

BLACK FOUNDERS

The Free Black Community in the Early Republic

Essay by Richard S. Newman

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The Library Company of Philadelphia
Philadelphia

This publication accompanies an exhibition of the same title on view at the Library Company from March to October 2008.

The exhibition, this publication, and related public programs have been generously funded by:

The Albert M. Greenfield Foundation
The Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation
The Louise Lux-Sions Exhibition Endowment Fund
The Quaker Chemical Foundation
The Rittenhouse Foundation



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The Library Company of Philadelphia

1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107

ISBN 978-0-914076-48-3

Black Founders: The Free Black Community in the Early Republic

By Richard S. Newman

In October 1859, as sectional battles over slavery intensified, a new magazine sought to inspire African American reformers by recounting the historic struggles of black activists during the early Republic. The names that rolled off the page of the New York *Anglo-African Magazine* – James Forten, Richard Allen, William Hamilton – conjured a black classical era. “We had giants in those days!” the editors exclaimed of the men (and we now know women) who built the black community’s first autonomous organizations, launched black abolitionism, and redefined African Americans’ place in both America and the Atlantic world.¹ Without their dedication to black freedom during the Age of Jefferson, the magazine pointed out, African Americans’ struggle for justice would not have assumed so central a place during the Age of Lincoln.



London Coffee House, lithograph by W. L. Breton (Philadelphia, 1830), showing slave auction, with advertisement.

The Library Company’s exhibition “Black Founders: The Free Black Community in the Early Republic” illuminates this remarkable, though often overlooked, generation of Americans. Conceived against the backdrop of two antislavery bicentennials in 2008 – the 200th anniversary of slave trade abolition in the United States and the first liberation year of Pennsylvania’s gradual abolition act – “Black Founders” focuses on the struggles and accomplishments of African American reformers between the 1770s and 1830s. What the 20th-century Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal called the “American Dilemma” actually had its roots in the nation’s founding era, when philanthropists, politicians, reformers, and slaveholders debated the fate of black liberty in the New Republic. African Americans were critical participants in this debate. It could hardly have been otherwise. “[W]e have in common with all other men a naturel [sic] right to our freedoms,” enslaved people informed the colonial Massachusetts government two years before Jefferson declared that all men were created equal.² The Declaration of Independence enshrined this right and made it a bedrock of American society. During the Revolution, African Americans, who comprised one fifth of the overall population, fought for American independence and against racial injustice (though some fought for the British in hopes of gaining liberty). Over the next fifty years, black activists helped create America’s first civil rights movement, one that vigorously challenged slavery and racial injustice in the land of the free. These men and women were nothing less than “black founders.”

Just who composed the black founding generation? There are two possible answers. At one level, black founders may be defined as the most visible race leaders who emerged during the late 18th and early 19th centu-



“Richard Allen,” illustration in *Proceedings of the Quarto-Centennial Conference of the African M.E. Church, of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1890).

ries: Richard Allen, Phillis Wheatley, Prince Hall, and Daniel Coker, among others. These iconic figures ennobled the early black freedom struggle, becoming regional and national celebrities in African American communities. They had their portraits painted; festive days were held in their honor (black communities marked Richard Allen’s birthday of February 14th into the 20th century); and subsequent generations of activists, from Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Dubois, hailed their accomplishments as nothing short of inspirational.³ If one imagines a group portrait of black founders – done in the mold of the famous John Trumbull painting of

the white founders signing the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia – these are the people who would populate it.

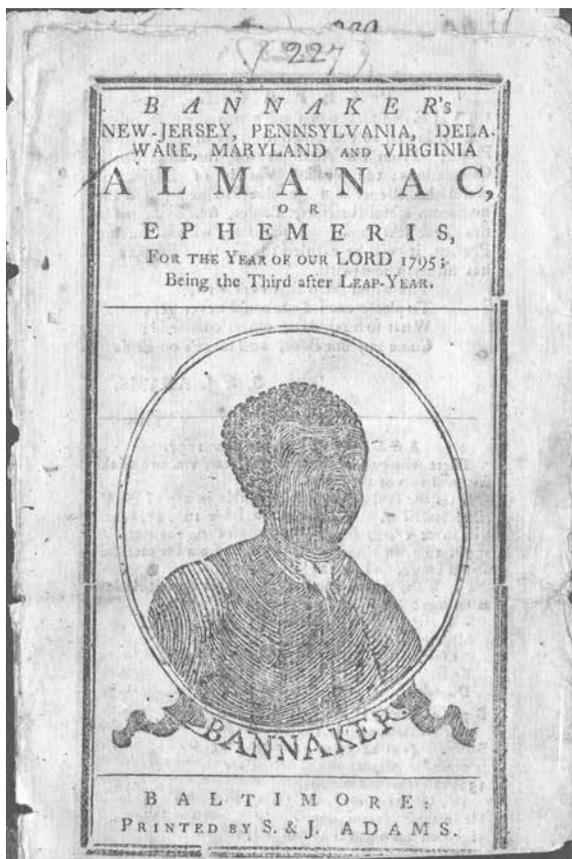
Yet because African American reformers defined freedom in group terms, the definition of black founders must also encompass those who established black organizations to help whole communities emerging from slavery. In this rendering, an unheralded Connecticut preacher named Jacob Oson, who crafted one of the first histories of African identity, deserves mention alongside the legendary founder of black Masonry Prince Hall. Likewise Rhode Island’s Newport Gardner, who helped launch America’s first black mutual aid society, ranks beside church founder Richard Allen as a great black institution-builder. And then there are the truly unheralded figures: black women like Flora Allen and Sarah Allen, the first and second wives, respectively, of the famous black leader, who dedicated their lives to



“Sarah Allen,” illustration in *Proceedings of the Quarto-Centennial Conference of the African M.E. Church, of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1890).

improving free black life by supporting the organizations their husband founded. The rich African American community life that developed after the American Revolution could not have taken shape without their philanthropic endeavors and commitment to black uplift. (For more detailed summaries of black founders' lives, please see the Appendix following this essay.)

And thrive free black communities did. While



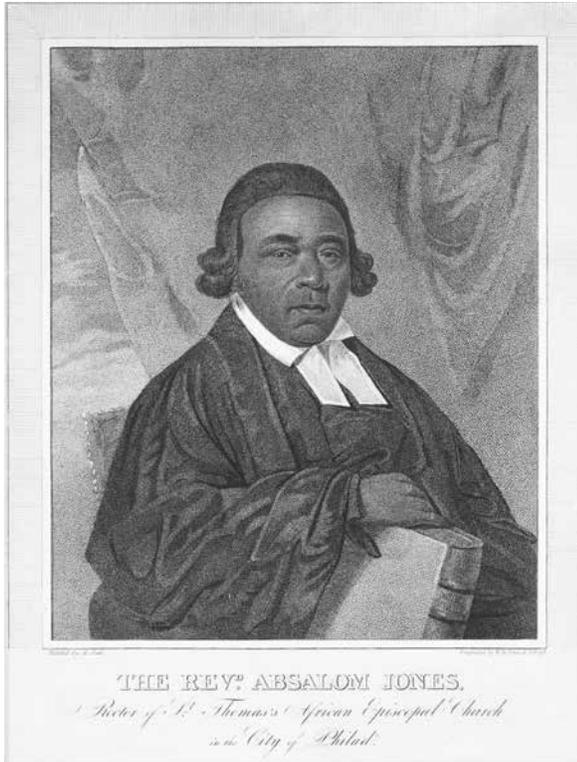
Benjamin Banneker, *Bannaker's New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia Almanac . . .* 1795 (Baltimore, 1794).

the overwhelming majority of black people remained enslaved during the early Republic, free people of color comprised a rising segment of the African American population.⁴ The first federal census of 1790 counted

59,557 free blacks in the United States, or roughly 8% of the black population. While not a completely accurate measure of the free black community, the census was generally on the mark. And it showed that both the absolute number of free blacks and the percentage of African Americans as a whole dramatically increased during the early national period. In 1800 there were 108,000 free blacks (nearly 11% of the African American population); by 1830 that number had almost tripled, rising to 320,000 (or nearly 14% of the overall black population). More importantly, the “decennial increase” – or decade to decade rise – of free black populations was staggering in the nation’s earliest years, jumping 82% in the final decade of the 18th century and 72% in the first decade of the 19th century.⁵ If the absolute number of free blacks paled next to the booming slave population (nearly two million strong by the 1830s), it nonetheless remained significant, reflecting the resilience and strength of free black communities.

African Americans’ stride toward freedom did not proceed smoothly. Black founders faced a harsh and discriminatory climate throughout emancipating Northern states. Prefiguring the reaction that accompanied Southern emancipation following the Civil War, many white Northerners expressed horror at the very prospect of black equality.⁶ Despite significant hurdles, free African American communities survived and expanded, imagining a day when freedom and justice for all would become reality.

Nevertheless, black founders failed to end ra-



The Revd. Absalom Jones, Rector of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church in the City of Philada., stipple engraving by W. R. Jones & John Boyd after the oil painting by Rembrandt Peale (Philadelphia, ca. 1820). Courtesy of the Richard Allen Museum at Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

cial oppression in their own time. When James Forten, the last of the great black founders, passed away in 1842, black and white abolitionists worried that slavery might survive for many more years. Just what, then, did black founders achieve? Pulitzer prize-winning historian Joseph Ellis asks this same question of Adams, Jefferson, Washington, and the hallowed members of the white founding generation. According to Ellis, white founders' five "core achievements" included their victory in the War of Independence with Great Britain; their creation of a large republic; their insistence on a secular state; their innovative division of popular sovereignty

between state and federal governments; and their formation of political parties as a bulwark of dissent in American civic culture. "These are considerable achievements," Ellis writes, "that continue to glow even brighter with the passage of time."⁷ Although he also criticizes their failure to fully address slavery and their harsh treatment of Native Americans, Ellis argues fervently that white founders deserve all the praise they get.

Taking a page from Ellis's book, we might credit black founders with three "core achievements." First, they established durable community institutions that allowed free blacks to flourish despite continuing oppression. Second, they created a black abolitionist tradition that emphasized universal emancipation and equality (something white reformers often failed to do before the 1830s). And third, they inaugurated transatlantic debates over the meaning of black identity that transformed the way people of color pictured themselves and, in turn, were perceived by others. In each case, black founders' newfound emphasis on printed protest informed their struggles, as did a continued consciousness of international events (from the advent of the free black colony of Sierra Leone on the western coast of Africa to the formation of the Haitian Republic).

Indeed, black founders deserve credit not just for being first in a long line of black civil rights protesters, but also for creating reform traditions and tactics that had not previously existed. Without their calls for universal liberty, it is doubtful that more famous reformers like William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick

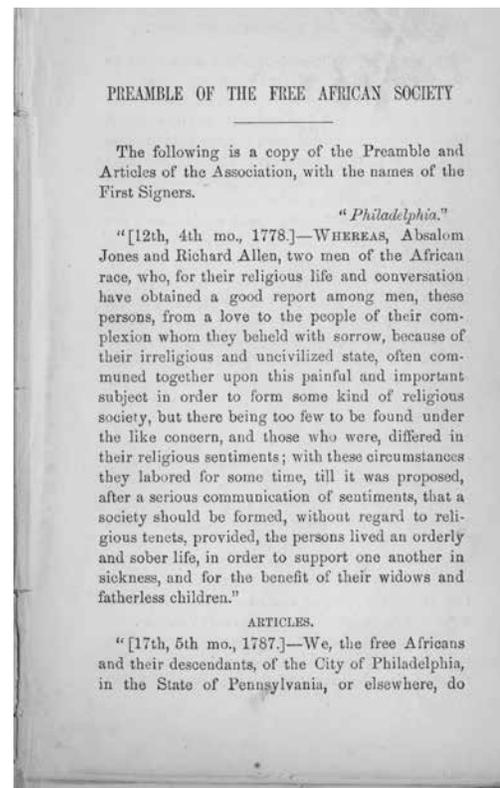
Douglass (both of whom acknowledged the wisdom of black founder James Forten) would have become such powerful advocates of immediate abolition during the antebellum era. Similarly, without the radical egalitarianism of Richard Allen and Peter Williams, we may wonder where our current belief in multicultural citizenship came from – especially considering the fears of slaveholding statesmen like Jefferson, who argued that free black and white people could never live together in America. Well before Lincoln’s “new birth of freedom,” black founders imagined an American nation redeemed from the sins of slavery and racism.

In this sense, black founders can take their place on the American stage as the progenitors of modern multiracial democracy. They can also stand alongside that more famous set of American founders as icons of American liberty, for they generated a creative dialogue with white statesmen and citizens over the very essence of American freedom. That dialogue remains with us still.

1. Uplifting Free Black Communities

Black founders’ first and perhaps most important achievement occurred at the local level with the creation of communal institutions that guided African Americans from slavery to freedom. While gradual emancipation statutes in the North and eased manumission laws in the upper South contributed to the growth of free black communities, African Americans them-

selves deserve the lion’s share of credit for building a universe of autonomous organizations by the early 19th century. Raw numbers tell the tale of the remarkable social transformation that black communities wrought in state after state. In 1790 the black population in New England and the Middle Atlantic was largely enslaved, with approximately 40,000 enslaved people versus 27,000 free blacks. By 1830 the black population of these areas had become overwhelmingly free, with 122,000 free blacks versus 3,000 slaves (mostly in New Jersey). In what census takers called the South Atlantic region, stretching from Delaware to Florida, free black populations grew as well: from 31,500 to 152,000, mostly in



“Preamble of the Free African Society,” in William Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America, Now Styled the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1862).

Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina.⁸ Particularly in urban settings like Baltimore, Boston, Hartford, Philadelphia, and, further south, Richmond and even Charleston, communal organizations sustained black social life. No sooner had independence been declared by American patriots, and freedom claimed by people of color, than free blacks began organizing Masonic lodges, churches, mutual aid societies, libraries and debating



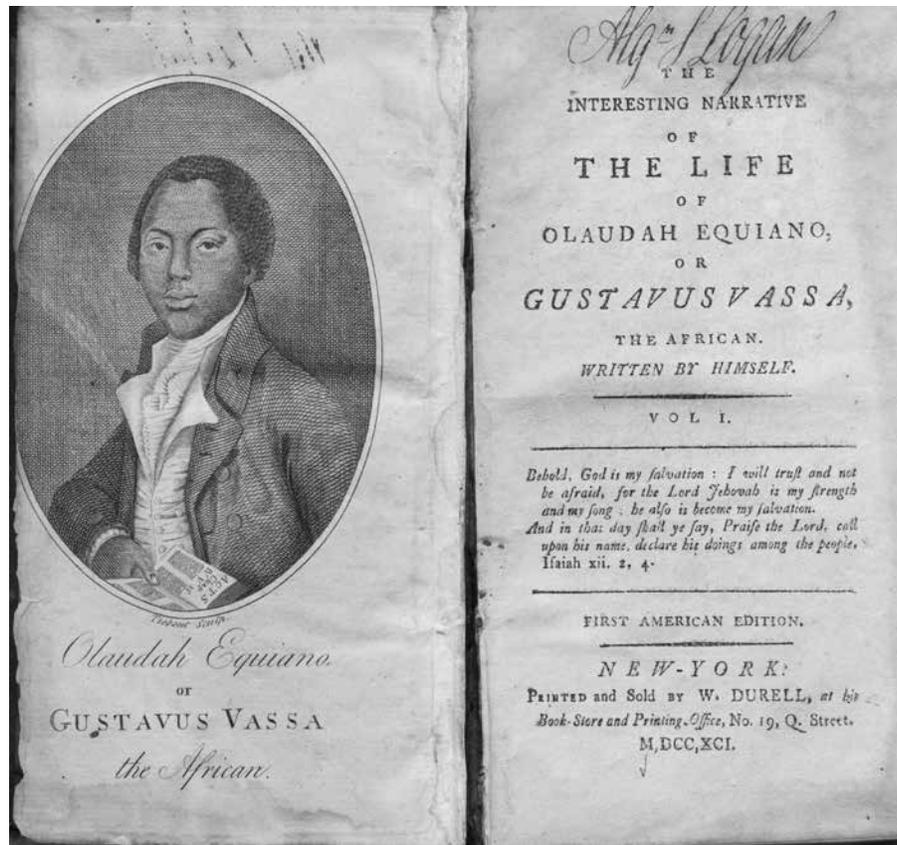
Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Phila., lithograph by W. L. Breton (Philadelphia, 1829).

clubs, and philanthropic groups. Institution building offered a powerful reply to many white citizens' doubts about free blacks' ability to navigate the vicissitudes of freedom.⁹

Newport, Rhode Island, a slave-trading port that contained a small but powerful free black community, offers a perfect place to locate the origins of black institution-building efforts. In 1780 former slave Newport Gardner and several free black leaders formed the African Union Society, a mutual aid organization dedicated to education, uplift, and the celebration of African

cultural heritage. Comprising roughly 20% of the local population by the 1770s, black Newporters could be found worshiping in the back of white churches; working for white citizens on the docks, in barns, and in merchant shops; and living in close proximity to whites. Despite their economic importance, black Rhode Islanders had few rights in or out of slavery. Colonial laws forbidding slaves from being out at night without permission carried over into concern about free blacks' movements during the American Revolutionary era. In some Rhode Island towns, free blacks were even threatened with expulsion. Where could they turn for aid and support?

The African Union Society provided an autonomous space for the black community to debate, argue, and congregate in order to resist white oversight. Soon after its formation, the group established a school, compiled records of births, marriages, and deaths for local people of color, and administered funeral rites.¹⁰ Passage of Rhode Island's gradual emancipation law in 1784 steadily increased the number of free blacks over the next forty years, both in Newport and other parts of the state. Drawing on the example of the African Union Society, black Newporters created a host of new autonomous groups to meet the humanitarian and social needs of a newly-emancipated community, from the African Humane Society and the African Benevolent Society to the Female African Benevolent Society and the Union Congregational Church.¹¹ With burgeoning free black populations statewide, and rising anti-black sentiment, the African Union Society soon proposed an "assembly



Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (New York, 1791).

consisting of one or two members from every society” to discuss reform initiatives.¹²

As the Newport African Union Society realized, both the challenges of freedom and the realities of racial discrimination made black communalism absolutely necessary. Wherever one found a burgeoning free black community, there existed an impressive array of black-led institutions. In many instances, black institutions mirrored the white institutions from which blacks were excluded. In northern churches, black parishioners were confined to segregated areas and asked to wait until white congregants had taken communion – despite the fact that they contributed to building the very fabric

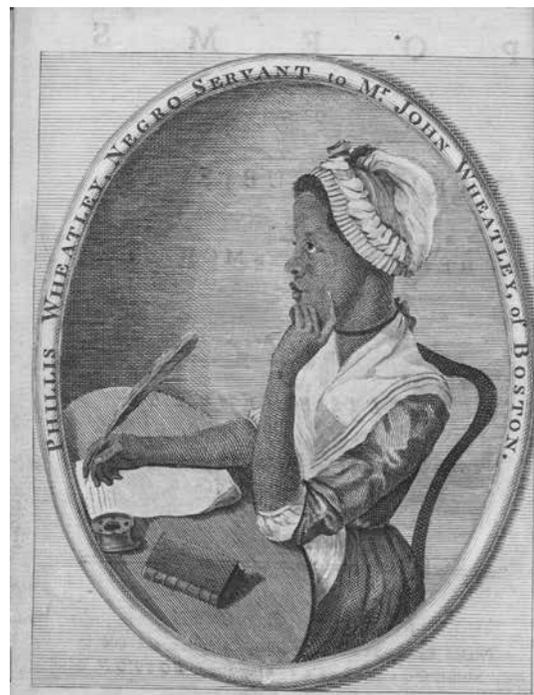
of the churches (new pews, galleries, and even pulpits). Such discrimination inspired the formation of “African” churches in New York City, Baltimore, and Philadelphia during the 1790s. In Wilmington, Delaware, black Christians formed the first independent African Methodist denomination in America (anticipating Richard Allen’s better-known Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia by a few years). Black Bostonians formed the first officially-sanctioned African Masonic Lodge in America in 1784, not to mention the African Society (a mutual aid group), the African Baptist Church, and other reform organizations. Hundreds of miles to the south, in Georgia, slaves and free blacks

took advantage of revolutionary currents during the 1770s and 1780s to build African Baptist churches in both Augusta and Savannah.¹³ Among New York City’s many autonomous organizations formed during the early national period, the African Marine Fund provided benefits to “the distressed orphans, and poor members” of this group. And in Philadelphia the free black community created so many organizations by the 1830s – nearly forty distinct groups – that it became the very hub of African American social and political life before the Civil War. Surveying the remarkable rise of black churches among free blacks, Daniel Coker could only quote from the Bible: “Ye are a chosen generation,” he told black leaders and communities, alluding to the famous biblical injunction (1 Peter 2:9) emphasizing the holy cause of building the Christian Church. For Coker as for other black leaders, community-building efforts also proved the wisdom of Psalm 68:31: “Princes would come out of Egypt and Ethiopia would stretch forth its hands unto God.”¹⁴

In addition to the practical benefits of these organizations, free black institution building and the concomitant rise of communalism carried significant ideological meaning, for they harked back to a pre-slavery identity. “The communal ethic of mutual responsibility that was part of blacks’ African heritage,” historians James and Lois Horton point out, “made such cooperative organization a cultural imperative” in America. The West African tradition of forming both secret and voluntary societies “patterned early community life”

throughout the Americas, Craig Wilder adds. Autonomous associations “protect[ed blacks’] public interest” and allowed people of color to rise as a group economically, socially, and demographically.¹⁵

Although institution building depended on the energies of myriad activists, black institutions often became synonymous with a cadre of key leaders. Prince Hall will forever be linked to African Lodge 459, so



Phillis Wheatley, Frontispiece in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773).

named because Hall had to get sanction from British Masons after American authorities declined to recognize the organization he founded. Baltimore’s Daniel Coker gained fame as a founding member of the AME Church in 1816. Philadelphia’s John Gloucester was long remembered as the founder of the African Presbyterian Church in 1807. For all of these men, the build-

ing of community organizations led to local, regional, and even national reputations. Other factors certainly bolstered post-revolutionary black leaders' rise to prominence: securing significant amounts of property, mastering literacy, and exploiting contacts with well-known white reformers. Yet no factor loomed larger than institutional leadership itself. In Philadelphia, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones first came to the attention of white abolitionists through their organization of the Free African Society in 1787, a mutual aid group composed of free blacks and former slaves dedicated to piety, benevolence and black solidarity. White reformers, perennially worried about the conduct of black freedmen, hailed the group's formation, particularly the existence of a leadership cadre that served as guardians of the growing free black community.¹⁶

Allen and Jones certainly saw themselves as free blacks' protectors. But they did not conjure the Free African Society out of thin air. In fact, they may have learned the importance of communalism from a lesser-known activist named James Dexter. A former slave who purchased his freedom in the 1760s, Dexter later became a founding member of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church. Though he owned his own home and called influential white abolitionists friends, Dexter long recognized the significance of communalism. His neighborhood near the present-day Constitution Center contained a majority-white population. The story was much the same for African Americans throughout Philadelphia, as smaller black populations sprouted in

majority-white districts (rigid segregation took shape closer to the Civil War). Thus, forming community organizations where free blacks could gather became especially important in the closing decades of the 18th century.

In 1782 Dexter joined a group of six people of



A Sunday Morning View of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia, lithograph by W. L. Breton (Philadelphia, 1823). Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

color who petitioned the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council for a separate "Negroes burying ground" in what became Washington Square. Prior to the establishment of free black churches, which secured their own burial spaces, Afro-Philadelphians used the city's "potter's field." Dexter's group asked for the "liberty to fence in the Negroes burying ground" to protect themselves from white harassment.¹⁷ Though the Executive Council rejected their request, Dexter and other free blacks continued to use the potter's field for African-style burials well into the 19th century. More importantly, Dexter's activism paved the way for subsequent communal

organization within Philadelphia's black community.

Women and family networks bolstered free black institutions. In North Bridgewater, Massachusetts, black abolitionist Hosea Easton worked in his father's iron works in the early 1800s, which became a springboard for a family-run manual labor school for free blacks – one of the first in the nation. In Philadelphia, roughly a dozen free black women followed men from a segregated white church to form the first independent black churches. Over the next several decades, they contributed funds to church-building efforts, hosted traveling ministers, and inculcated among rising generations the importance of free black institutions. In Baltimore, Boston, Albany, New Haven, Newport, and a variety of other locales, women did similar work to support autonomous institutions.¹⁸

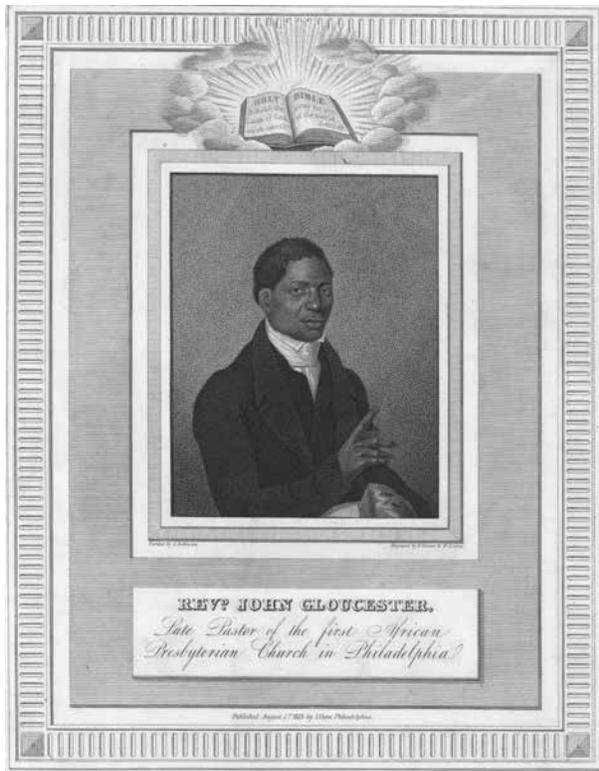
In this way, women helped define community uplift as perhaps the most important project of black reform. Community uplift revolved around a collective sense of justice and achievement for people of color. Working as helpmates, educators, and, in the Methodist Church (which had a high number of black female converts by the 1790s), class leaders, black women underscored the vital nature of piety, industry, charity, and communalism. Boston's Maria Stewart remains an icon of female political activism for her antislavery publications during the 1830s. Yet prior to her rise as a pamphleteer, Stewart worked as a teacher in the black community. When David Walker, the city's leading black activist, died mysteriously in 1830, Stewart stepped con-

fidently into his role as a publicist for black uplift. The first woman to address an integrated audience in American history, Stewart reminded black men and women of their sacred civic duty to aid those around them.¹⁹

So rich was the intellectual life of early black organizations that some scholars have viewed it as a world unto itself and in complete opposition to the broader value systems of American culture. Forming a "counter-public," in the words of literary scholar Joanna Brooks, free blacks sought not to join mainstream society but rather to insulate themselves from its innate racism.²⁰ As Manisha Sinha adds, black founders created "an oppositional tradition . . . that departed dramatically from mainstream American political thought and its premises." Very much like modern-day critical race theorists, radical black thinkers argued that slavery and racism undergirded American so-called democracy.²¹

While there is some truth in this notion, black founders also realized that institution building fit perfectly with the ethos of American democratic society, particularly its vibrant public sphere and tradition of civic organizing. Blacks emerging from slavery assembled organizations that projected African American interests into the civic realm.

Indeed, African Americans often used their organizational prowess to demonstrate blacks' fitness for freedom. Recognizing that anti-black public sentiment framed discussions over universal emancipation, black leaders produced their own organizational histories and pamphlets as positive proof that abolition created pious



Rev. John Gloucester, Late Pastor of the First African Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, stipple engraving by B. Tanner & W. R. Jones after the oil painting by John Robinson (Philadelphia, 1823).

and stable black communities. The Troy, New York, African Female Benevolent Society (AFBS) attached its constitution and annual report to a eulogy it published in 1834 with the hope that these documents would display free blacks' "intellectual powers" to a skeptical world. A boom town of 12,000 after the Erie Canal's completion, Troy contained a relatively small black community of 400 people. Yet because New York's 1827 abolition act had only recently outlawed slavery forever, black citizens confronted a wellspring of racist sentiment. Normally dedicated to mutual aid for blacks, the AFBS printed a sample of its proceedings to "enlighten" the public mind and unfetter "black genius."

The first wave of black libraries, debating clubs, and educational institutions had already adopted this strategy. John Gloucester, a former Tennessee slave who moved to Philadelphia, gained freedom, and founded the African Presbyterian Church, touted the creation of a black seminary as a way to refute racist stereotypes. To raise consciousness about the seminary's broader importance, Gloucester forwarded a circular to white as well as black ministers in the summer of 1816. Noting that the entire black community in Philadelphia supported the seminary – the nation's first training ground for black ministers – and that literate, multilingual African American pupils would spread the Christian gospel far beyond the City of Brotherly Love, Gloucester urged white citizens to support the school as part of a benevolent Christian empire.²²

Black institutionalism soon transcended local communities. Black Masons corresponded with one another across state lines. When the Newport African Union Society decided to explore African emigration as a means of escaping American racism, it sought the advice and support of free black groups in both Philadelphia and Boston. A history of regional networking among free black Methodists in Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania easily translated into the formation of the AME Church in April 1816, an organization that grew to 10,000 members just a decade later.

Communal institutions also fostered an outward-looking politics of black reform, transforming themselves into classic American lobbying groups. Free

CONSTITUTION OF THE PLYMOUTH AND NORFOLK BIBLE SOCIETY.

For the purpose of supplying the destitute, within our immediate vicinity, with Bibles and Testaments, and of contributing generally to the distribution of the Sacred Scriptures, we, the subscribers and those persons who may associate with us, forth ourselves into a Society, upon the following principles, and adopt the following

CONSTITUTION.

Article 1. The name of this society shall be, *The Plymouth and Norfolk Bible Society.*
 2. Every person paying annually to the funds of the society seven-y-five cents, shall be a member during the punctual payment of his or her subscription; and every person giving to the society five dollars at any one time, shall be a member for life, and liable to no further assessment.
 3. The funds of this society shall be exclusively devoted to the distribution of the Sacred Scriptures; and the objects of this charity are, the poor, actually destitute of whole copies of the Bible; the aged poor, who may be in want of fair and legible copies; and generally, all such Bible Societies of Massachusetts.
 4. The society may act in its own name, or as auxiliary to the Bible Society of Massachusetts; and it may either distribute Bibles and Testaments gratuitously, or supply them for sale at a reduced price, so as to render them easily attainable by the poor.
 5. The officers of the society shall be, a President, Secretary, Treasurer, and five Trustees, to be chosen annually by ballot.
 6. The duties of the President and Secretary are indicated by their names, and they shall be, *ex officio*, members of the Board of Trustees,

in addition to the number above specified.

7. The Treasurer shall collect and receive all the monies of the society, and employ and apply them according to the direction of the Trustees. He shall give bonds in the sum of three hundred dollars, for the faithful execution of his trust; his accounts shall be always open to the inspection of the Trustees, and by them shall be annually examined.

8. The Trustees shall have the exclusive management of the funds and property of the society; of the purchase and distribution of Bibles and Testaments; subject to the instructions of the society at their annual meetings, when the Trustees shall make a detailed report of their proceedings, and of the state and application of the funds of the society. They shall meet semi-annually, at such time and place as they may previously appoint. Any five of them, at such meetings, shall constitute a quorum, for the transaction of business.

9. The meetings of the society shall be annual, on the second Wednesday in September, at the hour and place determined, and publicly notified by the Trustees; when a sermon shall be delivered by some person appointed by the Trustees, and a collection made to aid the funds of the society.

10. It is understood that the meetings of the society shall be appointed at different times, in different parishes or towns; the Trustees, in the appointment of a place for the annual meeting, having a regard to the convenience of the members generally, and the advantage of the society.

11. This constitution shall not be subject to revision or alteration, but by consent of a majority of the whole number of Trustees, and the

vote of two-thirds of the members of the society, present at any annual meeting.

At a meeting in Marshfield, of the gentlemen whose names are hereunto subscribed, on the 24th April, 1816, it was unanimously voted, that they would accept the above constitution, for the purposes therein specified; and that they would meet on the second Monday in June next, at twelve o'clock, A. M. at Crooker's Tavern, near the Four Corners, in Hanover, Plymouth County, for the purpose of choosing the officers of the society, and adopting whatever measures may be necessary to its operation; at which time and place, all persons disposed to associate and co-operate with them in this benevolent and

excellent cause, are requested punctually to attend.

William Shaw,
 Zephaniah Willis,
 John Allyn,
 Elijah Leonard,
 Jacob Norton,
 Nehemiah Thomas,
 Nicholas B. Whitney,
 Jacob Flint,
 Morrill Allen,
 Samuel Deane,
 Henry Colman.

Attest,
 SAMUEL DEANE,
 Secy of the Meeting.

N. B. The persons to whom this constitution may be sent, are requested to use their influence in obtaining members and subscriptions for the society.

EDUCATION OF AFRICANS.

(Continued.)

Sir—We take the liberty of addressing you on a subject which, we have no doubt, you will consider interesting to humanity. A proposition was laid before some of the members of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, at their last session, for the establishment of a seminary to educate African youth for the Gospel Ministry, by giving them a classical and scientific education, preparatory to theology. Mr. Mills, so well known as a zealous and successful missionary, interested himself warmly for the establishment of such an institution. The subject has been long talked of among many enlightened and humane Christians; such a seminary has, however, been already commenced in the city of Philadelphia, among the Africans themselves.

In May last, a Board of Superintendants was organized, for the establishment of an institution of the

nature contemplated. A Committee was appointed to procure funds, by subscription among the coloured people, and ascertain what number of pupils could be had to enter the school. The Rev. Nathaniel R. Snowden, a graduate of Princeton College, and a pupil in theology of the celebrated Dr. Nesbit, was elected Principal of the seminary, which has been styled, Augustine Hall. Mr. Snowden accepted the offer, and, for a small compensation, devoted himself to this laudable undertaking.

On the 1st of June, the seminary was opened, with prayer, by the Rev. Absalom Jones, pastor of the Episcopal Church in this city, and the Principal entered on the duties of his office. The smiles of Providence have, in a remarkable manner, rested on our humble endeavours. Some Africans, who have no children to educate at present, have

John Gloucester, "Education of Africans," in the *Christian Disciple*, vol. 4, no. 8 (August 1816).

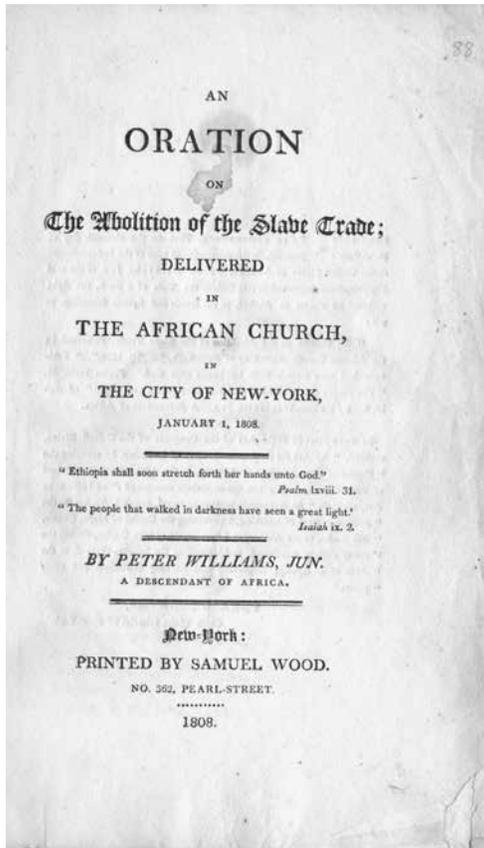
black organizations hosted antislavery lecturers, organized public demonstrations against discriminatory laws, and served as the nexus of African American struggles for justice in the public realm. In 1799 Afro-Philadelphians used churches and reform groups to gather over seventy signatures to a congressional antislavery memorial. In Boston both the African Masonic Lodge and the African Society sponsored antislavery lectures designed not merely to rally the city's black community but also to publicize their struggles in the community at large.

In New York communal organizations underwrote a succession of protest pamphlets during the early 1800s, hoping variously to raise consciousness about the

persistence of racial injustice, claim civic space as American citizens, and challenge racial stereotypes. In 1809 New Yorker William Hamilton satisfied all three objectives when he publicly thanked members of the African Society for requesting the publication of his address commemorating the end of the slave trade. "The proposition has been advanced by men who claim the preeminence in the learned world, that Africans are inferior to white men in the structure of both body and mind," Hamilton declared. Then, holding up a pamphlet written by fellow New Yorker Peter Williams Jr., he added, "if we continue to produce specimens like these, we shall soon put our enemies to the blush; abashed and confounded they

will no longer urge their superiority of souls.”²³

Slave trade commemorations became a high

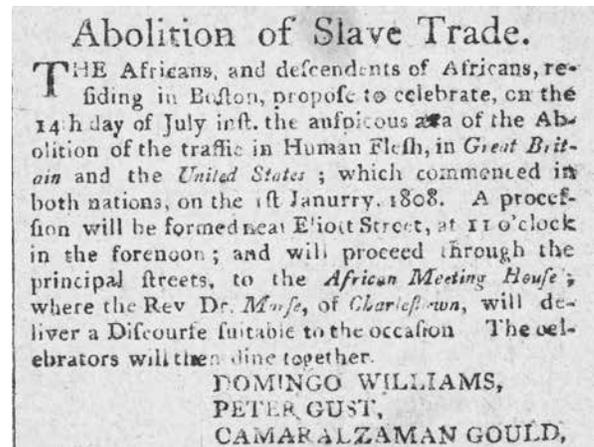


Peter Williams, Jr., *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; Delivered in the African Church, in the City of New-York, January 1, 1808* (New York, 1808).

point on free blacks’ organizational calendar. While the best-known events occurred in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, black communities all along the Atlantic seaboard marked the federal government’s ban on the international slave trade (which officially took effect on January 1, 1808) by holding rallies, giving speeches, and publishing pamphlets. Ostensibly organized to honor Congress’s only antislavery decree before the 1820s, these New Year’s Day gatherings also served as

a platform for black abolitionism. Indeed, though free blacks used July 4th festivities to call for universal freedom, they often faced angry denunciations from white citizens who felt that the day belonged to them. In 1799 black New Yorkers had to postpone July 4th celebrations (which also marked the state’s recent passage of a gradual abolition law) when whites physically harassed them. As David Waldstreicher has perceptively pointed out, black writers and speakers later responded by using January 1st commemorations to critique whites-only July 4th festivities.²⁴

In addition, slave trade commemorations al-



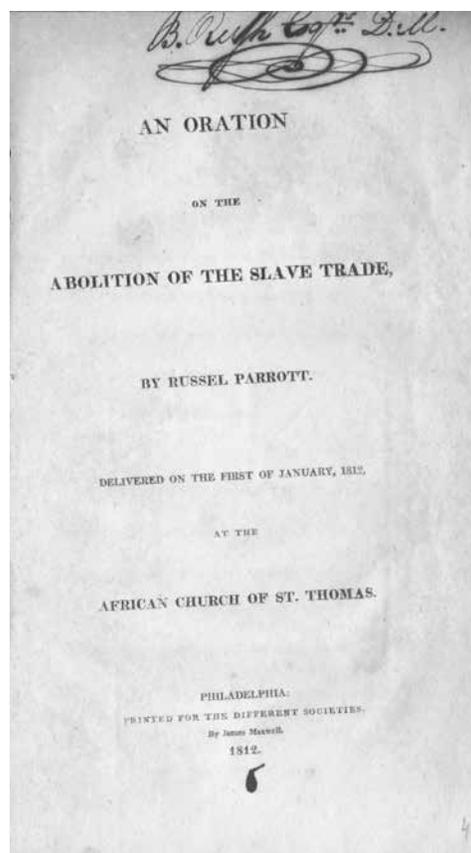
Announcement of Boston Blacks’ Celebration, in the *Columbian Centinel* (July 6, 1808).

lowed black activists a seemingly patriotic way to condemn slavery’s growth in the South. After honoring white statesmen for curtailing the slave trade, black orators and writers took aim at domestic bondage. “Since . . . the slave trade is by law forever abolished,” New Yorker Joseph Sidney informed the Wilberforce Philanthropic Association in January 1809, “may we not, my

countrymen, without incurring the imputation of rashness or presumption, look forward to that period when slavery, in this land of freedom, will be unheard of and unknown?” Sidney answered with a resounding “Yes!” For Sidney, black community building had proven the wisdom of gradual emancipation schemes in the North. If African American protesters continued to highlight both the evils of slavery and the success of black emancipation, then Americans would have little choice but to adopt national abolition laws.²⁵

For these reasons, slave trade commemorations became the first African American festive occasions to generate their own literature. Drawing on the resources of communal organizations, black writers produced and distributed over a dozen major pamphlets, each echoing in some form Sidney’s twin concerns: Americans had to end slavery and not just the slave trade, and African Americans must consider themselves the prophets of interracial harmony. By linking print culture to the activities of autonomous organizations, pamphleteers transformed themselves into a nationally-visible protest group. “Let liberty unfurl her banners, [and] freedom and justice reign triumphant in the world, universally,” New Yorker George Lawrence proclaimed in New York’s AME Church in 1813. That sentiment became a keynote for subsequent generations of abolitionists.²⁶

Indeed, black reformers moved almost seamlessly from slave trade commemorations to anti-colonization movements. Once again communal organizations played a key role in disseminating black freedom claims.



Russell Parrott, *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade by Russel [sic] Parrott. Delivered on the First of January, 1812, at the African Church of St. Thomas* (Philadelphia, 1812).

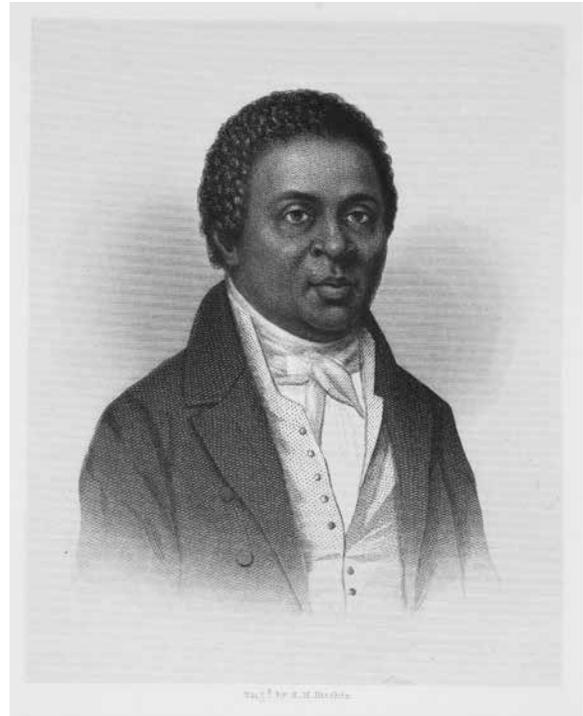
Despite the fact that many northern black leaders had flirted with emigration efforts, the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816 (dominated by slaveholders and anti-abolitionists) raised deep concerns about the prospect of forced black migrations overseas – what might be called a second, east-bound Middle Passage. In 1817 a massive gathering of 3,000 black Philadelphians assembled at Richard Allen’s Bethel Church to oppose the ACS. Over the next decade and a half, virtually every major black community from Richmond to Boston issued similar challenges to the group’s

program, utilizing the resources of black communal organizations that had become firmly rooted on American soil. Black anti-colonization activities so impressed rising white reformers like William Lloyd Garrison that they vowed to reject the ACS altogether and fight for both immediate abolition and black equality within the United States. Garrison even published a compendium of black protest initiatives on the colonization issue in 1832, a fitting salute, of sorts, to those black communal organizations that had nurtured African American protest during the previous fifty years.²⁷

2. Universal Emancipation and Equality

Well before the rise of immediate abolitionism, African American communal organizations became the centers of black abolitionism. Part of a growing transatlantic antislavery movement established during the late 18th century, black abolitionism was unique for its consistent claim that equality must accompany universal emancipation. As James Forten declared in his celebrated pamphlet *Letters from a Man of Colour on a Late Bill before the Senate of Pennsylvania* (1813), egalitarianism (and not property rights-in-man) was the great underlying principle of American civic life. This notion tied together people of all races, geographic regions, and ethnicities. And, Forten claimed, those who violated it should be subject to the “animadversion of all.”²⁸

Racial egalitarianism was rare in Forten’s time. Although roughly 500,000 of the estimated 10-12 mil-



Hay Ritchie in J. B. Wakeley, *Lost Chapters Recovered from the Early History of American Methodism* (New York, 1858).

lion Africans forcibly removed to the New World came to North America, the United States would grapple with the twin issues of mass emancipation and integration more deeply than any other Atlantic society. When, for example, the Somerset decision banished slavery from British soil in 1772, Afro-Britons were a minuscule part of the population (less than one percent).²⁹ In the Caribbean brutal plantation regimes undermined integrationist prospects. Indeed, though the Haitian slave rebellion declared universal liberty as its great goal, successive military invasions by both French and British forces (not to mention white planters’ support for black re-enslavement) turned slave rebels against white authorities, setting the stage for years of brutal warfare. In 1804 Haiti declared independence and became the Western

Hemisphere's first self-consciously *black* republic. Seeking to protect itself from a reversion to white control, this new nation enfranchised only black citizens.³⁰

In emancipating Northern states, black populations confronted white majorities. In 1790 Boston and Philadelphia together contained 2,181 free blacks, a very small percentage (4.5%) compared to the more than 44,000 white citizens in these two main urban centers. Southern states with black majorities (such as coastal South Carolina rice-growing regions) as well as southern cities with rising free black populations (Baltimore, Charleston, and Richmond) existed within the broader framework of majority-white social and political cultures.³¹ These scenarios made violent revolt exceedingly difficult; they also taught many early black abolitionists to embrace non-violent “persuasive” political strategies to achieve racial justice. “An appeal to the heart is my intention,” James Forten observed at the close of his celebrated pamphlet, “and if I have failed it is my great misfortune not to have [had] a power of eloquence sufficient to convince” statesman to embrace racial equality.³²

In a post-revolutionary society that valorized freedom – and contained black minorities – why did black abolitionists like Forten have to work so hard to persuade whites about the safety of emancipation and equality? For many white citizens, the very prospect of universal emancipation and civic integration was revolutionary. Emancipating Northern states – beginning with Pennsylvania in 1780 and ending with New Jersey

in 1804 – first debated whether liberated blacks would be equal citizens.³³ In New York City, where reformers had pushed for emancipation since the 1780s, white fears of black liberty actually prevented the passage of an abolition act until 1799.

Even white abolitionists raised concerns about black freedom. Benjamin Franklin, a former slaveholder



“Mrs. Jarena Lee. Preacher of the A.M.E.Church,” lithograph by Alfred Hoffy in Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel... Written by Herself* (Philadelphia, 1849).

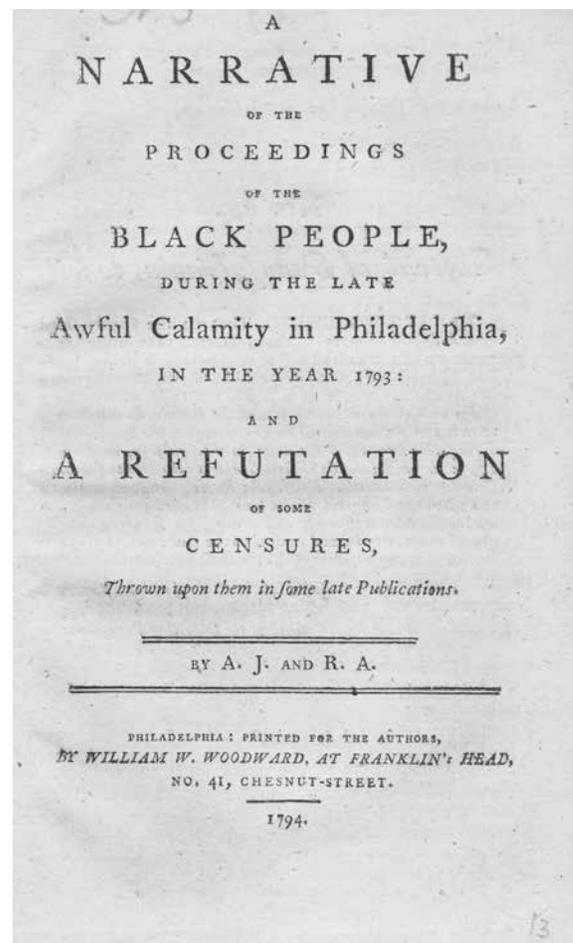
who became the titular head of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society just before he died in 1790, called for white oversight of free people of color. “Slavery,” the usually optimistic Franklin commented, “is such an atrocious debasement of human nature, that its very extirpation,

if not performed with solicitous care, may sometimes open a source of serious evils.” Without white vigilance, he continued, “freedom may often prove a misfortune to [former slaves], and prejudicial to society.”³⁴

In the slave South, precious few white statesmen publicly embraced abolition, and fewer still envisioned a biracial society taking shape in a world without bondage. “Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state?” Jefferson once wondered. “Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites” and “10,000 recollections by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained” provided clear answers in the negative.³⁵ Like other Southern masters, Jefferson believed that African Americans were an alien presence – one that would violently retaliate against their former oppressors. Jefferson’s dire concerns about free blacks in American society found powerful expression in the rise of colonization movements during the 19th century. Linking slave liberation to black explosion, white colonizationists – following in Jefferson’s footsteps – envisioned a republic free from both slavery and people of color.

White founders’ unwillingness to condemn racial oppression nationally proved to be their biggest failure, according to historian Joseph Ellis. Viewing universal abolitionism as a threat to the new Republic, they adopted a deliberate policy of “silence” on the matter.³⁶ Black founders offered what can only be labeled “the reply”: a conscious strategy of publicizing their claims to freedom. In petitions, speeches, pamphlets, and broadsides, black founders countered white fears, returning

again and again to the viability of universal emancipation and black equality in American culture. According to the Black Antislavery Writings Project, African American writers produced over 1,500 documents during the early Republic – one of the great caches of literary production by oppressed blacks before the Civil War.³⁷ And the prevailing theme in many of these documents? The elemental connection between abolition and equality. “Freedom, a thing so desirable to most men, and so hard to be obtained by many at the present time, will be the theme of our contemplation,” an anonymous Bos-



Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (Philadelphia, 1794).

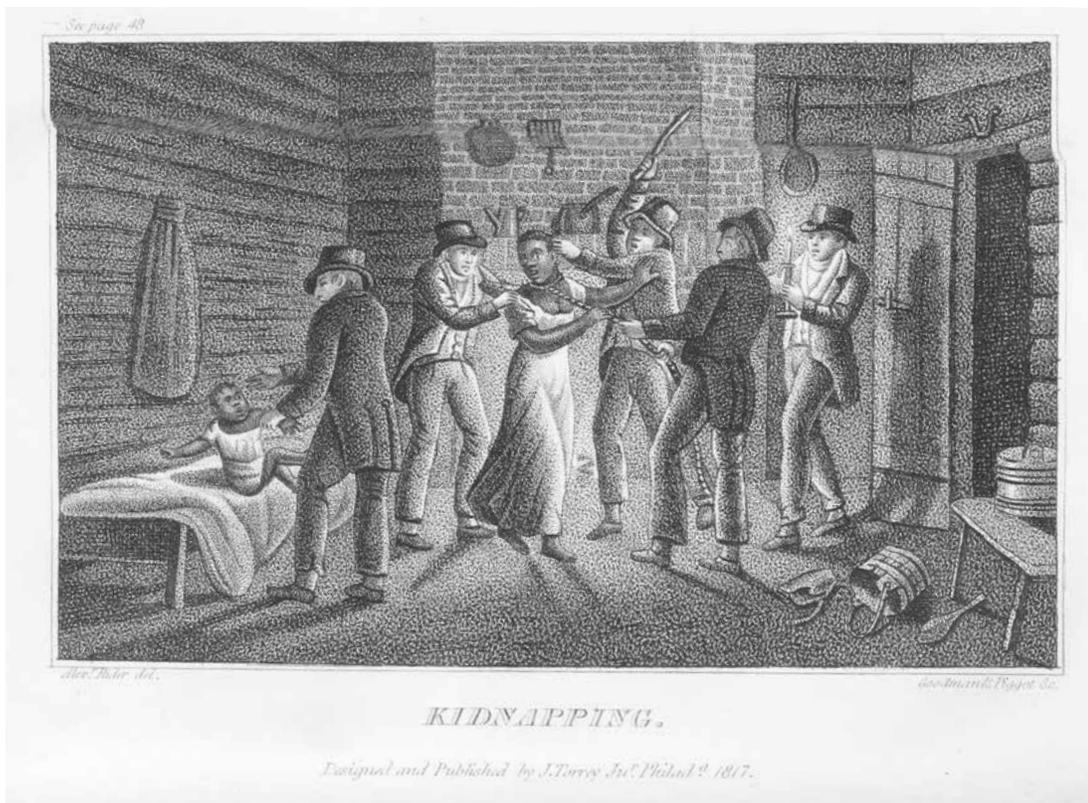
ton pamphleteer observed at the outset of *The Sons of Africans: An Essay on Freedom* (1808). Like other black abolitionists, the writer used colonial Americans' struggle against British oppression as a historical model for antislavery movements in the United States. "If [freedom from Britain was so] desirable," he proclaimed, "[it is] equally desirable to all."³⁸ Former New England slave Venture Smith, who had vivid memories of African liberty, wrote in 1798 that "my freedom is a privilege which nothing else can equal."³⁹

The new generation of black activists emerging in early national society became the leading exponents of egalitarian abolitionism. Locked out of formal politics (and not offered admission to the first wave of abolition societies before the 1830s), Prince Hall, Phillis Wheatley, James Forten, Richard Allen, Peter Williams, Daniel Coker and many other black leaders utilized the printed sphere to broadcast their vision of equality. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones gained fame as anti-slavery publicists – and not simply institution builders – when they wrote the first copyrighted pamphlet by African American writers: *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793*. Ostensibly an account of black heroism during Philadelphia's horrific yellow fever epidemic, the pamphlet took broader aim at the racial stereotyping that shadowed black aid workers accused of plundering white homes during the chaos of the disaster. Allen affixed an antislavery appeal to the end of the document asking federal statesmen to try the

"experiment" of treating the rising generation of African Americans as true equals. "If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of Love," Allen challenged, "clear your hands from slaves, burden not your children or country with them."⁴⁰

Allen revisited this theme in his rousing 1799 eulogy of George Washington. While highlighting Washington's emancipationist will – which, uniquely among Virginia founders, liberated the president's slaves upon his wife's death – Allen also levied a harsh critique of Americans who ignored slavery's growth in a land supposedly dedicated to universal freedom. "May a double portion of [Washington's] spirit rest on all the officers of the government in the United States," Allen thundered, "and . . . the whole of the American people." Allen's abolitionist memorial, given first in his Bethel Church, highlighted the legitimacy of black citizenship claims, noting that patriotic people of color mourned Washington's death as earnestly as any American. The black preacher's words so impressed newspaper editors in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore that they quickly reprinted them when Allen turned his speech into a printed appeal for black freedom.⁴¹ Allen's radicalism as an antislavery publicist can be measured by the fact that no white abolitionist issued a similar newspaper appeal while Philadelphia served as the nation's capital during the 1790s.

A surprisingly broad range of black writers joined in Allen's literary crusade. Utilizing the printed word as a vehicle of emancipation, black authors shat-



“Kidnapping,” engraving in Jesse Torrey, *Portraiture of Domestic Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1817).

tered age-old images of African-descended people as brutes suited only for slavery. In pre-emancipation New York City, a writer named Africanus challenged the stereotypical assertions of a white correspondent “Rusticus,” who opposed black freedom because “the wool hairy negro” (a term he used to signify black inequality) had descended from apes. “I am a sheep hairy Negro,” Africanus responded, turning the racist physical description into a badge of honor, “the son of an African man and woman, who by a train of fortunate events . . . was let free when very young . . . received a common English school education . . . have been instructed in the Christian religion . . . [and am now the] master of [a] trade.” Bristling at Rusticus’s identification of blackness

with savagery, “Africanus” stated flatly that white citizens should not “consider me as the link in the creation by which the monkey hangs to the gentleman.”⁴²

Africanus’s literary activism flowed from several decades of struggle among people of color to find their voice in the printed realm and use it as a political weapon. Eighteenth-century white missionaries had unwittingly fueled blacks’ hunger for literacy by distributing biblical tracts and spiritual treatises among enslaved people in both America and the Caribbean. During the Revolutionary era, black Atlantic itinerants – many of whom claimed American backgrounds either by birth or travel – issued the first major slave narratives in Western culture, using their personal histories to exam-

LETTER.—No. IV.

MR. FENNO,

IN my last I have stated the example of blacks, who intermarried by force of conquest with two European nations—happy was it for the conquered, that their colour only changed on this account—however as we all admit full blood, three quarters, and half blood, in our hounds and horses—it will not appear a paradox, if I lay it down as a general rule, that when in animated nature higher orders intermix with lower ones, the original character is gradually debased, and finally lost; this leads me to an examination of what would happen if negroes were made freemen, living among us.

Different notions have been held on the manumission of negroes—let us select one, and suppose that it was granted on all sides, that the children of the slaves which will be born the next year, are to be free. As the law can, I believe, make no difference between citizens of the empire, of what colour they may be, a gradual intermarriage of the whites and blacks will happen of course: Where is, among our citizens, the mother of a family blessed with beautiful daughters, who will not shudder when she thinks, that there might be only a probability, that her great grand daughters will have black muzzles and crooked figures; moreover this is but the smallest part of the bitter fruits with which black citizenship would be pregnant—it would be unclosing Pandora's box.

Although I believe that the new black citizen would feel grateful for his manumission, yet this sentiment will soon subside, and be fully extinguished in the next generation; the difference in corporal and intellectual qualities would be felt by the black, the consciousness of his inferiority would extinguish gratitude, and jealousy would be his prevailing passion—should any invasion happen, the enemy would purchase the blacks on easy terms, and without any foreign attack this jealousy would have the most fatal effects, and cause constant disturbances in the empire; tranquility would fly from Columbia, and not be re-established until intermarriage had dyed the nation nearly one and the same colour! But then the original character of the nation will only stand recorded in the historic page, when it speaks of the times of their ancestors becoming renowned in the annals of mankind by repelling tyranny, and assuming their independency with spirit; when by gigantic strides they rose into consequence, and outshone even their originals in arms, in sciences and arts—when they crowned the liberty of the citizen by a uniform federal government: then genius was a native of this happy soil—and the foreigner gloried to be an American freeman.

RUSTICUS.

Rusticus, "Letter - No. IV," exchange between Rusticus and Africanus in the *Gazette of the United States*, March 5, 1790.

ine both slavery's horrors and black claims to equality. They were joined by black essayists and poets in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York who produced more trenchant abolitionist appeals. "I need not point out the absurdity of your exertions for liberty while you hold slaves in your houses," an unheralded former slave named Caesar Sarter wrote in the *Essex Journal* (Massachusetts) in August 1774. Reminding Americans that the same just God who had once vanquished Egyptian slaveholders would also destroy unapologetic American masters, Sarter signaled African Americans' intention of

using printed protest as a consciousness-raising tool in the new American Republic.⁴³

Like other forms of nonviolent politics, printed protest may appear to be much less radical and consequential than physical uprising.⁴⁴ However, all forms of black abolitionism were viewed as a threat to white supremacy in the Atlantic world. As fearful as many Southern masters were about the lessons of the recent Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804, they remained equally afraid of state-sponsored abolitionism and the prospect of black equality. As the newspaper *Richmond South* declared in 1858, "nature intends" black servitude – while the exigencies of white democracy demand it. "If [even] one Negro may be free," the paper continued, its tone of incredulosity rising, "why not another" and another . . . until universal black freedom and equality would become the order of the day! That was truly a nightmare.⁴⁵ Many Northern whites agreed. In fact, during the 1820s the American Colonization Society grew faster in many Northern locales than Southern ones precisely because it promised to export free blacks from American shores.⁴⁶ Despite national consensus among white citizens on the problems associated with black freedom, Northern politics proved more hospitable to black pamphleteers and petitioners. Many Southern slaveholders simply opposed black abolitionists' right to publish pamphlets of protest or petition the federal government. "We the people does not mean them," one Southern congressman yelled when Absalom Jones presented his national abolitionist petition



Engraved frontispiece to *Incendie du Cap. Révolte général des Nègres. Massacre des Blanca* (Paris, 1815).

in December 1799.⁴⁷ In Southern states very few black abolitionist documents ever saw the light of day. Even calls for better treatment of slaves provoked a swift and bitter backlash.

Daniel Coker's 1810 pamphlet *A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister* was one of the few black abolitionist pamphlets published in the heart of slave country. Coker did not lecture or harangue recalcitrant white figures, but rather attempted to subtly persuade Southern masters to adopt gradual abolitionism. Written as a dialogue between a black clergyman and a white slave owner, Coker's pamphlet strategically subverted whites' rationalizations of bondage. Though sympathetic to the ideal of emancipation, the master tells the "African minister" that he doubted reformers'

ability to end slavery peacefully in the United States. What could be done, he wonders? "Sir," Coker's black character quietly replies, "that is an important question, and has been asked more than once." After citing the Bible, Coker's character reads from a Pennsylvanian's abolitionist proposal. "Immediate liberation of all the slaves may be attended with some difficulty," Coker concedes, "but surely something towards [it] now may be done. In the first place, let . . . a period be adopted after which none should be born slaves in the United States, and the colored children to be free at a certain age." Impressed by the African minister's civility and moderate tone, the Virginian finally replies that gradual abolitionism might well work!⁴⁸

Coker's hopeful tract flowed from promising

Marcus-Hook, Chester County, August 23. 1763.
RUn-away from the Subscriber, the First of this Init. A Negroe Wench, named Phebe, about 30 Years of Age, of a small Stature, has three or four large Negroe Scars up and down her Fore-head, but is apt to wear a Handkerchief round her Head to hide them: Had on, and took with her, Three fine Shifts, and one coarse Ditto, a Calicoe Gown and Bed-gown, a striped Linsey Bed-gown and three Petticoats. She sometimes calls herself Sarah, and pretends to be free. Whoever takes up, or finds her, and brings her to any Goal, so that the Subscriber may be satisfied, shall have Thirty Shillings Reward, and

Philadelphia, May 5. 1748.
RUn away, last Thursday, from Philip Syng, of this city, silvermitch, a Negroe man, named *Cato*, about 20 years old, a short, well-set fellow, and speaks good *English*: Had on when he went away two jackets, the uppermost a dark blue halfthick, lined with red flannel, the other a light blue homespun flannel, without lining, ozenbrigs shirt, old leather breeches, yarn stockings, old shoes, and an old beaver hat. When he went away he had irons on his legs, and about his neck, but he has probably broken them off, and done several times but shall have Twenty Shillings, paid by

ONE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD.
RUN away from the subscriber, near the Head of North-East, Cæcil County, Maryland, a Negroe Man, called **TONEY**, about 5 feet 10 inches high, slim built, and his wife **RACHEL**, with a young child, she is about 5 feet 8 inches high, of a tawny complexion, has some of her fore teeth out, has a very four look and is very bold and faucy; they are both between 30 and 40 years of age; their clothes is uncertain; it is thought they have a pass with them and may change their names and pass for free Negroes. Whoever will give information where they are concealed, or secure them in any gaol on the continent, shall have the above reward, paid by
 April 14. 1779. JOHN HALL.

Burlington, October 20. 1729.
BROKE out of the Goal of Burlington, the 20th Day of October, Two Men, One named *Aristobolus Christopher*, about Thirty Years of age, of a Swarthy Complexion, thick Brown Hair, about five Feet and eight Inches high, Shipwright by Trade.
 The other a Malato, and goes by the Name of *Malato John*, about Forty Years of age, about six Feet and two Inches high, and well set, and smooth Fac'd, short Brown Hair, he pretends to be a House-Carpenter by Trade. Whosoever takes up the said Persons, or either of them, and bring them to Burlington, shall have Forty Shillings Reward for Each, and reasonable Charges, paid by
 Thomas Hunlock Sheriff

Runaway slave advertisements.

trends in the Chesapeake. Both Maryland and Virginia masters had flirted with private emancipation schemes since the Revolutionary era. Between 1782 and 1806, according to one estimate, masters in the Old Dominion liberated perhaps as many as 15,000 slaves before curtailing manumission. In Maryland the free black population ballooned from 8,000 to over 50,000 persons between 1790 and 1830.⁴⁹ Yet neither state ever adopted a formal abolition law – and abolitionists, whether black or white, became *personae non gratae* in both states.

For this reason, one of the oldest forms of non-violent black resistance remained a potent strategy for attaining freedom: running away. Every British colony, and then independent American state, found fugitives

fleeing masters. In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* perhaps unwittingly highlighted blacks' unwillingness to remain enslaved. From the 1730s onward, Franklin's paper published hundreds of fugitive slave advertisements. "RUN away on Saturday Night last, from Moorhall in Chester County, a Mulatto Man *Slave*, aged about 22," a typical 1740 notice read. "He speaks Swede and English well."⁵⁰ By the 1790s runaway slave advertisements had become a staple of American newspapers in the North as well as South, and they conveyed black restiveness as much as whites' desire to reclaim their human property.

The marked increase in fugitive slaves during the American Revolutionary era – which historian Gary

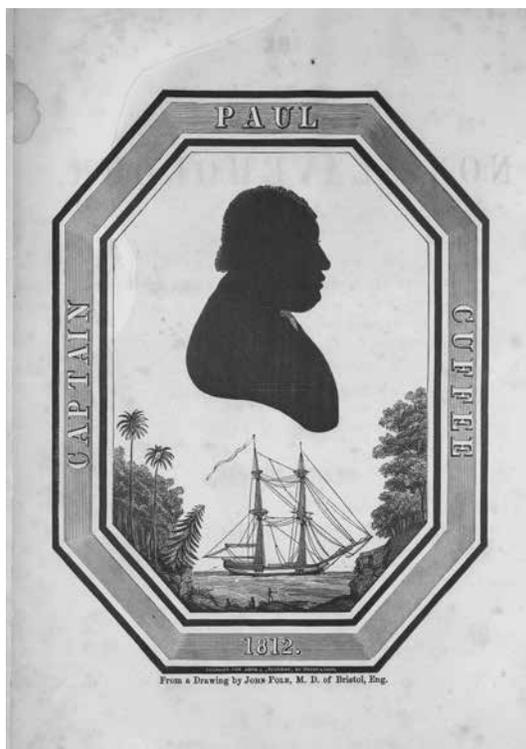
Nash has called the largest slave rebellion in American history prior to the Civil War⁵¹ – affected American reformers’ understanding of slavery and abolition. Black struggles for freedom helped inspire Pennsylvania’s gradual abolition act in 1780. The first of its kind in the Western world, the law registered all slaves born in the Quaker State after March 1, 1780, promising them state-sanctioned liberty at the age of twenty-eight (the first wave of freedom certificates thus matured in 1808). Slaves in Pennsylvania responded by pressing harder for freedom, either by taking recalcitrant masters to court or by signing indenture contracts with masters that reduced slavery to a shorter term (often seven years). Within a decade of its passage, Pennsylvania abolitionists found

themselves representing an increasing number of black runaways in Northern courts, many from out of state.

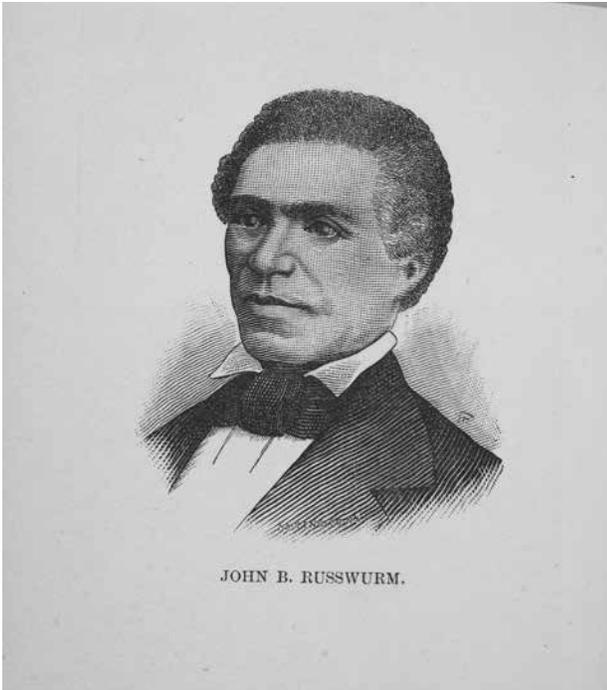
Because of its laws and sympathetic environment, Pennsylvania was a crucial dividing line between slavery and freedom, much like Spanish Florida during the colonial era and British Upper Canada before the Civil War. In colonial times, Southern fugitives struggled to reach Spanish Florida, which granted freedom and autonomy to escaped blacks from British colonies. Similarly, during the American Revolution, enslaved people throughout the Chesapeake fled to British lines in hopes of securing liberty. In early national America, Southern slaves headed north, where Pennsylvania (as well as New York and the New England states) had outlawed bondage and had black and white abolitionist communities sympathetic to slaves’ freedom struggles.

Of course, neither white abolitionists nor free blacks could guarantee freedom to fugitive slaves from Southern states. But that did not stop runways from infiltrating northern states and melding with growing free black communities from Philadelphia to Portland, Maine. Black leaders like Richard Allen and James Forten had often served as “go-between” figures, connecting fugitive slaves to white abolitionist lawyers. In 1817 Philadelphia’s free black community formally linked its struggles to those of enslaved people everywhere, declaring bond people “our brethren.” “We never will separate ourselves voluntarily from the slave population in this country,” they pledged.⁵²

By the antebellum era, with the support of



Captain Paul Cuffee 1812. From a drawing by John Pole, M.D., of Bristol, Eng. Engraved for Abraham L. Pennock by Mason and Maas (Philadelphia, ca. 1850).



“John B. Russwurm,” in Irving Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press, and Its Editors* (Springfield, 1891).

more radical white reformers, black founders’ appeals for universal emancipation and equality would infiltrate mainstream American political and social life as well.

3. Revolutionizing Black Identities in the Atlantic World

One of the byproducts of black freedom movements and community organization was a wide-ranging debate over the very meaning of black identity in the Atlantic world – a world no longer defined simply by black bondage but now also by black liberty. If the descendants of Africa looked outward on American society, challenging both racial stereotyping and the stigma of bondage, then they also looked inward at themselves,

asking penetrating questions about their place in this dynamic world. What did it mean to be a person of African descent in the partially emancipating United States? Would African culture remain a model for constructing post-slavery black identities? Did emigration to Africa, Canada, or Haiti offer viable alternatives to people of color exhausted by American racial oppression? Black founders consistently meditated upon these matters, providing thoughtful understandings of blackness itself.

For some, black identity flowed intrinsically from African heritage. Here, kinship, communalist worldviews, and the common experience of bondage created links to a pre-slavery past that must be reaffirmed. For others, black identity was compatible with Western values, such as a market economy, Christianity, and po-



Rev. Daniel Coker, one of the founders of the A.M.E. Church, engraving by John Sartain in *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, 1891).

litical liberalism. As James T. Campbell has succinctly put it, black founders “established the terms of debate for future generations of African Americans struggling to make sense of their relationship” to people of color around the world. That struggle revolved around two key questions: “What is Africa to me?” and, by implication, “What is America to me?”⁵³

African ancestry offered a critical starting point for defining black identity. Having been pejoratively labeled by European enslavers since at least the 1500s as “savages” and “idolaters,” people of African descent turned the rhetorical tables on their oppressors by redefining the terms used to describe themselves. Enlightenment philosophers too often defined Africans as outside of mainstream Western civilization – and therefore not worthy of full freedom. “I am apt to suspect,” Scottish

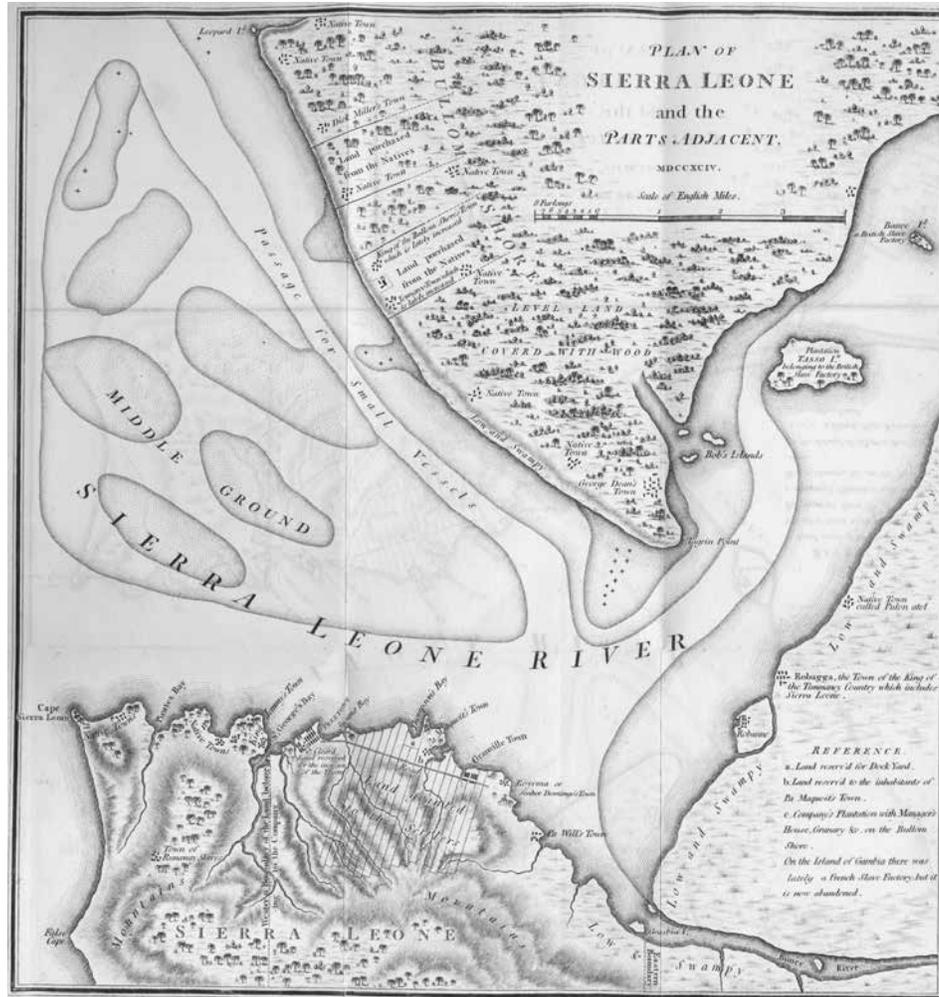


Portrait identified as James Forten, oil on paper, possibly by the African American artist Robert Douglass, Jr., ca. 1834. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

philosopher David Hume observed in 1748, “the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites.” With no “art,” “science” or “manufacturers” worthy of notice, Hume finished, Africans could not be considered anything more than human underlings.⁵⁴ In a world so hostile to the very notion of blackness, it is nothing short of remarkable that people of African descent attempted to reclaim and redeem their identities.

The proliferation of self-styled “African” institutions, from churches to burial societies, codified the reaffirmation of African heritage. New York City’s African Burial Ground, located in present-day lower Manhattan and dating back to Dutch rule in the 1600s, offers compelling evidence that African funeral rites remained a firm part of black culture well into the Revolutionary period. Archaeologists have discovered hundreds of bodies buried in accordance with West African deathways: the deceased were washed and shrouded in a particular fashion; their bodies were laid down facing east; and they were entombed with numerous African relics (pipes, pots) for the journey to the next world.⁵⁵ Grave sites in Rhode Island and South Carolina similarly resemble those found in West African culture.⁵⁶

Because West Africans placed particular significance on a proper burial – worrying that the spirits of the deceased would wander aimlessly if improperly buried – black funerary rites became subject to vigorous disputes between people of color and white citizens. In many parts of the emancipating North, local and state officials simply dismissed black communities’ requests



Plan of Sierra Leone and the Parts Adjacent, from Sierra Leone Company, An Account of the Colony of Sierra Leone, from Its First Establishment in 1793 (London, 1795).

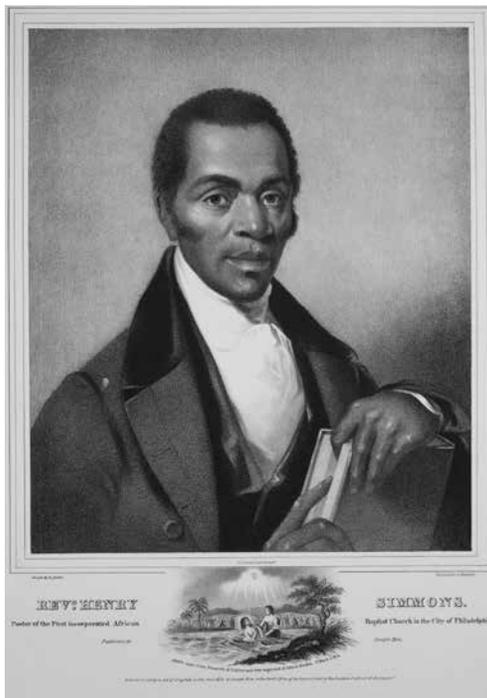
to protect African burial grounds. African churches and mutual aid societies stepped into the breach, creating cemeteries for black parishioners and performing burial services for black families who could not afford them. During the first two decades of the 19th century, Richard Allen's Bethel Church spent well over \$1,000 to underwrite the cost of funeral preparations for his less fortunate parishioners.⁵⁷

Joining an African church, participating in African funeral rites, or subscribing to an African mutual

aid society restored one's ties to an African homeland. It is not surprising, therefore, that black people who gained freedom during the early national period went a step further by generating the first Back-to-Africa movements. In one of the earliest instances, four Massachusetts slaves who petitioned the colonial assembly for freedom in 1773 also sought the means to "transport ourselves to some part of the coast of Africa, where we propose a settlement."⁵⁸ By the early 1790s, several hundred black Loyalists who had departed with the British

following the American Revolution arrived in the struggling West African colony of Sierra Leone, becoming the first wave of African Americans to return *en masse* to the land of their ancestors.

This remarkable group of freed people endured a harrowing journey from American to African shores. Originally numbering about 3,000 men and women who had flocked to British lines before a provisional peace treaty had been signed with American forces in 1782, these black Loyalists were gathered in New York City, given freedom papers by English officials, and moved to the British province of Nova Scotia. Brutal winters, disease, and economic hardship haunted the expatriate free black community. After complaints from black leaders,



The Revd. Henry Simmons. Pastor of the First Incorporated African Baptist Church in the City of Philadelphia, lithograph by Albert Newsam after an oil painting by Joseph Kyle (Philadelphia, 1838). Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

British officials transferred approximately 1,200 settlers to Sierra Leone, where many died from disease and others remained the rest of their lives.⁵⁹

Ironically, some black Loyalists who traveled to Sierra Leone hoped to revivify African culture through the powers of Christianity and commerce. As Boston King put it, “Spreading the knowledge of Christianity in [Africa had] . . . long possessed my mind.”⁶⁰ Other black leaders expressed similar sentiments. Both Daniel Coker and Paul Cuffe traveled to Africa with hopes of spreading Christianity and developing trade networks among African people. Disciples of the “Fortunate Fall” – the belief that, though horrible, the slave trade had been divinely inspired to introduce Christianity to Africans – these men hoped to redeem African society, not simply be redeemed by it. Before his death in 1817, Cuffe took several trips to the West African coast. He established Bible study groups and mutual aid societies, believing that these pious endeavors would help curb African participation in the slave trade. “I have for some years had it impressed on my mind to make a voyage to [West Africa],” he wrote in 1809, “feeling a desire that the inhabitants . . . might become an enlightened people.”⁶¹ While Cuffe died before creating a modern commercial republic in West Africa, Coker lived as a Christian missionary there for several decades after arriving in 1820.

Though black communities supported African emigration throughout the 19th century, these schemes posed many challenges. Cost was one factor; family an-

other, for with a decreasing percentage of native-born Africans in the United States, African resettlement meant leaving loved ones who resided in the United States. The formation of the American Colonization Society, which many African Americans viewed as a front for slaveholders who merely wanted to rid America of troublesome free blacks, further clouded the prospect of African departures. Although enslaved people in Maryland, Virginia, and other parts of the South creatively used the ACS to gain manumission (on condition that they depart for Africa), the number of African emigrants – 6,000 between 1820 and 1860 – paled next to the majority of African Americans who rejected the organization outright.⁶²

If returning to Africa proved difficult, black founders still used African heritage as way to understand black identity in the Americas. Stressing what James Sidbury has usefully labeled “filiative” notions of kinship, African Americans argued that they were joined “to one another [in] mythic time, and into a category that was at least as deep and real in its own way as blood kinship.”⁶³ Anyone claiming African descent, or who experienced racial oppression, shared the sacred bonds of blackness. As New Yorker William Hamilton once observed, “It makes no kind of difference whether the man is born in Africa, Asia, Europe or America, so long as he [descends] from African parents.”⁶⁴ According to Absalom Jones, African-descended people were intimately bound by “their affliction . . . [and] their privation of liberty.”⁶⁵ In short, for both Hamilton and Jones, as for other black

leaders, there was something unique about the modern black condition.

Yet black founders envisioned themselves as more than simply an “afflicted” group. They were, early black pamphleteers and orators observed, a redeemer people anointed by God to perfect liberty and justice in Western culture. Absalom Jones’s famous January 1st oration, delivered on the very day Americans ended the international slave trade in 1808, turned the experience of racial subjugation into a biblical parable, with blacks’ playing the role of ancient Jews gloriously liberated from Egyptian bondage. “The history of the world,” Jones proclaimed, “shows us that the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage is not the only instance in which it has pleased God to appear in behalf of oppressed and distressed nations.”⁶⁶ Blacks in the New World, like ancient Jews, had a special bond with a righteous God and one another.

As Jones’s words suggest, the story of Exodus resonated in black communities seeking to redefine themselves in Western slave societies. Prince Hall, Richard Allen, Daniel Coker, Peter Williams, and a host of black leaders cited its eternal relevance to emancipated people of color. For them, the very prospect of liberation required that oppressed blacks remain pious and connected to one another across time and space. The formation of African churches and communal institutions reified this sacred connection. So too did linguistic allusions to a black communal identity. In Boston, Prince Hall addressed his audience of black Masons as



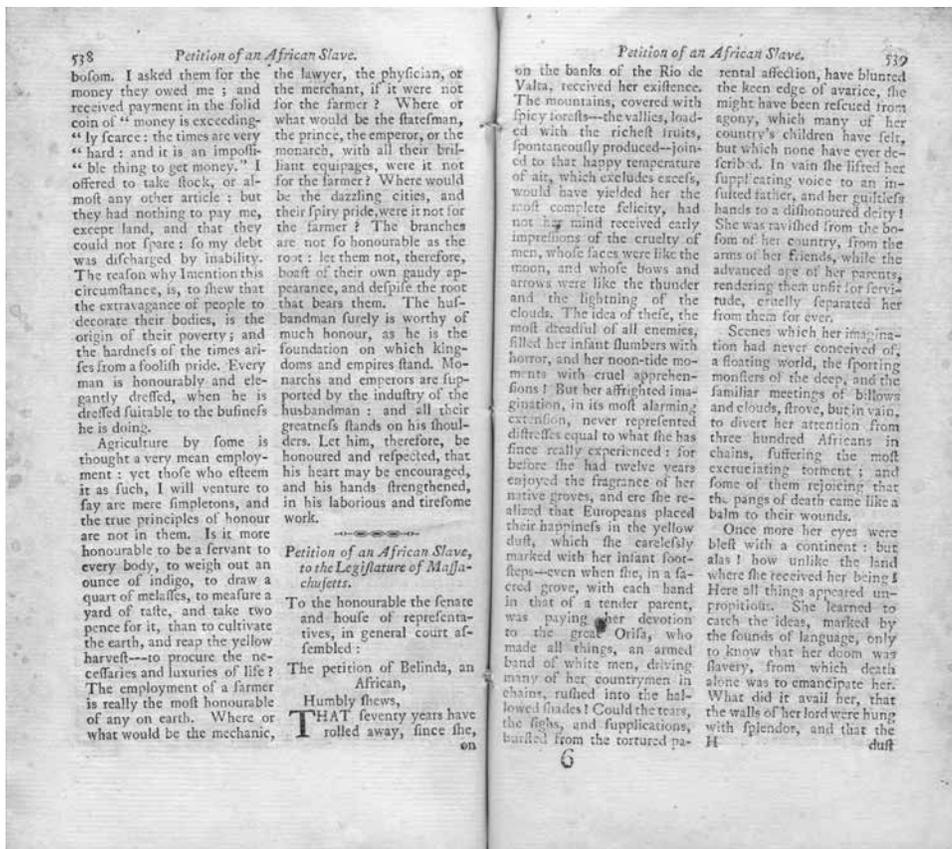
*Rev. Morris Brown, of Philadelphia, engraving by John Sartain in Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, 1891)*

“beloved brethren”; in New York City, Joseph Sidney hailed his black readers as “countrymen”; in Baltimore, Daniel Coker ended his 1810 abolitionist pamphlet by reminding “Ethiopia’s sons in the United States of America” that they formed “an holy nation” within the American nation, “a peculiar people.”⁶⁷

One powerful strand of black founders thinking about identity, then, revolved around the notion that African heritage (whether identified as blood ties or ancestral connections) and the unique experiences

of racial oppression marked people of color as a unique community in Atlantic society. Nonetheless, African heritage formed only part of the matrix by which black founders defined themselves. They also claimed a post-slavery American identity. In fact, the very failure to integrate American civic institutions often led many activists to establish their own parallel institutions, ironically prefiguring modern black nationalism’s emphasis on black separation and racial/ancestral kinship. Daniel Coker, Peter Williams, and Richard Allen each believed in the dream of universal emancipation and black equality within the United States. Only when those dreams failed did they experiment with more radical forms of racial redress, including African and Haitian emigration. Prior to advocating emigration, they all stressed the consonance of blackness and American nationalism. Indeed, though they would not dissolve racial identity altogether, many black founders sought to celebrate a noble African past while also enjoying the rights and liberties derived from the Declaration of Independence. Particularly in emancipating northern states, black leaders dreamed of a biracial future. As Richard Allen said to white slave owners in 1794, “it is in our posterity enjoying the same privileges with your own, that you ought to look for better things.”⁶⁸

By linking modern black identity to the nation’s founding ideals, African American leaders inaugurated a line of thinking that still informs black patriotism. Black founders argued that African Americans had built the country from the ground up, died in wars to defend



Belinda, "Petition of an African Slave," from *The American Museum, or, Repository of Ancient and Modern Fugitive Pieces, Prose and Poetical* (June 1787).

American freedom, and helped refine notions of liberty. As Richard Allen declared in *Freedom's Journal* in 1827, America was a black homeland precisely because people of color had given their lives to create the nation. "This land which we have watered with our tears and our blood," he vigorously asserted, "is now our mother country." As New Yorker Peter Williams put it on July 4th, 1830, recalling his enslaved father's struggles during the Revolutionary War, "We are natives of this country. . . . Not a few of our fathers suffered and bled to purchase its independence. . . . We have toiled to cultivate it, and to raise it to its present prosperous condition; we ask only to share equal privileges with those who come from

distant lands to enjoy the fruits of our labor."⁶⁹ Antebellum black activists uttered versions of this famous motto, too. Citing James Forten, Frederick Douglass argued in 1849 that "Black people of this country are in fact the rightful owners of the soil of this country . . . 'We are American-born citizens; we only asked to be treated as well as you treat your aliens.'"⁷⁰

Black founders used this line of reasoning to bolster their earliest appeals for reparations. "Belinda's Petition," an appeal for monetary support issued by an enslaved woman in Massachusetts during the 1780s, argued that slaves had toiled to make others rich while they suffered in obscurity. "The face of your petitioner

Letters from a Man of Colour,

ON A LATE BILL

Before the Senate of Pennsylvania.

No. I.

O Liberty! thou power supremely bright,
Profuse of bliss and pregnant with delight,
Perpetual pleasures in thy presence reign,
And smiling plenty leads thy wanton train.

ADDISON.

We hold this truth to be self-evident that God created all men equal, and is one of the most prominent features in the declaration of Independence, and in that glorious fabric of collected wisdom, our noble constitution. This idea embraces the Indian and the European, the Savage and the Saint, the Peruvian and the Lapplander, the white Man and the African, and whatever measures are adopted subversive of this inestimable privilege, are in direct violation of the letter and spirit of our constitution, and become subject to the animadversion of all, particularly those who are deeply interested in the measure.

These thoughts were suggested by the promulgation of a late bill, before the senate of Pennsylvania, to prevent the emigration of people of colour into this state. It was not passed into a law at this session and must in consequence lay over until the next, before when we sincerely hope, the white men, whom we should look upon as our protectors, will have become convinced of the inhumanity and impolicy of such a measure, and forbear to deprive us of those inestimable treasures, Liberty and Independence. This is almost the only state in the union wherein the African race have justly boasted of rational liberty and the protection of the laws, and shall it now be said they have been deprived of that liberty, and publicly exposed for sale to the highest bidder? Shall colonial inhumanity that has marked many of us with shameful stripes become the practice of the people of Pennsylvania, while mercy stands weeping at the miserable spectacle? People of Pennsylvania, descendants of the immortal Penn, doom us not to the unhappy fate of thousands of our countrymen in the Southern States and the West Indies; despise the traffic in blood, and the blessing of the African will forever be around you. Many of us are men of property, for the security of which, we have hitherto looked to the laws of our blessed state, but should this become a law, our property is jeopardized, since the same power which can expose to sale an unfortunate fellow creature, can wrest from him those estates, which years of honest industry have accumulated.— Where shall the poor African look for protection, should the people of Pennsylvania consent to oppress him? We grant there are a number of worthless men belonging to our colour, but there are laws of sufficient rigour for their punishment, if properly and duly enforced. We wish not to screen the guilty from punishment, but with the guilty do not permit the innocent to suffer. If there are worthless men, there are also men of merit among the African race, who are useful members of Society. The truth of this let their benevolent institutions and the numbers cloathed and fed by them witness. Punish the guilty man of colour to the utmost limit of the laws, but sell him not to slavery! If he is in danger of becoming a publick charge prevent him! If he is too indolent to labour for his own subsistence, compel him to do so, but sell him not to slavery. By selling him you do not make him better, but commit a wrong, without benefiting the object of it or society at large. Many of our ancestors were brought here more than one hundred years ago; many of our fathers, many of ourselves have fought and bled for the Independence of our country. Do not then expose us to sale. Let not the spirit of the father behold the son robbed of that Liberty which he died to establish, but let the motto of our Legislators be "The Law knows no distinction."

These are only a few desultory remarks on the subject, and intend to succeed this effervescence of feeling, by a series of essays, tending to prove the impolicy and unconstitutionality of the law in question.

For the present, I leave the public to the consideration of the above observations, in which I hope they will see so much truth, that they will never consent to sell to slavery

April, 1813. A MAN OF COLOUR.

The American Daily Advertiser.

James Forten, "Letters from a Man of Colour, on a Late Bill before the Senate of Pennsylvania," from *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (April 13, 1813).

is now marked with the furrows of time," Belinda's memorial remarked, "and her frame feebly bending under the oppression of years, while she, by the laws of the land, is denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, a part whereof have been accumulated by her own industry, and the whole augmented by her servitude." Apparently co-authored by Prince Hall, who lived nearby, "Belinda's Petition" established free people of color as Americans who could enter the civic realm and make legitimate claims upon governing institutions at both the state and federal levels. The Massachusetts legislature responded by granting Belinda an annual pension (though it was paid out of her Loyalist former master's estate).⁷¹

Emphasizing affinities with American ideals actually allowed black leaders to imagine themselves as a loyal opposition whose antislavery protest had been underwritten by service to the nation. Connecticut preacher Lemuel Haynes used his experience as both a Minuteman and member of the Continental Army to campaign for black equality. According to his most recent biographer, Haynes "absorbed from the American Revolution a mix of Republican ideology and New Divinity theology that inspired his antislavery and pro-black writings." For Haynes, the new American Republic could become a bulwark of black liberty – if, that is, white citizens dedicated themselves to "terminating slavery and welcoming blacks into commonwealth and congregation." He composed his first essay, "Liberty Further Extended: or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of



Grand and Splendid Bobalition of Slavery [broadside] (Boston, 1825).

Slave keeping,” in 1776. This vigorous attack on slavery and the international slave trade used both the Bible and the Declaration of Independence to argue for universal liberty within the American Republic. Though unpublished in his lifetime, Haynes probably allowed people to read his private manuscripts (as was fashionable in the 18th century). More importantly, “Liberty Further Extended” became the foundation of Haynes’s “public career, since for more than 50 years [he] . . . continued to write about liberty, faith in God, and the governance of a fair society” in America.⁷²

Haynes’s assertion of an American identity owed much to his upbringing in a majority-white cul-

tural and political setting that was just beginning to grapple with widespread black freedom claims. Following the American Revolution, hundreds of African Americans in New York, Pennsylvania, and New England claimed freedom for military service or allegiance to the patriot cause. Access to courts of law, and representation from white abolitionists, not only abetted black claims to freedom but also provided hope that the new Republic would root racial injustice. Haynes’s birth state of Connecticut adopted a gradual abolition law in 1784, promising liberty to over 6,000 enslaved people within its borders (some were sold south before their freedom dates matured); his adopted state of Massachusetts declared slavery unconstitutional in 1783. Vermont, where he took on his first preaching post, never sanctioned slavery at all. In short, Haynes could travel throughout New England and watch the dream of universal freedom take shape.

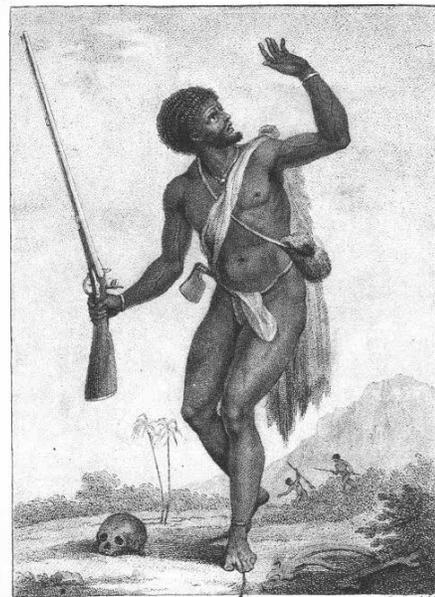
Clearly an exceptional figure, Haynes’s use of black patriotism to obtain universal liberty was not unique. James Forten, who heard one of the first public readings of the Declaration of Independence as a boy and then served on a privateer in the American Revolution, offered perhaps the most soaring celebration of black patriotism and equality in his 1813 essay *Letters from a Man of Colour*. Published initially in *Poulson’s Daily Advertiser* to protest a proposed law requiring free black migrants to register with Pennsylvania officials (under the threat of fines and imprisonment), Forten soon printed his thoughts in pamphlet form.

He based his opposition to the proposed law on “the letter and spirit of our [state] constitution,” which had been conceived by Pennsylvania politicians in 1790 as a race neutral document (anti-abolitionists’ attempt to distinguish “white” from “black” rights failed). How, he wondered, could Quaker State legislators betray Pennsylvania’s “noble constitution” by even considering the anti-black statute? “This is almost the only state in the union wherein the African race have justly boasted of rational liberty and the protection of the laws, and shall it now be said they have been deprived of that liberty . . .?”⁷³ By levying critiques of unjust laws, Forten hoped that white statesmen would rally to blacks’ side just as many people of color had supported Americans’ struggle for independence.⁷⁴

Forten won this battle; the law never passed. But even within the liberal state of Pennsylvania, black activists had to remain constantly on guard. When a new state constitution disfranchised African Americans in 1838, black reformers vigorously urged statesmen to resort to Pennsylvania’s “first principles” and secure African American equality. “We honor Pennsylvania and her noble institutions too much to part with our birthright, as her free citizens, without a struggle,” Robert Purvis, James Forten’s son-in-law, observed in *The Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened with Disfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania*.⁷⁵ This time, black protest failed to persuade white statesmen and citizens to reverse course. African Americans in Pennsylvania would not regain voting rights until after the

Civil War.

Well before Pennsylvania’s disfranchisement of black citizens, African American leaders raised concerns about the fate of racial equality in a slaveholding republic. Indeed, slavery’s growth in the South and racial exclusion in the North complicated black founders’ sense of allegiance to the United States. By the early 19th century, many free black leaders looked for a third way – a civil rights solution that did not necessarily return blacks to Africa but placed free people of color beyond the United States. And when they searched for alternative models of defining black identity, free blacks drew inspiration above all else from Haiti. The first black republic in the Western Hemisphere, the Haitian uprising



A Rebel Negro armed & on his guard.

“A Rebel Negro, armed & on his guard,” engraving by Francesco Bartolozzi in John Gabriel Stedman, *A Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam . . . from the Years 1772 to 1773* (London, 1796).

volumes in favour of education, and endeavouring to improve the condition of this unfortunate class of people. It is the cultivation of the mind and the heart, which teaches them to be honest, makes them quiet and orderly citizens, and leads them to a knowledge of the means whereby they may obtain comfort in this life, and happiness in the life to come."

8. Several girls, who have received their education at this school, have gone with their parents to Hayti, where they will be capable of teaching schools, and may be of singular benefit.—Two interesting letters from one of these girls, has been received by E. J. Cox; extracts from which are here subjoined.

"Republic of Hayti, City of St. Domingo, Sept. 29, 1824.

"DEAR TEACHER,

9. "With pleasure I hasten to inform you of our safe arrival in St. Domingo, after a passage of twenty-one days: mother and myself were very much afflicted with sea-sickness, for about nine or ten days, but after that, we enjoyed a little of the pleasures of our voyage.

10. "On our arrival, we were conducted by the captain of the port to the Governor's house, where we were received by him with all the friendship that he could have received us with, had we been intimately acquainted for years. After informing him of our intention of residing on the Island, we were conducted to the residence of the second General in command, where we had our names registered. From thence we went to see the principal chapel in the city; to give a description of which, it requires a far abler pen than mine; (she however mentions many particulars) but you cannot form an idea of it, unless you could see for yourself. After we had viewed the church throughout, we were conducted to our lodgings, at which place we are at present.

11. "Since we have been here, my sampler and bench cover have been seen by a number of ladies and gentlemen, and have been very much admired by all

"Republic of Hayti, City of St. Domingo, Sept. 29, 1824. Dear Teacher," in *Abigail Field Mott, Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour. To Which Is Added, a Selection of Pieces in Poetry* (New York, 1826).

was proof positive that people of African descent could alter the racial politics of Atlantic culture. For Boston's Prince Hall, Haitian slave rebels were biblical avengers whose dedication to freedom inspired oppressed black communities everywhere.⁷⁶

Black leaders along the Atlantic seaboard echoed Hall's sentiments. During the 1820s, Baltimore's William Watkins offered one of the most glowing accounts of Haiti's significance in the black mind when he declared that the black republic's independence "tends to the exultation of *our* color and character" [emphasis added]. "Of all that has hitherto been done in favor

of the descendants of Africa," he went on, referring not only to France's recognition of its former colony in 1825 but the very survival of a black nation in the Atlantic world, "I recollect nothing so fraught with momentous importance."⁷⁷

In Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, and Boston, the Haitian Revolution became more than an emblem of black pride. Haiti was the most popular early national destination of black émigrés tired of American promises betrayed, attracting between 6,000 and 12,000 free people of color to its shores in the 1820s alone. While many of these émigrés eventually returned, disappointed in the realities of the Haitian economy (and, for black evangelicals, aspects of vodoun), the idea of Haiti as a safety valve remained a visible part of black protest. Virtually every prominent black leader, from Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown to Henry Highland Garnet and Henry McNeal Turner, envisioned Haiti as either an outlet for disaffected black communities or an inspiration for militant black protest back home. "I would not persuade you to like the white race less," T. Morris Chester shouted in Philadelphia during the Civil War, "but to love the black race more," particularly the 'immortal [Haitian general] Toussaint' L'Ouverture.⁷⁸

Knowing of free blacks' concerns about American racism, Haitian officials shrewdly visited New York, Philadelphia, and other black communities to discuss emigrationist prospects to the Caribbean republic. Haitian diplomat Jonathas Granville (a *gens de couleur* with a formal education and a regal bearing) made sev-

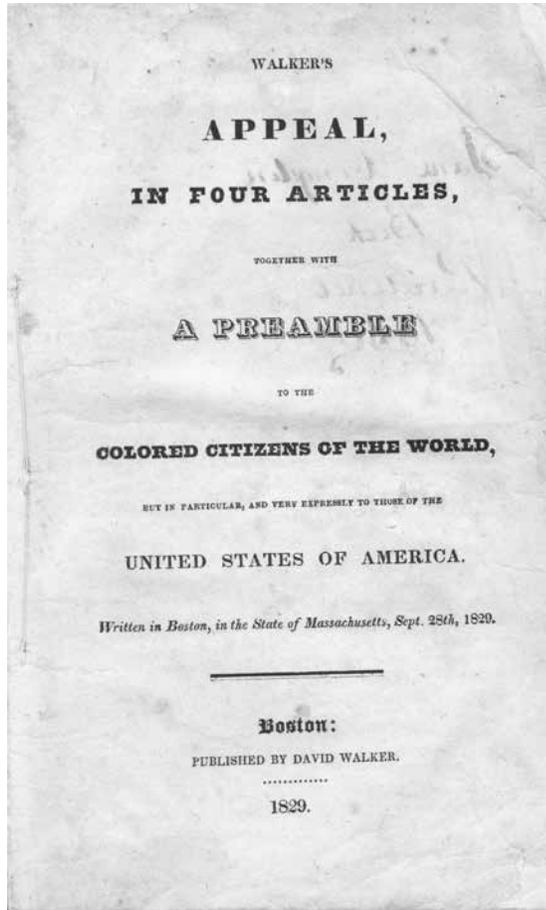
eral stops at Richard Allen's Bethel Church. In August of 1824, Allen even wrote a letter to Haitian President Jean Pierre Boyer about the glorious prospect of black departures. Referring to the Haitian republic as a "refuge where [we] will enjoy the blessings of freedom and equality," Allen told Boyer that he had compiled a list of nearly 500 potential émigrés – and that he had recently dispatched a group of 50 free black people there. "I daily receive correspondence from many persons of color in varied cities and towns requesting information on the requirements of emigration," he confidently told Boyer. "I have no doubt that in little time there will be thousands more."⁷⁹

Black interest in Haiti flowed from a long tradition of African American internationalism. The black itinerants who roamed Atlantic society at the close of the 18th century – John Marrant, Moses Wilkinson, Boston and Violet King, among others – saw no one nation as blacks' saving grace. Using evangelical Christianity to frame their movements, they traveled to British Canada, the Caribbean, West Africa, and Great Britain as proponents of black redemption. Boston and Violet King, fugitive slaves from the South (he from South Carolina, she from North Carolina) who had met and wed under British protection before traveling to Nova Scotia and then Sierra Leone, kept moving from one locale to another in search of full freedom. A few years after Violet King died in Sierra Leone in 1792, her husband departed again for Great Britain, where he taught African pupils and spread the gospel of equality to anyone

who would listen. Likewise, John Marrant, who hailed from a free black family in colonial New York, became perhaps the most celebrated Atlantic itinerant for his work in Nova Scotia, Boston, and England. A New Divinity Christian, Marrant argued vigorously that God had "made of one blood all nations." For Atlantic itinerants like the Kings and Marrant, Christianity became as powerful a marker of personal and group identity as ethnicity, race, or African background.⁸⁰

With so many models available for constructing black identity during late 18th and early 19th centuries – including African ancestry, American egalitarianism, Haitian democracy, and Christian Universalism – it is little wonder that some black founders could resort to hybridity when defining both themselves and the broader black community. The 1792 congressional memorial by Afro-Philadelphians highlighted free blacks' claim to American liberties, as well as the option of departing the oppressive American nation altogether. "We humbly petition you that you will be pleased to inquire into the grievances of which we have complained," the memorial began, on the way to asserting black rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." While hoping for a national plan of gradual abolition – modeled, perhaps, on Pennsylvania's emancipation act of 1780 – the petitioners also expressed a desire to have "an asylum . . . similar to the one prepared by the British in Sierra Leone."⁸¹ White backlash against the building of autonomous black churches, as well as broader anti-black sentiment flowing from the Quaker State's emancipation

edict, may have prompted the petition drive. The matter gets more complicated still because the petition was not presented. Did free black Philadelphians truly desire em-



David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America* (Boston, 1829).

igration? Or did they speak out of a sense of frustration?

New Haven clergyman Jacob Oson, author of *A Search for Truth; Or, An Inquiry into the Origins of the African Nation* (1817), perhaps the first fully articulated history of African identity, indirectly grappled with this problem by simultaneously critiquing Western culture's marginalization of Africans and celebrating Africans' impact on civilization. While Euro-American writers

derisively referred to "Africans" and "Negroes" as beyond the pale of humanity, Oson claimed that people of African descent shared a common human ancestry dating all the way back to Adam. Pointing to the Acts of the Apostles, he declared that the Lord had "made of one blood all nations of men to dwell upon the face of the earth." Oson also critiqued notions of polygenesis, or separate black creation, by pointing to the glory of ancient African nations. From earliest Africa came science, arts, and learning. Furthermore, Africa gave the world a whole lineage of Christian bishops, including Divinus, Julius, and St. Augustine. While the advent of New World slavery had suppressed this genius, people of African descent would rise again.⁸²

Yet for Oson, as for other black founders, African redemption did not necessarily require a return to African soil. Nor did it necessitate remaining in the United States. Rather, the advent of black freedom movements in the United States, Canada, Britain, and the Caribbean marked people of color as a rising moral, political and economic force in a variety of national settings. Redeeming Africans and blackness could therefore occur anywhere in the Atlantic world – so long as people of color viewed themselves as a powerful collective entity.

Debates over black identity continued well into the 19th century, with new generations of activists revisiting and refining discourses black founders had inaugurated. Both Africa and America remained vital parts of black identity formation, as they do in our own time. In-

deed, one might argue that the diversity of opinion over black identity proved to be one of the great strengths of early African American politics. It illustrated that black ideology was not static – and that black leaders could respond to new situations even as blackness revolved around essential characteristics (such as links to a common heritage or common oppression). As Robin Kelley has observed, even the failure of African emigration plans illuminates black communities’ deepest hopes and fears. “The desire to leave Babylon, if you will, and search for a new land tells us a great deal about what people dream about, what they want, how they might want to reconstruct their lives.”⁸³



Frank Johnson, lithograph by Alfred Hoffs, from a daguerreotype by R[obert] Douglass Jr. (Philadelphia, 1846). Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

For black founders, that dream was universal freedom and equality. Not finding it in America, they

sought for alternatives; and not finding those alternatives, they returned to America ready for a new phase in the struggle for justice in the years leading to the Civil War. That black identity itself became such a dynamic force – spurring more radical abolitionist movements in antebellum America and establishing the baseline of multicultural democracy in the twentieth-first century – remains perhaps the best testament to black founders’ accomplishments.

Appendix: Dramatis Personae

Richard Allen (1760 – 1831), a former slave possibly born in Philadelphia, attained his freedom in 1783 after striking a bargain with his Delaware master. A Methodist convert, he dedicated himself to religious outreach before settling in Philadelphia in 1786. He co-founded several revered institutions in the free black community, including the Free African Society in 1787, his Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (in 1794), and the national AME church (which had its first organizational meeting in Philadelphia in April 1816). He also served as the inaugural Bishop of the AME Church in 1816 (after Daniel Coker was initially chosen as Bishop but then resigned). Gaining literacy on the Methodist circuit as a youth, Allen co-authored the first copyrighted pamphlet in the United States: *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (1794). He also served as leader of Philadelphia’s Haitian Emigration Society during the

1820s, writing a letter to Haitian President Jean Pierre Boyer in August 1824 about the potential benefit of African American migration to the black republic. During the 1830s, Allen organized the first national convention of black activists, which met in his Bethel Church in September 1830. He wrote the first autobiography by a black founder, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Philadelphia, 1832).

Sarah Allen, née Bass, (1764? – 1849) was the second wife of Richard Allen. An enslaved native of Isle of Wight County, Virginia, she remained in bondage until the 1780s or 1790s, when she moved to Pennsylvania, where she appeared as “Sarah Bass” on the membership rolls of class meetings at St. George’s Methodist Church in Philadelphia. Class lists also included Richard Allen and his first wife Flora. Sarah Bass followed them out of the segregated white church and into Allen’s Bethel Church. She also served an important role as a nurse and caregiver during Philadelphia’s Yellow Fever epidemic. Sarah wed Richard Allen after the death of the black minister’s first wife in 1801. They had six children over the next two decades – Richard, Jr., James, John, Peter, Sara, and Ann – and lived at Allen’s home at 150 Spruce St. in Philadelphia (between present-day Fourth and Fifth streets). She was also active in church and community benevolent groups, helping start the Daughters of Conference, which aided black ministers attending AME conferences, and the Bethel Benevolent Society, a charitable organization that raised funds for AME families.

Belinda (1713 –?), a native of Ghana in West Africa, was enslaved to Isaac Royall, a Loyalist who had been one of Massachusetts’s largest slave owners before he fled to England in 1775. After his property was seized in 1778, Belinda was liberated. Moving to Boston, she made the first formal request for slave reparations to the Massachusetts legislature on February 14, 1783. She repeated her claim in 1787. Seeking an annual pension to support both herself and a handicapped daughter, Belinda based her claims on the fact that her physical labor had created substantial wealth for others. She also appealed to the principles of justice stemming from American revolutionary ideology. Though little is known of her life following the second petition, we do know that Belinda was part of a network of black activists that included Prince Hall, who lived nearby and possibly aided her appeal for reparations.

Daniel Coker (1780 – 1846) was born Isaac Wright in Frederick County, Maryland, to an indentured white mother and an enslaved father. The details of his early life remain obscure, though he ran away to New York before returning to Maryland in the early 1800s. As a mixed-race son of a white mother, he was considered a slave under Maryland law until the age of thirty-one. With the help of friends, he purchased his freedom and settled in Baltimore. Coker started a school for black children in 1807 and became the leading voice of black Methodists struggling to gain independence from white church officials. In 1810 he published the only major black aboli-

tionist pamphlet in the slave South, *A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister*. In 1815 he and a group of black parishioners removed themselves from a segregated white church. The next year, Coker helped organize the inaugural meeting of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. After being elected the first bishop of the AME Church, Coker resigned his post (the details of this event still baffle historians), allowing Richard Allen to assume the position. In 1820 Coker sailed for Sierra Leone and established the first AME branch in Africa.

Paul Cuffe (1759 – 1817), famed mariner and reformer, was the freeborn son of an African man named Cuffe Slocum (or John Cuffe) and a Wampanoag woman named Ruth Moses. As a teenager in southeastern Massachusetts, Paul worked on whaling vessels to help support the family. He bought his first ship in 1787 and another vessel several years later. By the early 1800s he was one of most successful black businessmen in New England. His political activism took shape in 1780, when he and his brother protested Massachusetts's ban on blacks voting. Thrown in jail for refusing to pay his taxes, he gave speeches on the theme of “no taxation without representation.” The black suffrage ban was eventually lifted and Massachusetts remained one of the few states in America that retained black voting rights through the Civil War era. He also started a school for black pupils in his home during the 1790s. Cuffe's transatlantic vision focused on creating trade networks between black set-

tlers in the British colony of Sierra Leone on the coast of West Africa and free black communities in the United States. His first voyage to West Africa occurred in 1811. He died in 1817 while planning more voyages there, hoping that the principles of Christianity and commerce would revolutionize transatlantic race relations.

James Dexter (1737? – 1799), also known as “Oronoco” after English playwright Aphra Behn's tale of an African prince who was enslaved, purchased his freedom in 1767 from the estate of a Philadelphia tavern keeper. He worked as a coachman for Quaker abolitionist John Pemberton and became one of the first black petitioners to the Pennsylvania Executive Council in 1782, when he and five black leaders sought burial space in Philadelphia's potter's field. In 1792 he served as a deacon of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church, holding the inaugural organizational meeting for this important black institution in his home near Fifth and Cherry streets (the present-day site of the National Constitution Center). He also signed the first draft petition to the federal government circa 1792, which sought equal justice under the law, national emancipation, and monetary support for a voluntary African emigration. Although the memorial was never forwarded to Congress, it gathered support from over fifty people of color in the Philadelphia area. Dexter, who had also purchased his wife's freedom during the 1760s, remained active in St. Thomas's Church right up to his death in August 1799.

James Forten (1766 – 1842) hailed from a free black family in Philadelphia. A pupil at Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet’s school, Forten learned to read and write at an early age. He heard one of the earliest public readings of the Declaration of Independence in the summer of 1776 and then volunteered on an American privateer. After being captured by a British ship, Forten refused an offer to travel to England and receive an advanced education. Following in his father’s footsteps, he learned the craft of sail making and worked as an apprentice under a white man named Robert Bridges, who eventually sold his business to Forten. A member of St. Thomas’s Church and the African Masonic Lodge, he supported a variety of free black institutions and reform causes. Though an early advocate of both African and Haitian emigration, Forten chaired the famous anti-colonization meeting in Richard Allen’s Bethel Church in 1817. He also wrote *Letters from a Man of Colour on a Late Bill before the Senate of Pennsylvania* (1813), which became one of the most important black abolitionist pamphlets of the 19th century. During the 1830s, he provided monetary support to William Lloyd Garrison and became an advocate of immediate abolitionism. In 1835 he served as president of the American Moral Reform Society, which was dedicated to universal emancipation and moral uplift.

Newport Gardner, born Occramar Marycoo (1746-1826), helped create the African Union Society in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1780. One of the few black found-

ers with direct memories of his African youth, Gardner was brought to colonial America as a youth with hopes of attaining a formal education under the sponsorship of a slave-trading ship captain. After being sold into slavery in Rhode Island, Gardner worked diligently for his freedom and a possible return to Africa. A formally trained singer and composer, he ran a music school in Newport at the close of the 18th century. A founder of the Union Congregational Church, the city’s leading free black church, Gardner returned to Africa as a Christian missionary in 1826, where he soon died of disease.

Prince Hall (1735? – 1807), a former slave who learned the leather trade under his master, became black Boston’s first institution builder when he founded the “African Lodge of the Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons of Boston” in 1775. Formed under the wing of British Masons, the African Society was not formally incorporated until 1784, when Hall’s application gained approval in London. During the Revolutionary War, Hall supplied leather goods to American troops and probably served in a Boston regiment at Bunker Hill. During the 1780s, he joined other Boston blacks in petitioning the Massachusetts government for equal rights. He also may have helped craft “Belinda’s Petition,” a memorial presented to the Massachusetts legislature twice during the 1780s seeking monetary recompense for a former female slave. During the 1790s, Hall published two important pamphlets in Boston (both entitled *A Charge*), emphasizing the necessity of free black auton-

omy and brotherhood. Hall's African Lodge and home remained synonymous with black protest well after his death.

William Hamilton (1773 – 1836) remains one of the most intriguing black founders, for he may have been the son of (or related to) Federalist Alexander Hamilton. A free black carpenter who lived in New York City for several decades, Hamilton may also have written the “Africanus” essay in the *Gazette of the United States* in March 1790. He later became a co-founder of the African Society for Mutual Relief and a mainstay in black New York's organizational life. He published several pamphlets during the early 19th century, treating subjects ranging from the ending of the slave trade to black accomplishment in America. Hamilton served as the president of the fourth annual meeting of black reformers in 1834 and generated monetary support for the radical antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*, published by William Lloyd Garrison in Boston. He passed on his firm belief in the utility of literary protest to his sons Thomas and Robert, who published the *Weekly Anglo-African* during the late 1850s and early 1860s.

Lemuel Haynes (1753 – 1833), one of the first free blacks ordained in the Congregational Church, was also the first African American leader to have an honorary degree bestowed upon him (an 1804 master of arts degree from Middlebury College in Vermont). A freeborn person who hailed from West Hartford, Connecticut,

Haynes was apprenticed to a Massachusetts man until the age of twenty-one. He volunteered for military service as a Minuteman during the American Revolution and fought at the Battle of Lexington in April of 1775. He wrote his first treatise on black equality – “Liberty Further Extended” – in 1776, although the document remained unpublished. Married to a white school teacher in the 1780s, Haynes preached briefly in Torrington, Connecticut before moving to a church in Rutland, Vermont, where he remained for much of his life. Although he declined the opportunity to study at Dartmouth College, he was tutored in Greek and Latin by a Connecticut minister. He published a pamphlet entitled *The Nature and Importance of True Republicanism* in 1801 and supported Federalist politicians, who he believed to be dedicated to antislavery and equality.

Absalom Jones (1746 – 1818), a former slave from Delaware who moved to Philadelphia, gained his freedom and became one of the most revered black activists of the early Republic. The first African American ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church, Jones formed the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in 1794, after departing segregated St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church a few years before. With Richard Allen, he helped create the Free African Society in 1787 and co-authored *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793* (1794), the first copyrighted pamphlet by black authors in the United States. Jones also led the

first black petition drive to Congress when he presented an abolitionist memorial in December 1799 that was rejected by the House of Representatives, 84-1. In 1808 he published his famous oration on the ending of the slave trade, *A Thanksgiving Sermon*. In 1816 he was one of five local clergymen who supported Richard Allen's ordination as bishop of the AME Church (after Daniel Coker resigned).

John Marrant (1755 – 1791) was born free in New York City, though travels in the Southern colonies led to his conversion to evangelical Christianity as a youth. Impressed into the British Army, he eventually won his release and became one of the first black Atlantic itinerants of the Revolutionary era. He also joined the Huntingdon Connection, a Methodist sect with Calvinist leanings. Marrant published a spiritual autobiography in 1785, *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant*, as well as several other pamphlets soon after. Traveling among black communities in Nova Scotia, Boston, and England, he advocated both emancipation and universal equality.

Jacob Oson (d. 1828) was a New Haven, Connecticut, clergyman who produced one of the first and most thoughtful histories of African identity in the early Republic. Some scholars believe he may have hailed from the Caribbean and was perhaps once enslaved. By 1805 he appeared in New Haven as a free man and soon attracted the attention of white religious leaders. Oson

ran a school for black children and began writing about the glories of ancient African culture. After addressing members of an AME Zion Church in New York City in 1817, he published *A Search for Truth; or, An Inquiry into the Origin of the African Nation*, which denied polygenesis – or the separate creation of races – and placed Africa among the global powers. He befriended the Rev. Harry Crosswell, a leading member of the Protestant Episcopal Church in New Haven, who helped Oson apply for a position as lay reader at St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Lack of formal education scuttled Oson's hopes. In 1828 he became the first African American missionary ordained by the Episcopal Church – and only the fifth black minister ever ordained by Episcopalians. He died that year before traveling to Liberia, a colony of former slaves recently created by the American Colonization Society.

Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1753 – 1784), poet and the first published African American author, was born in Africa and enslaved to the Wheatley family of Boston prior to the American Revolution. A precocious talent, Wheatley learned to read and write in her mistress's liberal home, which also welcomed leading colonial evangelicals and reformers. Soon after skeptical Boston authorities tested her literary abilities in 1772, Wheatley traveled to Britain, where she met abolitionist Granville Sharp and the Countess of Huntingdon. British friends helped arrange the publication of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773, the same year that she

gained her freedom. She remained with the Wheatleys for several years before marrying John Peters, a free black man. She eventually had to work as a servant and died poor on December 5, 1784.

Peter Williams, Jr. (1780? – 1840), the son of an indentured mother and enslaved father who had fought in the American Revolution and protected white patriots, was born in New Jersey but matured in New York City, where he attended the New York Manumission Society's famous African Free School. Ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1826, Williams headed St. Philip's Episcopal Church, which had been organized in 1819 as an autonomous congregation within the Episcopal Church hierarchy. A member of the African Society for Mutual Relief, he also helped form mutual aid groups, including the African Dorcas Association and the New York Phoenix Society (which was dedicated to creating a black manual labor college). One of the early supporters of New York's *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in America, Williams also wrote *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (New York, 1808). During the 1830s, when St. Philip's grew to over 200 families, Williams became a member of the American Antislavery Society's board of managers (from 1833 and 1836) and served as one of a handful of free blacks on the Society's executive committee in 1834. He received a passport to travel to Great Britain in 1836, a milestone in his struggle to be formally recognized as an American citizen.

Endnotes

1 *The Anglo-African Magazine* (October 1859).

2 "The Petition of a Grate Number of Blackes of this Province who by divine permission are held in a state of Slavery within the bowels of a free and christian Country," May 25, 1774, at <http://www.brandywinesources.com/1701-1775/1774DOCPetitionofBlackes.htm>

3 For Dubois and Douglass' celebration of Richard Allen, see Richard Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008), epilogue.

4 As a percentage of the African American population in the United States, free blacks fluctuated between 1790 (7.9 %) and 1860 (11 %), reaching a high point in the census of 1830 of 13.7% of America's 2.39 million African Americans. For black population statistics, see "Free Colored and Slave Population: 1790-1860," in Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington, D.C., 1918), 53-57. Statistics cited herein quoted at 53.

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12 See Newport African Union Society to Providence African Society, February 13, 1794, in Dorothy Sterling, ed., *Speak Out in Thunder Tones: Letters and Other Writings by Black Northerners, 1787-1865* (Garden City, N.Y., 1973), 9.

13 James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York, 2007), 68-70.

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16 See Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*, chap. 2. See also Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 98-99.

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47 See Winch, *Gentleman of Color*, 154-156.

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- 66 Ibid., 335.
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- 73 Forten, *Letters from Man of Colour*, 67.
- 74 On Forten's thought, see Winch, *Gentleman of Color*.
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- 76 See Prince Hall, *A Charge, Delivered to the African Lodge, June 24, 1797, at Menotomy* (Boston, 1797), 43-45.
- 77 *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* (Mount Pleasant, Ohio), August 1824, 168-169.
- 78 T. Morris Chester, *Negro Self-Respect and Pride of Race* (Philadelphia, 1862), in Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky, *Pamphlets of Protest*, 307-308.
- 79 Allen to "Le President d'Haiti," Jean Francois Boyer, August 22, 1824, reprinted in *Biographie de Jonathas Granville, par son fils* (Paris, 1873), 224-225. I am much indebted to Julie Winch for making this source known to me.
- 80 On this theme, see especially Peter P. Hinks, "John Mar-
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- 81 See Newman, Finkenbine, and Mooney, "Philadelphia Emigrationist Petition," 161-166.
- 82 Jacob Oson, *A Search for Truth; or, An Inquiry into the Origins of the African Nation* (New York, 1817), posted online at <http://oieahc.wm.edu/wmq/Jan07/Hall.pdf>. See also Stephen G. Hall, "A Search for Truth: Jacob Oson and the Beginnings of African American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. 64 (2007): 139-148.
- 83 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002), 16.

Acknowledgments

As most scholars of black history know, the Library Company contains a treasure trove of Afro Americana. For over three decades, the person most responsible for collecting and maintaining the seemingly endless array of pictures, documents and ephemera comprising its famous “Afro-Americana Collection” has been Phillip Lapsansky – the “incomparable” Phil, in one historian’s words. He curated the “Black Founders” exhibition and shaped both the content and texture of this accompanying publication. Without Phil’s tireless commitment to documenting black history, we would not be in a position to survey the black founders’ world in such a detailed and multifaceted way. For his scholarly aid and friendship over the past fifteen years, I offer heartfelt thanks. So too would I like to thank the Library Company’s Director John C. Van Horne for inviting me to craft the “Black Founders” exhibition pamphlet – and for being a stalwart supporter of a related conference on “Atlantic Emancipations,” both of which will go a long way towards enhancing the historical status of early African American reformers. John also helped collate and improve several drafts of the exhibition pamphlet, for which I remain in his debt. Both Debbie Shapiro and Nicole Scalessa at the Library Company deserve a hearty thanks for helping facilitate work on the production of this pamphlet. I would also like to thank several people, both at the Library Company and beyond, whose insightful commentary markedly improved the exhibition pamphlet: James Green, Cornelia S. King, Sharon Thompson-Nowak, and Christine K. Van Horne. Any errors are of course mine but thanks to one and all for making the “Black Founders” exhibition and publication a reality! Finally, I would like to offer thanks to the Dean’s Office in the College of Liberal Arts at Rochester Institute of Technology for a small travel grant which allowed me to finalize my thoughts on both the exhibition and this essay.

--Richard S. Newman

Rochester Institute of Technology

Checklist of the Exhibition

Slavery and Revolution in the Atlantic World

Girolamo Benzoni, *Americae pars quinta nobilis & admiratione plena Hieronymi Bezoni Mediolanensis, secundae sectionis h[istor]ia[e] Hispanorium: tum in Indos crudelitatem, Gallorumq[ue] pirataru[m] de Hispanis toties reportata spolia* (Frankfurt, 1595).

Engraved frontispiece to *Incendie du Cap. Révolte général des Nègres. Massacre des Blanca* (Paris, 1815).

“A Rebel Negro, armed & on his guard,” engraving by Francesco Bartolozzi in John Gabriel Stedman, *A Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam . . . from the Years 1772 to 1773* (London, 1796).

“Leonard Parkinson, a Captain of the Maroons,” engraving by Abraham Raimbach in *Proceedings of the Governor and Assembly of Jamaica in Regard to the Maroon Negroes* (London, 1796).

Daniel Horsmanden, *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York in America, and Murdering the Inhabitants* (New York, 1744).

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