instead to emphasize personal experience and intuition. Emerson resigned from the ministry in 1832. By the end of the decade, however, he was the leading exponent of transcendentalism, a philosophy that maintains the universality of creation, upholds the intrinsic goodness of man, and grounds all knowledge in personal insight.

From the 1830s on, Emerson and a group of like-minded thinkers including Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody were based in Concord, Massachusetts. The transcendentalist community at Concord not only shared radical religious views, but also embraced forward-looking social reforms including abolition, temperance, and woman suffrage.

Emerson lived in his family home, The Old Manse, for one year, where he completed his notable, *Nature* (1836)[2], and composed the poem "Concord Hymn" (1837) which commemorates the Revolutionary War battle with its phrase, "And fired the shot heard round the world." Nathaniel Hawthorne and his wife later rented the Old Manse.[3] A prolific writer and thinker, Emerson's collected essays earned international acclaim, and, for decades, he remained a popular lecturer.

The Old Manse, Concord, c1900. Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division

By the time of his death in 1882, the eighty-year-old radical was heralded as the "Sage of Concord."

Home of Emerson, Concord, Mass. Cosmos Pictures Co., N.Y., 1905. Prints & Photographs Division

Learn More

- Search Today in History for features on the reformers, philosophers, writers, and artists who formed Emerson's circle:
  - Henry David Thoreau
  - Elizabeth Palmer Peabody
  - John Burroughs
  - Walt Whitman
  - Bronson Alcott
  - Daniel Chester French
  - Louisa May Alcott
  - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
- Read *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Philosopher and Seer; an Estimate of His Character and Genius in Prose and Verse*[4] by A. Bronson Alcott (1882).
- Read a letter from Emerson to Walt Whitman praising Whitman's poetry. This famous Emerson letter is available in manuscript form in the Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection. A printed copy of the letter can be found in the Thomas Biggs Harned Collection of Walt Whitman Papers. Search both of these collections on Emerson for drafts of essays and articles written by Whitman about Emerson.
- Emerson edited and wrote a moving biographical sketch for Henry David Thoreau's final work, Excursions. Published posthumously in 1863, *Excursions* is available through the collection The Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850-1920.
- Emerson was a popular lecturer as well as writer. Search historic newspapers through Chronicling America to find reviews and notices about his books and speaking engagements.
- In 1840, Emerson founded the transcendentalist literary magazine, *The Dial*[5], with Margaret Fuller and others. A writer, editor, and intellectual, Fuller published an introspective account of a trip to the Great Lakes region in 1843, *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* is available through the collection Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca. 1820 to 1915.
- Take a virtual tour of turn-of-the-century Concord, Massachusetts. Homes and haunts of the transcendentalists include the large white house Emerson occupied after renting the Manse to Nathaniel Hawthorne.
- Emerson's works are available through the Internet Archive[6] and the HathiTrust Digital Library[7].
- View the Woman Suffrage collections:
  - National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection
  - Women's Suffrage: Pictures of Suffragists and Their Activities
  - Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party
  - National American Woman Suffrage Association Records
  - Scrapbooks of Elizabeth Smith Miller and Anne Fitzhugh Miller, included in the National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson

Legendary jazz tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was born on **May 25**, 1878, in Richmond, Virginia. His given name was Luther Jr. Robinson exemplified the vaudeville tradition of his younger brother, William. An extraordinary performer and synthesizer of the tap tradition, Robinson is also credited with two major innovation in this American art form: transforming its flat footwork into dancing up on the toes, which gave tap "a hitherto-unknown lightness and presence." Many steps Robinson performed with his trademark clarity, precision, and elegance, including the famous "star dance," remain part of the tap repertoire today.

Portrait of Bill Robinson. Carl Van Vechten, photographer, Jan. 25, 1933. Van Vechten Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

Orphaned in early childhood and unwanted by his grandmother, a survivor of slavery and a Sioux Baptist who forbade dancing, Robinson nevertheless began dancing and singing as a young child for nickels and dimes on Richmond street-corners. He ran away to Washington, D.C., and spent some years dancing in local beer gardens and surviving on odd jobs before breaking into the relatively new theatrical genre called "vaudeville," which showcased dancers, singers, comedians, and actors in a series of short performances. By the early decades of the twentieth century, Robinson was earning top dollar on the vaudeville circuit and is nightclub as one of the very few black dancers who was permitted to perform as a soloist. In 1928 he burst onto Broadway with sensational success in the all-black revue *Blackbirds of 1928*. Other Broadway triumphs followed.

By the 1930s, motion pictures and radio had usurped vaudeville's popularity and Robinson moved with the times from stage to Hollywood in 1932 and appeared in some sixteen films, most famously opposite Shirley Temple. *Stormy Weather* (1943), with Lena Horne, provided him a rare opportunity to appear in an African-American production. Although his film career brought him even greater prominence during this period, Robinson also continued to work in the theatre. He was featured in the highly acclaimed *Hot Mikado*, staged at the 1939 World's Fair, in which a critic for *Theatre Arts* described his dancing:

> *He does not sing, or even swing, with his voice but with his feet. Never has shoe leather beaten out such a variety of intricate patterns. Never ... has one note been made to sing and soar, to whisper and to laugh, in such astonishingly complex rhythm.*

A quick-tempered and competitive man, a perfectionist well aware of his own immense artistic gifts, Robinson chafed at and challenged the oppressive racial norms of his era, gambled recklessly, and carried a gold-plated revolver that no one doubted he was prepared to use. He celebrated his sixty-first birthday by dancing down Broadway from Columbus Circle to 46th Street. As his seventeen birthday approached, his dancing abilities, like his popularity, barely waned. At Robinson's death in 1949, thousands passed by his body as it lay in state in Harlem, where he had long since been deemed honorary mayor. Black and white, high and low, alike paid tribute to the man's professional genius and personal generosity.

Portrait of Bill Robinson. Carl Van Vechten, photographer, Jan. 25, 1933. Van Vechten Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

Several films included in the collection Variety Stage Sound Recordings and Motion Pictures demonstrate the style of dancing Robinson excelled at.

Unabashedly racist, the comedy Fights of Nations relied on both stereotype and slapstick. "Pars 2" opens with a small fight between three blind Scots, and moves on to a New York City dance hall. Between brawls, viewers are treated to a tap dance, performed by a character known as "The Bully."

Tap Dance Sequence from Fights of Nations. Part 2 of 3, second film. Billy Bitzer, camera. United States: American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1907. Variety Stage Sound Recordings and Motion Pictures. Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Sound Division

The Library of Congress presents such materials as part of the record of the past, reflecting the attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs of different times. The Library of Congress does not endorse the views they express.

1. Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (rev. ed. with foreword and afterword by Brenda Dixon-Gottschild. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 187. (Return to text)

Learn More

- Browse the Subject Index for the digital collection The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, 1600 to 1920 on find works on Richmond, Virginia, where Robinson spent his earliest years; included is the illustrated 1987 work Souvenir Views: Negro Enterprises & Residences, Richmond, Va.
- The collection Variety Stage Sound Recordings and Motion Pictures illustrates the vibrant and diverse forms of entertainment, especially vaudeville, that thrived at the turn of the century. Search the collection on tap dance to view The Boys Think They Have One On Four Grandpa.
- Tap Dance in America: A Twentieth-Century Chronology of Tap Performance on Stage, Film, and Media is an exhaustive and detailed collection of materials related to twentieth-century tap performance. Included is Tap Dance in America: a Short History.
- Explore the collection African American Sheet Music[8] available through the Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship.
- Search the collection American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940 on Harlem to retrieve several interviews describing the Harlem Robinson knew in the 1920s and 1930s. "Harlem Beauty Shop" mentions the *Hot Mikado*.
- Search on the words *Dunbar Apartments* in the digital collection Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey to see photographs and information on a building where Robinson lived in New York City.
- Read Today in History features on some of Robinson's show-business contemporaries, including impresario Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., escape artist Harry Houdini , and "the father of the Blues," W. C. Handy .

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