WITH a name like Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett, its owner might have been taken for an Englishman with a Spanish background, plus a touch of the Old Testament, Ebenezer (Hebrew for "stone of help") thrown in for good fortune. With his handsome good looks—light brown complexion, short, straight, dark hair, and a flowing, twirled-at-the-tips moustache—he might have been taken for a Spanish dancing or fencing master, a European count, or the able American diplomat that he was. Only he looked more like a native of the Caribbean area, where he served, than of New England, where he was born. And unlike so many other American diplomats, Bassett was fluent in the native language (French) of the country (Haiti) to which he was accredited; he even shortly mastered the Creole dialect that was used in the only French-speaking nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Bassett served the United States in Haiti from mid-1869 till late 1877, longer than his three predecessors combined, and while he was there Haiti had four presidents: one was summarily shot; one fled the country; one took political refuge in Bassett's residence for many months; while only the fourth, Bassett's friend, President Boisrond-Canal, was there to bid him farewell when he returned to the United States. Thus it was no wonder that Secretary of State Hamilton Fish reportedly said of him, that he wished one-half of his ministers abroad "performed their duties as well as Mr. Bassett."

Far from having the distinguished ancestry that one might have guessed—from his name and from his aristocratic good looks—Bassett was, in fact, the son of a mulatto slave father and an American Indian mother (of the Shagiticoke branch of the Pequot tribe). He was born on October 16, 1833, in Litchfield, Connecticut, the son of Eben (for
Ebenezer) Tobias and Susan (Gregory) Bassett. The surname Bassett was an assumed one, taken from that of a “Squire Bassett,” of Derby, who once had owned Eben Tobias. Earlier, Eben Tobias’ name appears as Tobias Pero, indicating that he may have changed his surname because he changed owners. The grandfather of the future diplomat was a slave by the name of Tobias, or Tobiah, who was owned by a “Captain Wooster,” also of Derby. Tobias, or Tobiah, served in the American Revolution and may have been freed for his service, though that point is not absolutely certain.¹

Slavery was more deeply-rooted and popular in Connecticut than in any other New England state. For instance, in the 1790, or first, census of the United States, Connecticut, with 2,764 slaves, or 1.17 percent of its population, had a larger number than all the rest of New England combined. But by 1790 gradual emancipation was underway, as a result of a law passed in the aftermath of the American Revolution, in 1786, providing for the freedom of all slaves born after March 1 of that year, at the age of twenty-five. In 1797, the 1784 law was amended, however, providing for emancipation of all slaves born after August 1, 1797, but upon their twenty-first birthday, not the twenty-fifth. Even so, it was not until 1848, in the midst of the abolition crisis, that Connecticut abolished slavery altogether. But by that date, there were only twenty slaves in the whole state.²

The boy Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett attended the public schools, including high school, in Birmingham, Connecticut, and though there is no record of it his classmates must have made a joke at his expense over his uncommon, and uncommonly long, name. There was also a stint at the Wesleyan Academy, in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, before young Bassett returned to Connecticut and its State Normal School, from which he graduated, with honors, in 1853, at age twenty. That same year he was appointed principal of a public grammar school in New Haven, where he served two years, till 1855. At the same time, Bassett took advantage of the presence in New Haven of Yale University, where he studied classics, mathematics, or mathematical science, and general literature. He never graduated from Yale, but later he had a son, Ulysses Simpson Grant Bassett—with a name as long, and even more impressive than that of his father—who did graduate from there. While in New Haven, Bassett was an active member of an organization known as the Convention of Colored Men of the State of Connecticut, and in both 1854 and 1855, as one of the three secretaries at the annual meeting, he signed a petition calling upon the state to give the franchise to its black citizens.
It was in 1855 that Bassett left his native Connecticut for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the city that he would call home for the rest of his life, and the place where he would die and be buried, though he did live in New York City for almost ten years, as consul-general for Haiti. In that same year, on his birthday of October 16, Bassett married Eliza Park, who with three sons and two daughters, outlived him.

It is not clear exactly what Bassett did in Philadelphia from 1855 to 1857, but in the latter year he was named principal of the Institute for Colored Youth, a Quaker institution and the only private secondary school for blacks in Philadelphia.

Chartered in 1842 for the purpose of preparing Negro teachers, of both sexes, in either “school-learning or in the mechanic arts and agriculture,” the Institute for Colored Youth, in time, numbered among its alumni not only the vast majority of the area’s black teachers for the remainder of the nineteenth century, but two other distinguished black diplomats, John Henry Smyth and John Stephens Durham. Richard Humphreys, who made a gift of the original endowment of the Institute, had stipulated that mechanical, industrial, and agricultural subjects be taught, as well as the classical, literary, and mathematical ones, but in fact they were not until after the great Centennial Exhibition of 1876 had awakened Americans to the achievements of foreign trade schools.

Unlike most other denominational schools for blacks sponsored by whites, the Institute was run and staffed by blacks exclusively, thus providing, as well as education, good adult models for the students. Even so, the white Quaker businessmen who sat on the Institute’s governing board passed on every book chosen for the library or classroom use; they, in consultation with the black principal, prepared the examinations; their approval was needed for all new courses; and they handled all disciplinary cases themselves. In reality, the Institute was thoroughly paternalistic, but the Friends did make a special effort to seek out and develop a relationship with colleges that would accept blacks, so that black teachers for the Institute could, in turn, be recruited from them. And the Institute was free of all fees, including those for books. Thus a student had only to be accepted in order to have a chance at a free college preparatory education.

When Bassett arrived at the Institute—as principal, as teacher of mathematics, natural sciences, and classics, and as school librarian—he joined a staff of five other teachers: Octavius V. Catto, Grace A. Mapps, Martha A. Farbeaux, Jacob C. White, Jr., and Sarah Mapps Douglass (no relation to Frederick Douglass). The school was divided into four departments: preparatory for boys and preparatory for girls, and high
school for boys and high school for girls, with a total enrollment in 1860 in excess of a hundred pupils.  

Bassett, as if he did not already have enough to do—as principal, teacher, and librarian—also gave a series of evening lectures to the public, on chemistry and natural philosophy, and in both 1857 and 1858 he enrolled as a part-time student at the University of Pennsylvania. Withal, one of his staff members at the Institute, a half century later, remembered him as "a man of great modesty of character."  

The next fourteen years Bassett spent in Philadelphia at the Institute, while during the Civil War he helped to raise Negro troops for the Union Army. And somewhere along the way, he met and became a friend of Frederick Douglass, abolitionist, editor, and later diplomat, and the best known black man in America, until his death in 1895.  

Emancipation, the Fourteenth Amendment, black voters, and the Republican Party in control in Washington, all meant that after 1865 black Americans were living in a world of opportunity that they could only have imagined before the Civil War. And in that new world Bassett reputedly suggested to his friend Douglass that it was time for a black man to be appointed to represent the United States in the black republic of Haiti. Douglass agreed, and he recommended Bassett for the position, though he seems later to have wished that he had sought it for himself, when, perhaps surprisingly, President Grant recommended to the Senate that Bassett be appointed minister resident and consul general to Haiti. In the Senate, the nomination ran into opposition, from those who felt that Bassett was not qualified for the position, and from friends of Douglass, who felt that he should have had the distinction of becoming the nation's first black diplomat.  

Then, when the Senate gave its final approval, Douglass wrote a stern and cool letter of congratulation to Bassett:

> Your appointment is a grand achievement for yourself and for our whole people. It forms an important point in the history of our progress and upward tendency. I have no doubt you see the importance of your position. As you shall acquit yourself in it—wisely or otherwise, we shall be affected favorably or unfavorably.  

Douglass wanted the appointment for himself, all right, and twenty years later, in 1889, he got his revenge, so to speak, when Bassett, seeking a second appointment to Haiti, this time from President Benjamin Harrison, saw Douglass get the position. But that is a later story, and one that will be related further on.
As he prepared to leave Philadelphia for Port au Prince, Haiti, Bassett turned over leadership of the Institute for Colored Youth to one of his longtime staff members, Octavius V. Catto, who, just two years later, in 1871, was killed in a Philadelphia race riot that resulted when blacks tried to exercise their newly-gained right to vote under the Fifteenth Amendment.11

Delayed by “personal affairs” resulting from the death of his father, it was not till June 14, 1869, that Bassett arrived at his post in the Caribbean. He found there, to assist him, six consular agents; by the time he left, in November 1877, that number had doubled, to twelve, reflecting the growing importance of American commerce with the black republic.

The next eight years, while not altogether tranquil—what with recurrent revolutions and Haitian presidents either being shot or forced to flee the country, the awkward and embarrassing, and largely personal, attempt of President Grant to annex neighboring Santo Domingo, plus the threat of tropical disease—were obviously pleasant ones for Bassett, as he developed a deep knowledge as well as warm affection for Haiti and for its people. He took an intense interest in the internal affairs of Haiti, and not just in events and conditions that impinged directly on United States-Haitian relationships. For instance, in one nine-month period in 1872–73, he wrote Secretary Fish nineteen long letters about political, social, and economic matters, and indeed just general conditions about the republic.

Bassett, unlike one of his black successors, John Stephens Durham, who was troubled by later American policy of not offering political asylum in the legation offices or the minister’s personal residence to those who happened to find themselves on the losing side in yet another Haitian revolution, was troubled by complications emanating from the opposite policy, which was in effect while he was in Haiti. And well he might have been, since once, for many months, Bassett was host to a deposed Haitian president. Meanwhile, he was trying to carry on relations with the government that had deposed his house guest! When Great Britain ceased the policy of granting asylum in its legation to deposed Haitian officials, Bassett wrote to Washington of his conviction that the United States certainly ought to modify its position on the granting of asylum, but he made it clear that he was not in favor of wiping out the right altogether.

Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, and later, briefly, William M. Evarts, assuredly was kept as abreast of affairs in Haiti while Bassett was minister there as he could possibly have desired—or perhaps more
than he desired, for Bassett was a born gatherer of all kinds of bits and pieces of information that a later generation would term "intelligence." Not only was the Secretary kept fully informed of every—and frequent—governmental or parliamentary crisis, for he was also kept up-to-date on the less cataclysmic subject of local politics, plus the status of the American trade dollar, the presence of European vessels of war in the harbor of Port au Prince, the "complicated treaty of peace" between Haiti and Santo Domingo, the celebration of the American holiday of the Fourth of July on the island, and even a "historical resume of the religious situation" in Haiti. Truly, Minister Bassett told all and left out nothing.12

Back in the United States, in 1877 President Grant reluctantly relinquished the office to Rutherford B. Hayes, and though that meant that the Republicans were still in control, Hayes and his followers nevertheless wanted their own black man in Haiti—the distinguished John Mercer Langston, from Virginia. So, in November 1877, Bassett came home, but not before writing to Haitian President Boisrond-Canal of his many Haitian friends, including the president—friends whom, he said, he would likely never see again, "or indeed that beautiful Haiti on whose soil and among whose people I have passed so many happy days."13

But life and making a living had to go on—though preferably as close to Haiti as possible—so that from 1879 till 1888 Bassett served as the American consul general for Haiti in New York, a practice which was then, as now, a not uncommon one followed by other countries with dealings in the United States, but one which the United States has not itself practiced, in other countries, since the mid-nineteenth century. And for a while, during this same period, Bassett even was appointed by Haiti as its chargé d'affaires in Washington, but because he was a U.S. citizen he was only "conditionally recognized" by the American government.14

To Bassett, American political preferment was still attractive, and somnolent, beautiful Haiti still beckoned, so, in 1889, with a Republican President, Benjamin Harrison, in office once more, Bassett resigned his post as Haitian consul general in New York and briefly returned to New Haven, from which he wrote to his old friend Frederick Douglass that once more he was seeking a diplomatic appointment, preferably in Haiti. The New York Times reported that Douglass supported Bassett for the Haitian post, but unbeknownst to Bassett, by the time he wrote to Douglass of his interest in returning to Haiti, the Harrison administration already had offered the post to Douglas, who quickly accepted.15
longer having any oar in the water—either with the Haitian consulate in New York, which he had given up, or in Port au Prince, as American minister resident and consul general, the post he was seeking—Bassett swallowed his pride and wrote to Douglass, asking to be taken along as Douglass' secretary, since “even $850 [the annual salary] is better than nothing.” It was quite a comedown in position, as well as a comedown in salary from the $7,500 he had received while in Haiti twenty years earlier, but on hard times Bassett had fallen, and on hard times he would spend the rest of his life.

Back in his beloved Haiti, in spite of the low salary and lowly position, Bassett, not Douglass, well may have functioned as the American consul in fact. At least such claims were frequently made.

But in July 1891, the mercurial Douglass resigned, and Bassett soon found himself unemployed and back in the United States. There, he sank deeper and deeper into political and diplomatic oblivion, though ironically he gained a kind of immortality through the authorship of at least two publications, both, not surprisingly, on the subject of Haiti.

The first, titled *Handbook of Haiti*, was a 112-page compendium of encyclopaedic information about the country, its history, its people, institutions, economy, etc., published in 1892 by the Bureau of American Republics (the early-day Pan American Union, which eventually became the Organization of American States) in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. That same year, the *Handbook of Haiti* was reprinted in *The Executive Documents of the United States Senate*. It is a scholarly, yet well-written account that, like his earlier dispatches, is surprisingly complete, down to informing us that, at the time, 1892, among Haitian exports—in addition to such staples as coffee, cotton, sugar, and cocoa—there were goatskins and orange peelings. Also, as of 1887, there were thirty-one postoffices, which handled 479,996 pieces of mail. And when describing the office of chief executive, before the words “is elected by the people for a term of seven years,” Bassett carefully wrote, “According to the Constitution,” in obvious reference to the fact that almost never did a Haitian president last that long.

Twelve years later, in 1904, Bassett had an article published in a new journal, *The Voice of the Negro*. It was written in response to a resolution for the annexation of Haiti introduced in the Senate by Senator Wildon B. Heyburn of Idaho. Heyburn claimed that annexation was justified by geographical position, by the prospective construction of the Panama Canal, and by the general political instability that prevailed in Haiti. The resolution was coolly received, and it was promptly buried in the Committee on Foreign Relations. Bassett, too,
opposed annexation, because, he said—the case of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii notwithstanding—acquisition of islands, as opposed to contiguous territory, was contrary to longstanding United States policy. Nor was annexation in the best interests of either the Haitians or the Americans, said Bassett. There was, in the United States, he pointed out, the “color problem” that would exacerbate relations between the two peoples. He also pointed out the anomalous position in which Haitians, if annexed, would likely find themselves, together with the Filipinos and Puerto Ricans—that is, they would be declared citizens of Haiti, but not of the United States. Then, because the United States Supreme Court had already ruled that Filipinos were not aliens, because they were not United States citizens, either, they would have neither the rights of citizens nor the privileges of aliens! No one could win in such a situation. (Of course, as a result of the Jones Act of 1916 Filipinos were made citizens of the United States, while the Jones Act of 1917 accorded the same status to Puerto Ricans.) Bassett did not, however, rule out the annexation of transmarine territory, ever. Conditions in the future, he said, might make certain annexations desirable.19

Meanwhile, the years were running out for Bassett, and though briefly, once again in the early 1900s he was employed by Haiti as its consul general in New York he soon returned to Philadelphia, with his last years spent at 2121 North 29th Street. He had been in ill-health since leaving Haiti the first time, in 1877—probably from malaria or dengue fever, or both—while he also complained of a heart condition and “an annoying affection of my eyes, which are never in good trim.” It was in Philadelphia that he died, “poor and obscure,” on November 13, 1908, and it was there that he was buried, in the city that he had adopted, but which soon forgot its black, former schoolmaster who also enjoyed the distinction of being America’s first black diplomat.20

NOTES

2. Forrest Morgan, ed., *Connecticut as a Colony and as a State, or One of the Original Thirteen* (Hartford, 1904), 2: 258–59.


8. Logan and Winston, eds., "Bassett," *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*; Christmas ed., *Negroes in Public Affairs and Government*, 164; Jackson-Coppin, the Institute was moved to Cheyney, in Delaware County, and its name changed to the Cheyney Training School for Teachers. By then, the curriculum had become much more practical and less academic, "Booker T. Washington fashion." the Training School for Teachers eventually evolved into Cheyney State University, and since 1921 it has been entirely state-supported.


10. Douglass to Bassett, April 13, 1869, as quoted in Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 36–7.


16. Bassett to Douglass, June 27, 1889, as quoted in Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass*, (Washington, 1948), 323.


18. *Handbook of Haiti*, Bulletin #16, Bureau of the American Republics, 1892. Reprinted in *The Executive Documents of the United States Senate for the First Session of the Fifty-Second Congress, 1891–92*, Vol. 7 (Washington, D.C., 1892). The latter was used in this study, as no copy of the Bureau of American Republics bulletin is known to exist.
