

## On the Backs of Peoples of Color

By Colleen Fong, Editor

As I observe King's birthday, Black History Month, and the Lunar New Year, I am reminded that the United States was built by the labors of peoples of color. I learned something new this past February—"Negro Ben, Negro Bill" and other nameless and faceless slaves did the dirtiest and hardest work in constructing the White House and the Capitol, two of our nation's greatest symbols. In "Toil of Slaves built nation's Capitol," by Wayne Washington (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1/23/02) I read that "slaves dug out stone for building blocks and hewed trees into lumber, as America's new capital city and its most important buildings emerged from the vast forests and wetlands that made up 18<sup>th</sup> century Washington." They had no modern technology but used pick axes and wedges to remove the massive blocks of rock.

This article reminded me of the "Ah Toys" and "Ah Sams," the 600 faceless and nameless Chinese immigrants who dammed San Leandro Creek and brought additional water to Oakland—water that was essential for the continued growth of the population in the late 1870s. Today we call the reservoir Lake Chabot. We didn't even know about the Chinese contribution until 1980 when Chinese artifacts were discovered at the site and Professor George Miller and his students were called in to excavate what they found to be a Chinese labor camp, "Yema Po" (for a tour of the site, go to the Anthropology Department website, click on C.E. Smith Museum, then click on "Yema Po"). The quote that best captures the Chinese contribution is from *A Place Called Chinese America*, by Diane Mei Lin Mark and Ginger Chih: "Chinese labor was adrenalin to the Western American economy. Chinese workers built the foundation for the transformation of California into one of the richest farming regions in the United States and the world." (substitute, "Mexican American," "Native American," "White working class" . . . )

These contributions take on new significance in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> era in which we live. Had it not been for the labors of those who looked, acted, worshipped, and/or spoke differently than the majority, the United States would not hold the privileged position we all benefit from.

## Professors Nicholas Baham, III and Wendell Brooks

### Speak at King Peace Breakfast

On January 15, 2002, Department Professors Baham and Brooks addressed the campus in the Biella Room to commemorate Dr. King's birthday. Professor Baham presented a textual analysis of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a letter King penned in response to criticism by White clergyman for precipitating the violence that resulted after Public Safety Commissioner Bull Conner turned firehoses and dogs on King's march. Penned on the margins of the newspaper in which the clergymen's letter was published, King continued writing on scraps of papers brought in by visitors and finally finished the letter on a pad his attorneys were eventually permitted to give him.

Professor Brooks, provided an historical overview of African Americans through an examination of spirituals. Among those he included in his analysis or performance were: "Oh, Freedom," "Go Down Moses," "I'm So Glad Trouble Don't Last Always," "Little David Play Your Harp," and "Get On Board, Little Children." Professor Brooks, a baritone soloist who studied voice at the Conservatore der Stadt Wien and sociology at Uppsala University in Sweden, has performed extensively throughout Europe and the United States. As he sang some of the spirituals the emotional impact was palpable.

Students of Professor Paige's attended the Peace Breakfast and wrote reaction pieces, some of which are printed on page 3.



Dr. Nicholas Baham, III,  
 Ethnic Studies

**Gallagher Memorial Scholarship**  
 applications due 4/19/2002  
 MI 4099

**Ethnic Studies Academic Society**  
 Seeking new officers for 2002-03  
 (see p. 7)

**Spring Dinner**  
 5/4/2002  
 at Ricky's in San Leandro, make prepaid reservations in MI 4099  
 (see p. 7)

**"Reclaiming the Legacy" Conference**  
 5/4/2002 at University of San Francisco  
 (see p. 7)

**R. Dunbar-Ortiz Reading & Reception**  
 May 1, 2002  
 3-5 pm  
 University Club  
 (see p. 4)

**Call for Submissions**  
 Ethnic Studies online Journal deadline  
 August 31, 2002  
 (see p. 3)