



Country Dances of Ignatius Sancho

Monday, February 20, 2017 7:00 - 10:00 p.m.

Musicians

Rachel Barton Pine, baroque violin

Tim Macdonald, baroque violin

Jeremy Ward, baroque 'cello

Dance Reconstruction and Calling

Mady Newfield

Tammy Ravitts Bretscher

Organizer - Randi Ravitts Woodworth

Ignatius Sancho (c.1729-1780)

Ignatius Sancho was born on a slave ship bound for Granada in 1729. Two years later, his parents died, and he was taken to England, where he became an enslaved house servant for three unmarried sisters. The women gave him the surname of "Sancho" because he reminded them of Don Quixote's squire. The Duke of Montagu supported him in his efforts to educate himself, and he eventually came to serve as butler in the Montagu household. The Duke and Duchess recognized Sancho's intellect and character, and through the patronage of the Montagu family, Sancho completed his education and gained his freedom.

Sancho became known as "The Extraordinary Negro." He was a respected violinist, composer, and writer of poetry, plays, and letters. He wrote passionately about the horrors of slavery, and abolitionists regarded him as a symbol of the humanity of black people and the moral imperative to abolish the slave trade. His letters were published posthumously as "The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African" and constituted one of the earliest accounts of African slavery written in English by a former slave. Sancho married Ann Osborne in the 1760s, and they had seven children. They opened a greengrocer's shop, and, since he was already well known in society, the shop became a meeting place for famous writers, artists, actors, and politicians. As a financially independent householder, Sancho became the first black person of African origin to vote in British parliamentary elections. A portrait of him (above) was painted by Thomas Gainsborough in 1768 and now hangs in the National Gallery of Canada. When Sancho died of gout in 1780, he was the first person of African descent known to have an obituary in the British press.

Ignatius Sancho was the first black composer ever to have his music published, with four volumes of his music being published during his lifetime. Some of his works soon will be published through "Music by Black Composers," which is a project of the Rachel Barton Pine Foundation in conjunction with the University of Michigan. Sancho wrote both music and dance instructions for English country dancing, which was a popular social dance in his day, and this charming dance form has had a renaissance in the 20th and 21st centuries. Tonight's dance marks one of the very few times that Sancho's country dances and music have been heard and seen as intended since the era in which he lived.