



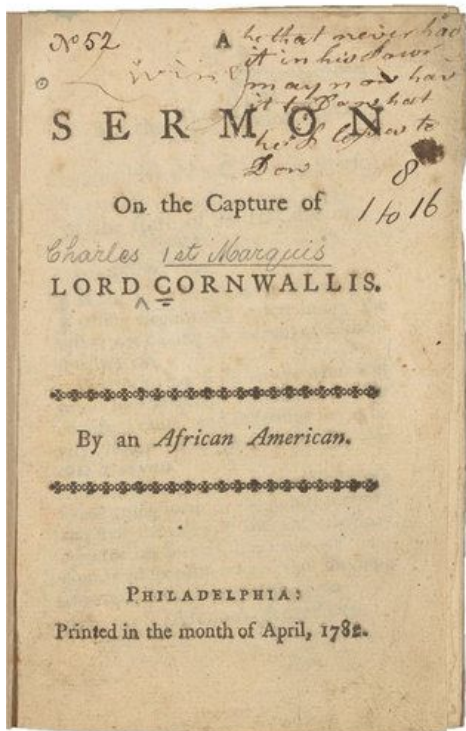
ARTS & CULTURE

The origin of “African American”

The term’s earliest known appearance in print is in an eighteenth-century sermon.

By Fred Shapiro | Jan/Feb 2016

Yale law librarian Fred R. Shapiro is working on the second edition of the *Yale Book of Quotations*.



Houghton Library, Harvard University

Send your quotation leads and questions to “You Can Quote Them,” Yale Alumni Magazine, PO Box 1905, New Haven, CT 06509-1905, or yam@yale.edu. [View full image](#)

Readers can view the sermon on the Houghton Library’s website: <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/50845864>

Most of us became familiar with the ethnonym *African American* in the 1980s, when Jesse Jackson began popularizing it as an alternative to *black*. (An ethnonym is a name by which an ethnic or racial group is known.) But the term is much older than that: recently, I found an example dating back to the earliest days of the American republic.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* traced its documented occurrences of “African American” back as far as 1835. (The related term “Afro-American,” which enjoyed a brief popularity in the 1960s, has an 1831 citation in the *OED*.) But last April, I did a routine search for the phrase in America’s Historical Newspapers, the Readex company’s very powerful database of early US papers, and was surprised to be led to a 1782 sermon published in Philadelphia. The sermon, whose only known surviving copy is at Harvard’s Houghton Library, was titled “A Sermon on the Capture of Lord Cornwallis.” The

title page of the pamphlet includes the byline “By an African American.”

The sermon gives few clues about the identity of the preacher, but I concluded that it was written by someone who was black, had some ties to South Carolina, and by his own admission did not have “the benefit of a liberal education.” Beyond that I had no clue as to his background or what kind of a person he was.

So I sought some expert advice. Richard Newman, a scholar of African American history and now director of the Library Company of Philadelphia, says he is not sure that the author was a person of color, despite the byline. “The tone and style of the pamphlet diverge from some key aspects of black writing at the time,” Newman says. “Where many African Americans emphasized the story of Exodus—which highlighted Biblical prophecy that unrepentant masters would be punished by a righteous God—this pamphlet focuses on

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