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The Network for Autonomy: Development of Early Black Voluntary Associations and the Progress of the Black Community

Marc T. Williams

THE NETWORK FOR AUTONOMY: DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY BLACK VOLUNTARY
ASSOCIATIONS AND THE PROGRESS OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY

By

MARC TRACEY WILLIAMS II

THESIS

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Supervising Committee:
    Delana Price, Supervising Professor
    Andrew Milson
    Stephanie Cole

ABSTRACT

The Network for Autonomy: Development of Early Black Voluntary Associations and
the Progress of Colonial Era Black Americans

Marc Tracey Williams II, MA

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Supervising Professor: Delanie Price

This thesis centers around and attempts to answer the question: between the Revolutionary era and the beginning of the Civil War, how did some of the earliest local Black benevolent communities develop themselves over the course of their lifetime? Three Black benevolent societies established during the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth century period will be analyzed — the Free African Union Society of Newport and Providence Rhode Island, the Free African Society of Philadelphia and the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in Manhattan — to assist in answering this question. It follows the commonly held idea scholars have held about Black voluntary associations while also taking a closer look at how each of these organizations developed their values, principles, and social, economic and political aid. It examines each individual organization in the order of their founding, to understand the foundational elements that defined Black voluntary associations and observe the ways in which ideals were shared and modified. This project will place heavy emphasis on the fact that Black representatives used the "instrumental-expressive" voluntary benevolent association formula to design a cultural space that serves the distinctive needs of the Black community during a time of intense national slavery. It holds to the idea that Black voluntary associations first and foremost derived from

eagerness among the Black community since before the Revolutionary War to become self-sufficient within a discriminatory social environment. Mutual aid services were tailored for the benefit of Black individuals oppressed by the traditional system, giving support, comfort, and status to people adjusting to a strange environment. It was a key element in the transition from slavery to freedom, even after the release of the Gradual Emancipation Laws across the north. Black voluntary associations were also used to create a distinct national identity as a means of distinguishing its community. Their foundation is intrinsically tied to core values of independence, self-determination, and social, political and economic empowerment for the Black community. They served as both an alternative to cultural assimilation into Euro American society and an outlet to secure equality within white culture.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1979, African American studies enthusiast Robert L. Harris Jr. published an article

entitled "Early Black Benevolent Societies, 1780-1830" for *Massachusetts Review*. A cross-

comparison study of multiple northern and southern American Black voluntary associations

between the post-Revolutionary era and early Antebellum period, Dr. Harris sought to add to the

limited discourse regarding pre-Civil war Black institutions and give early Black benevolent

societies the adequate attention and scrutiny that was sorely lacking in the field of African

American history. His rationale was understandable, as the historiography of Black institution

building by the mid twentieth century focused more on organizations established after the

complete abolition of legalized slavery and especially during the epoch of Jim Crow. No doubt

were post-Civil War Black mutual aid and voluntary associations reflective of a crucial and

perilous moment in Black history. The period immediately after the Civil War was a time in

which the newly emancipated—faced with the harsh realization that the transitioning social

environment in America caused by slavery's demise did not result in social, political or

economic equality—were "left to fend for themselves," and as a solution formed independent

institutions for Blacks to transition from slavery to freedom. The significance of these

organizations in the realm of both Black and national history is unequivocal, and the wealth of

sources and information available about them is what drew historians to conduct such research.

However, as Dr. Harris attests, the wave of Black voluntary associations after the Revolutionary

War provided the groundwork for Black institutionalization and racial identification efforts that

future Black associations would follow in order to meet the challenges of freedom. Therefore, to

not grant sufficient attention to early Black voluntary organizations would be neglecting an influential chapter in the narrative of Black and American history.[1]

A similar motive is used to guide the process of this project, which also centers on early Black voluntary associations. There have been some studies dedicated to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century organizations before the release of Dr. Harris Jr.'s article. One of which was written by W.E.B. DuBois, who in his groundbreaking 1903 empirical observation of religion in Black independent churches devoted a brief segment to the Philadelphia Free African Society, calling it "more than just a mere club" and "the first wavering step of a people toward organized social life."[2] New York Community leader and African American inventor Samuel L Scottron wrote a passage in 1905 about the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in honor of its ninety seventh anniversary, remarking on its "sufficient importance" worthy of investigation. He further considered its existence and longevity to be symbolic of a varied social phenomenon in the midst of intense slavery.[3] Charles A. Battle, as a part of his 1932 discussion over Black history in Rhode Island, gives a cursory overview of both Newport's African Union Society and Providence's African Benevolent Society, stating that the organizations "exerted a marked influence for the good on the colored people…in those early days, an influence that was felt long after it ceased to exist."[4]

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[1] Harris, Robert L. "Early Black Benevolent Societies, 1780-1830." *The Massachusetts Review* 20, no. 3 (1979): 603–25.

[2] Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, *The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made Under the Direction of Atlanta University ; Together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 26th, 1903* (Rowman Altamira, 2003), 124.

[3] Scottron, Samuel L. "New York African Society for Mutual Relief - Ninety-Seventh Anniversary". Colored American Magazine. 14 (1905): 685–690.

[4] Battle, Charles A. "Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island." (N.p.: N.p., 1932), 18; This pamphlet was republished by Newport's Black Museum by Sidney Wright, and Mrs. Sidney Wright in 1971.

Yet while these publications gave exposure to these associations and appreciated their impact on the Black community, thorough examinations of their evolution and resonance in modern culture had yet to be fully tackled, especially in mainstream historical circles where Black voluntary associations were rarely touched upon. In recent years, with the benefit of archeological discoveries and shifting historical disciplines and interests, more attention has been given to early Black voluntary associations. But contemporary studies still treat such organizations as precursors, rather than entities worth studying in their own right. In other words, most previous scholarship examined these associations as leading indicators towards a larger trend that would reach greater heights after the Civil War.

With this in mind, the purpose of this project is to not only provide surface level information regarding early Black voluntary associations, but to discuss their evolution within the larger context of Black community development after the American Revolution. This thesis follows the modern consensus that Black voluntary association differed greatly from white mutual aid institutions offering assistance for the Black community, in both scope and goals. Black led voluntary associations sought more than simple social and economic support for poor Blacks in need. These were direct responses toward a dominant oppressive system historically hostile to its Black residents and seen as outlets for the community to resist maltreatment. They intended to, and in many ways succeeded in, providing Blacks social, economic, and political autonomy to survive within the traditionally stratified society by incorporating sickness and disability benefits, pensions for deceased members' families, burial insurance, funeral direction, credit unions, charity, education, moral guidance, and real estate programs to build schools, religious sanctuaries and living spaces. Funding and structure were kept independent within the

confines of Black supervision, in order to refute common white created stereotypes that Blacks were entirely dependent, incapable of maintaining themselves without supreme authority.

The value these associations held at the time of their establishment is especially important. As authors such as Lerone Bennett Jr. have recognized, the period between the late eighteenth and the mid nineteenth century is one of the most important in Black history. It was the first moment in which 'Black pioneers' made considerable steps in utilizing Western political and social principles to structure permanent Black American institutions, thereby creating an alternative system within the confines of a slave society.[5] The desire to launch an independent Black organization also connects to previous community building efforts since the arrival of Africans in the seventeenth century. One of the first attempts took place in 1643 New York (then named New Amsterdam), where several enslaved Blacks pressed their rights to own property in courts. Many were granted acres of land around the same time, resulting in a landowning community of Black families settling in the area north of the city consisting of nearly thirty homes and farms described in later property documents as "negroes land" or "land of the blacks." Though these property owners were considered a part of a "half free' social class and gradually lost their land after 1664 following the seizure of New Netherland by English forces, the population during the settlement's lifetime had made ample measures to arrange a social landscape for themselves, constructing a community shared cattle pen and building the wall of Wall Street. Some historians claim this to be the first free African settlement formed in North America.[6] Although, it should be understood that the settlement existed within an immature

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[5] Bennett, Lerone. *The Shaping of Black America* (Chicago : Johnson Pub. Co., 1975), 114.
[6] See Ira Berlin and Leslie M. (Leslie Maria) Harris, *Slavery in New York* (New York : New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2005), 41–45; Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 128–30.

social and racial system, when America was what Ira Berlin called a "society with slavery."[7] The pivotal role of the Black assemblage for the comfort of the community was high, though at a time of relatively ambiguous racial relations.

By the early eighteenth century, the country had fully situated itself as a "slave society" with a rigid social and racial hierarchy.[8] This thesis uses Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and New York as primary settings. Historians of colonial era America have identified these three states as having some of the highest concentration of Blacks in northern America and were the most ardent practitioners of slavery throughout their respective region. While the system was not as intense there as it was in southern territories, these states nevertheless designed a trade and industrial system immensely reliant on a Black slave workforce. Of these states, Rhode Island ranked as the dominant player in the slave trade, with Africans accounting for nearly twelve percent of its total population (as opposed to every other northern state which never went above three percent); this large portion was due in no small part to its prodigious commercial activities that aligned with a large slaveholding aristocracy. The business of slavery came with its intransigent suppressive slave codes, all passed to marginalize Blacks, solidify and control a mass labor force, and keep the social pyramid intact. Each state approved similar curfew laws, trade and occupation restrictions for free Blacks, and tighter manumission requirements to keep enslaved Blacks bound to their status for life. They were to prevent those emancipated from integrating into Euro American society or defying standardized societal expectations.

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[7] The term "society with slavery was first coined in Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Harvard University Press, 1998).
[8] Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*.

Ironically, it would be these roadblocks that inflated the push for Black voluntary associations and Black community development. Gunnar Myrdal — in his influential study of American moral conflict, racism, and hypocrisy entitled *An American Dilemma* — considered Black voluntary associations to be at its core pathological responses to "prohibitions against having Negro members in white associations."[9] While there is truth to this claim, a simple explanation such as this strips away the complex elements of these organizations. This thesis maintains the idea that Black voluntary associations first and foremost derived from eagerness among the Black community since before the Revolutionary War to become self-sufficient within a discriminatory social environment. Much of the set up for these institutions can be seen in social and political activities that took place during the war's preceding years, which were also heavily based in struggles for autonomy. For example, the 'Negro 'Lection Day, festivals held across northern America between the 1740s and 1800, consisted of several enslaved and free Africans who assembled at public commons to hold separate annual elections from whites and celebrate the African community. They infused African traditional rituals with European customs as a means of adapting to their living space while constructing a unique and identifiable culture.[10] Separate Black churches that first emerged in the 1760s, despite being few in number, were also early examples, being both a response to enforcements of segregated or exclusionary fellowship in white religious congregations and a drive to practice religion and political action on their own terms.

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[9] Myrdal, Gunnar. *An American Dilemma: Volume 2, The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (Harper Tourchbooks, 1969), 952.
[10] Discussed in Joseph Reidy, "Negro Election Day and Black Community Life in New England, 1750–1860," Marxist Perspectives (Fall 1978).

This thesis also emphasizes the activist nature of Black voluntary associations, a trait which also stems from pre–Revolutionary War movements. The political expressions created during the Revolutionary period by white colonialists — calls for liberty, justice for all, true sovereignty against oppressors — proved to be instrumental in how Blacks articulated their pleas for emancipation and equal civil rights. Blacks obviously did not need to be given clarification over their status, but the revolution rhetoric was seen as a useful agreeable language tool to voice their grievances. Enslaved Blacks in northern territories during the mid-1770s petitioned their provincial assemblies asking to be freed and for the abolition of slavery, drawing heavily from the language of liberty.[11] Attached to these collective actions were enslaved African writers like Phillis Wheatly who continuously remarked over the hypocrisy of white Revolutionists who professed freedom from the suppressive British government while also harboring systems of oppression themselves. People like Wheatly called attention to the "strange Absurdity" of white cries for liberty that ignored the plights of Black Americans.[12] As will be highlighted, resonance of this discourse made its way into voluntary associations immediately, with members expressing their calls for abolition and equal opportunity diametrically opposed to standard American principles of freedom.

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[11] Most evidence of these petitions derive from Massachusetts. Groups of Black protestors (whose names were not included in the documents) petitioned the Massachusetts colonial government for their freedom between 1773 and 1777; "Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, June 1773," *Massachusetts Historical Society; "*Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, 25 May 1774," *Massachusetts Historical Society; "*Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty's Council, and the House of Representatives, June 1774," *Massachusetts Historical Society; "*Petition for freedom to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives, [13] January 1777," *Massachusetts Historical Society*; www.masshist.org*, accessed July 11th, 2024.

[12] Philis Wheatley, Letter to Samson Occum, Feb. 11, 1774, cited from Woody Holton, *Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era : A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA : Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 50–51

In many ways, Black voluntary associations were the zenith of Black political activism, which was especially important after the Revolutionary War had concluded. As a precursor to feelings felt by Blacks after the Civil War, rhetoric of liberty and equal rights echoed by Patriots and the success of securing a sovereign nation did not result in a rearranged social system for Blacks to prosper. Even after the passing of Gradual Emancipation Laws in northern states, racism and intolerance against the status quo remained an unmoving force. One of the most astonishing overlooked aspects of Black voluntary associations is that they, operating within systemic constraints of Euro American society, developed as the American nation proceeded to further define and establish itself. While both used similar principles of liberty and independence to secure autonomy for their community, their goals were entirely different. Though national organizations were formed to provide Blacks with education and trade training, they operated within a system of segregation and inadequacy. Black voluntary associations worked within an environment that viewed them as alien, confounding creatures, and anathema to white authority attempts to design a nation dominated by white Christian men.

On the note of national organizations used to assist Blacks, this thesis also takes notice of the remarkable feat of Blacks to exist independently from arising white abolitionist associations. These organizations were also deeply inspired by Revolutionary ideals of civil liberty and justice, in addition to developing more of a moral stance against slavery and the slave trade system. While many people within the community benefited from abolitionist institutions, most Blacks realized its major limitations in ensuring self-sufficiency for them. Several enslaved Africans were manumitted with the aid of these organizations but were granted no protection from systematic injustice or promises of a future of social and racial equality. Economic aid or property rights were also never a prime directive for abolitionist organizations, who held the

same fear of sharing their social status with Blacks as white governmental authority figures. Instead, moral uplift and religious instructions embodied most of their interests, and much of their education were guided under bigoted assumptions of Black inferiority. Blacks felt it was necessary to utilize lessons of morality and religious teachings obtained from white abolitionists, but as a means to elevate the community politically, socially, and economically in such a way that was anathema to abolitionist expectations. Black voluntary associations, as will be discussed, communicated with white abolitionist organizations over certain matters, but continued to maintain their self-determination.

To understand the development aspects of early Black voluntary associations, this thesis will observe their level of commitment, structure, accomplishments and ability to respond to changing societal circumstances between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. From the beginning, the intentions of these organizations could be described using the term "instrumental-expressive" voluntary benevolent societies. This term was used by Harris Jr. in his 1979 article, and is used to describe organizations that combine goals of immediate gratification with long-range objectives beneficial for the community.[13] Though this term applies to benevolent societies overall, specifically ones that rose during the late eighteenth century, he further asserts that Black organizations, inspired by preexisting voluntary associations, were unique in their aim to specifically provide for their particular community.[14] When these associations initially formed, their free Black founders had gained the social, political and economic strength to establish firm principles and ideologies to be followed through their run. Racial solidarity framed their value system early on. A sense of Black nationalism was also

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[13] Harris, "Early Black Benevolent Societies, 607-608.
[14] Harris, "Early Black Benevolent Societies, 609.

emphasized, as evidence by the efforts of the Newport African Union Society, which consistently asserted their identity as brethren from the Nations of Africa, and even made attempts to repatriate and create an independent settlement in Africa during its lifecycle. Yet commitments at first were rather slow, with low membership counts and followers not paying their fees to support the associations, ultimately becoming a contributing factor in some Black voluntary organizations momentarily ceasing their operations. By the early nineteenth century, as Blacks faced even further disenfranchisement and displacement from society as a result of industrialization and hardened racial politics, dedication to these organizations among members increased significantly. The boost given to these Black voluntary associations had helped solidify their status as a paradigm for racial dignity, perseverance and tenacity, giving them additional meaning.

Structurally, voluntary associations in the beginning were confined to the homes of their free Black property-owning founders, in part a result of exclusionary facilities but also a means to keep meetings and discussions discreet. In the case of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, the privacy of these organizations was necessary due to lingering slave codes prohibiting the collaboration of enslaved and free Blacks in public spaces. For others, it may have been done to emphasize their independent nature. Over time, especially as the free Black population increased in large numbers in northern states, voluntary associations became a more visible public force, opening themselves up in order to reach a wider network of potential members. As a result, associations performed their services in larger meetinghouses within predominantly Black neighborhoods, with the NYASMR becoming the first to be incorporated by the state government. While their newfound visibility came with antagonism from white residents, it

nevertheless was a giant leap forward in strengthening Black voluntary associations and

providing a wider population of Blacks with communal assistance.[15]

This study calls major attention to the diversity of early Black voluntary association

initiatives, the biggest of which involved the creation of a cultural landscape for the Black

community. Independent churches and organization meetinghouses stood prominently in Black

districts, and real estate projects were issued to construct houses for those in need. Most

astonishingly, these neighborhoods were situated in some of the richest cities in late eighteenth

and early nineteenth century America, and despite having to rely on their own material resources,

these associations sought out to take full advantage of their environments. Blacks pushed for

burial rights to form and oversee their own African burial grounds, an integral endeavor

considering local cemeteries were racially segregated and restrictive. By the nineteenth century,

several independent African American schools had been established by the NYASMR and

considered an alternative to the types of African schools offered by white abolitionists.[16] While

all these developments were evidence of the enduring faith of Black community building and

political maneuvers, the most momentous example of this was the founding of Seneca Village, a

Black settlement that began around 1825 in the borough of Manhattan. Often classified as the

apotheosis of Black real estate ventures, the NYASMF and various residents of New York

strongly dedicated their strength and efforts to creating a lasting Black presence through this

settlement. Several institutions were created including three churches, two schools, two

cemeteries and nearly fifty houses. For some free Blacks, moving or owning property in the

village was a strategic political maneuver to vote and gain political power in society. Though the

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[15] Discussed further in Craig Steven Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (NYU Press, 2001).
[16] Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men*.

community would unfortunately be erased in 1857 after being destroyed to create Central Park, representing a major blow in Black civil rights and cultural settlements, it was a significant achievement in the grand scheme of voluntary associations and Black community history.[17]

This thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the Free African Society in Philadelphia (FAS), founded by two Black ministers Richard Allen and Absalom Jones who sought to be city authorities with the ability to mobilize and influence the Black community. It explains that their desire of being absolutely responsive to the needs of the community, lest they risk losing their authority, is why the organization briefly moved past its initial plan to create a religious congregation and focused on building a mutual relief association. Their knowledge and commitment will be given attention as they are what allowed them to take positions as representatives of the FAS. It discusses decisions such as how attempts were made to lease land for an African burial ground, how they sent applied Blacks to assist those sick during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, and how they began work on funding and eventually building the St. Thomas African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first independent church in America. Further, it explains how these churches proved to be integral for Black neighborhoods. Once this formation of neighborhoods began, the area exerted a strong pull on those who were working their way free of white households or arriving in the city.

Chapter 2 brings attention to Rhode Island's Free African Union Society (FAUS) and the African Benevolent Society (ABS), elaborating on their formation and evolution. It articulates that through Negro Elections held in Newport, the privileges and achievements of Black middle class property owners, and possibly the experiences with non-discriminatory religious

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[17] Rosenzweig, Roy. *The Park and the People : A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1992), 65–89.

gatherings, the free Black community gained the social, political, and economic experience to create the FAUS. It outlines some of its early-stage prospects, structure of leadership, and decisions. The biggest of such being repatriation which, while originally endorsed by the FAUS, ultimately proved to be unsuccessful, unpopular among the majority of the Black community, and lost its luster over time. It will observe its most substantial evolution that occurred in 1808, when members of the FAUS transferred over to the African Benevolent Society after the former dissolved due to struggling finances and difficulties in increasing and maintaining membership. Though both organizations fell after 1824, their influence and passion ultimately led to several subsidiary Black benevolent organizations in Rhode Island (Female African Benevolent Society for example), and the building of the Colored Union Congregational Church in Providence.

The third and final chapter brings the New York African Society for Mutual Relief to the forefront, formally organized to assist widows and orphans, pay burial expenses for its members, and to serve as a brokerage house to buy real estate. The Black communities of New York and Brooklyn, with the assistance of the NYASMR, wrapped themselves in a web of associations that imposed principles that they hoped to make universal, which helped it become the most successful nineteenth century example of the blending of social justice and entrepreneurial capitalism. Their efforts led to the creation of a meeting house in Orange Street worth $1800, which provided a steady stream of income for sick and death benefits, a gathering place for the Black community, and a stop for the Underground Railroad. The chapter also analyzes the push by members for moral and spiritual education with its independent schools, churches and apprenticeship programs. Discussion over the support of the NYASMR culminates in an explanation over one of the first Black settlements in American history: Seneca Village, established between 1825 and 1857. Though it only lasted for a short time, it was the largest and

best example of Blacks utilizing material wealth to expand their influence for both free and

(potentially) enslaved Blacks to experience.

CHAPTER 1

BLACK PHILADELPHIANS: FREE AFRICAN SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA

In the autumn of 1792, a major development was taking place within the Philadelphia Black community. Methodist preachers, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, staged a protest against the St. George United Methodist Episcopal Church located on 4th Street in Center City. The protest was an expression of their frustration over institutional practices of discrimination and the segregation of Black worshipers from predominantly white congregation. As Allen mentions in his 1833 memoir, African attendees of the St. George Church, both enslaved and free, had previously been allowed by its administrators to sit next to, and participate in sermons with, white churchgoers (a rare situation compared to most churches in the nation, even in northern states).[18] The church even accepted both Allen and Jones' proposals to become its first licensed Black preachers, and by extension the first Black preachers in American Methodism. Seemingly no restrictions regarding their teaching methods were imposed upon them, although the two were limited to early morning classes. They nonetheless took pride in their newly given opportunity to preach as authorized clergymen. Allen, by the end of 1786 even gathered an audience of forty-two Black members. It was their leadership that would be partly responsible for the considerable increase in Black parishioners at St. George in 1787.[19]

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[18] Allen, Richard. *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen.: To Which Is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal ... to the People of Colour in the United States* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 14–16.
[19] Allen, 13.

For both Allen and Jones, the maneuver to displace Black people from St. George's religious community was a commitment enveloped in hypocrisy. According to Allen, Black brethren of St. George were loyal, well adapted people willing to abide by the disciplines of the church. He claimed that it was only after elders noticed the rise in Black attendance in prayer meetings and meetings of exhortation when the community suddenly became a nuisance and violators of the church. Upon this realization, Black churchgoers were forced to place themselves along the church walls and pews away from the main seats, and then were eventually secluded inside the small upstairs church gallery. Yet still, the community remained attendees of the church, as Allen and Jones held independent sermons inside the gallery.

However, the allegiance of Allen and Jones reached its final breaking point after an incident when Jones had been yanked from his kneeling position during prayer by a white pastor, who then unsuccessfully attempted to forcibly drag him over to another pew. Both were also threatened repeatedly to halt further independent sessions held in the gallery, lest all Black members be excommunicated indefinitely from St. George. Feelings of mistreatment, unfairness, and betrayal motivated Allen and Jones to take an active approach. Thus, by mid-1792, both leaders managed to rally several Black churchgoers at the end of a session and departed from the St. George building never to return, showcasing their disapproval and refusal to worship the church any further. Though this protest received opposition from some members of the Black community (who felt the best course of action was to avoid deepening racial tensions), it ultimately was overshadowed by ambitions set by Allen and Jones to establish an African American independent church.[20]

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[20] Allen, 13–16.

This conceptualized church was not only intended to have a religious function, but also

mutual assistance, an endeavor Allen and Jones had engaged with before. Five years earlier, on

April 12th, 1787, shortly before the Constitutional Convention held secret deliberation sessions

in Philadelphia to establish a definitive Constitution for the new nation, Allen and Richard had

already laid the framework for a mutual aid institution in the city: the Free African Society, one

of the first Black voluntary associations in America.

Historians who have discussed the Free African Society (FAS), as scant as they are, typically

frame it around the narrative of Philadelphia Blacks forming an independent church. The

Society's preamble released by its leaders Allen and Richard the day of its formation, states the

goals and desires of the organization clearly, as an avenue for "people of [Allen and Richard's]

complexion…upon this painful and important subject…to establish some kind of religious

society…without regards to religious tenets…in order to support one another in sickness, and for

the benefit of their widows and fatherless children."[21] Scholars attention to the statements made

in the preamble focuses intently on its call for Black people to gain and sustain religious freedom

from oppressive predominantly white ecclesiastical churches, an aspiration that the walkout

boisterously served to represent. By the mid-1780s, the church had become the center of the

Black community in both northern and southern states, especially Philadelphia's growing free

Black community. Yet, as most churches continuously treated the population as outcasts, a push

for the establishment of unfettered African American churches gained strength. An independent

church was a prominent goal for members of the FAS, displayed by their charity efforts to raise

money for the purchase of real estate that would be used to build such a church, which eventually

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[21] Douglass, William. *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America: Now Styled the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Philadelphia, in Its ... Their Condition, With the Co-Operation Of* (Forgotten Books, 2018), 15.

led to the construction of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in 1792 and the Mother

Bethel African Episcopal Church in 1794, two of the first Black independent religious

institutions in the nation. In that sense, academic discourse surrounding the FAS prioritizes their

accomplishment in forming an autonomous Black religious community that would spread

throughout the rest of the century and beyond in northern (and southern) territories.

Certainly, the Society's dedication to religious freedom and their contributions to African

American independent churches cannot be ignored and will be a major subject of discussion in

this chapter. However, to detail the FAS's status as a voluntary association, the conversation

must expand by observing the dynamics of the organization. The persistence in crafting an

independent religious life for Blacks is a major component of the history of the FAS but it

connects directly with strong desires for Black institutional building in Philadelphia, one that

provides social, political, and economic assistance for all within the community. The

independent churches were the flashpoint for the Society, but the articles of the FAS primarily

brought non-religious, specific social issues to the forefront. These included financial support for

widows, education for children unable to afford the Quaker operated free African schools, and a

treasury for other property and economic pursuits. The FAS strove to accomplish more than

religious freedom in Philadelphia. For patrons of the organization, it was the paradigm for an

organized life away from external paternalism. The impetus for a Black voluntary association in

Philadelphia traces back years prior to Allen and Jones' induction as St. George preachers and

reputation as community leaders.

The Gradual Abolition of Slavery legislation of Pennsylvania marked a notable turning point

for the Philadelphia Black population. Released in March of 1780, the act placed a prohibition on

the further importation of enslaved children and adults into Pennsylvania territory. It declared every "negro and mullato child" of enslaved mothers, born after the laws' enactment, to be set free by age twenty-eight.[22] The act did not extend its hand to the immediate total abolition of chattel slavery, as would be the case for all other Gradual Abolition laws that followed. In fact, as a means to satisfy those who firmly attached themselves to the business of slavery, slave owners were permitted to hold onto the enslaved Blacks they owned, provided they met the requirement in registering enslaved people annually, a decree which gave mainly wealthy owners official property protection.[23] Additionally, while newborns were presented with some promise of release from bondage, those who were enslaved before the passage of the act were given no announcement of their desired freedom. Essentially, the law crafted a system for the eventual freedom of enslaved individuals without declaring systematic slavery illegal. The latter trait would be adherent to all gradual emancipation legislation moving forward.

Despite its limitations, the Pennsylvania Gradual Abolition law stood as a watershed moment for free and enslaved Blacks in Philadelphia. The abolition law represented several developments. For one, it was the culmination of several years' worth of pressure for slavery's annulment on the part of both Black and white residents. Philadelphia Quakers had been skeptical of slavery since the 17th century, and such doubt would increase and parley into the next century, with prominent figures such as John Woolman and Anthony Benezet stressing the immorality of slaveholding. Quakers viewed slavery as an unholy act with the innate ability to corrupt participants into committing sins such as haughtiness and violence. However, rarely

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[22] General Assembly of Pennsylvania, "An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery," (1780), *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*
[23] Ibid. This is mentioned at the end of section five of "An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery; "...no Negro or Mulatto, now within this state, shall from and after the said first day of November, be deemed a slave or servant for life, or till the age of thirty one years, unless his or her name shall be entered as aforesaid on such record, except such Negro and Mulatto slaves and servants as are herein after excepted;"

would action move farther than confined arguments within the Quaker community. A petition against slavery in Germantown (currently part of Philadelphia) was written in 1688, making it the first written document to protest slavery in America. Yet, it received numerous rejections from Quakers, particularly those who practiced slavery themselves.[24] It would take until the mid-1770s for the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, an aggregation of Quakers in the Philadelphia region, to demand for members who purchased, sold, or held slaves to be banned from attending or being accepted into the organization. By this time, the Age of Enlightenment had taken hold in colonial America.

By 1775, as the American Enlightenment took hold, and as a battle between colonists and Britain seemed imminent, the abolitionist movement grew more of a pulse both among Quakers and the realm of Philadelphia society. Primarily due to increasing tensions between colonists and Great Britain, the core tenets of Enlightenment philosophy found significant use in mainstream colonial culture, to form a national identity infused with radical ideals. Such concepts included individualism, the belief in inherent dignity and worth among all people, and natural human rights including the right to live freely and away from imperial oppression. These ideas would influence an intellectual foundation for social activism in support of opposing slavery, separating the abolitionist movement further from traditional assumptions and values.
These Enlightenment ideals were commonly expressed through published texts released throughout the Revolutionary era.

Some pamphlets and books related to concerns about slavery and abolition had made it to publication before the 1770s. For example, Woolman's 1754 *Some Considerations on the*

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[24] For more on this petition, see Gerbner, Katharine. "We are against the traffick of mens-body: The Germantown Quaker Protest of 1688 and the Origins of American Abolitionism", in Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies (Spring 2007).

Keeping of Negroes and Benezet's 1760 *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes* were such examples, with the latter achieving notoriety in Philadelphia and London Quaker associations.[25]

By the time of the Revolution, pamphleteering opponents of slavery experienced a surge not had before, simultaneous with revolutionary pamphleteering. Many of these pamphleteers were Quakers, but other white abolitionist residents found it necessary to join the fray, releasing some of the most read publications in the city. For example, Presbyterian doctor Benjamin Rush produced a pamphlet in 1773 entitled *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, upon Slave-Keepin,* which attacks both slaveholders and institutional slavery itself. It uses ideals of human equality, natural liberty, and righteousness, to justify the inherent abhorrence of slavery, and even notes the hypocrisy of American patriots who argue against British tyranny while they "continue to mingle the sweat and blood of Negro slaves with their sacrifices."[26] English American political writer Thomas Paine, most acclaimed for his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*, published an antislavery essay a year before that was located inside the Pennsylvania Journal called *African Slavery in America*. Like Rush, it adopted natural rights philosophy to aggressively criticize the slave trade, claiming the practice to be "unnatural," "inhuman," and "monstrous," and all Africans to be as comprehensive to the "natural dictates of consciousness, and feelings of humanity" as the English, contrary to commonly held beliefs.[27]

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[25] On May 29th, 1767, the London Meeting for Sufferings ordered one thousand and five hundred copies of Benezet's *Observations on Importing, Enslaving and Purchasing of Negroes* to be re-printed and presented to Parliament, Rees, Alan M. "ENGLISH FRIENDS AND THE ABOLITION OF THE BRITISH SLAVE TRADE." *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association* 44, no. 2 (1955): 76.

[26] Rush, Benjamin. *An address to the inhabitants of the British settlements, on the slavery of the Negroes in America. To which is added, A vindication of the address, in answer to a pamphlet entitled, "Slavery not forbidden in Scripture; or, A defence of the West India planters." By a Pennsylvanian. [Fifteen lines of verse, signed Proteus]*, 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Printed and sold by John Dunlap, M,DCC,LXXIII. [1773]. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (accessed April 14, 2024) 27.

[27] "African Slavery in America," from *American Antislavery Writings : Colonial Beginnings to Emancipation* (New York : Library of America : Distributed to the trade in the U.S. by Penguin Group, 2012), 64.

Though records pertaining to the audienceship of these pamphlets are unavailable, it is most probable that pamphleteers targeted their publications to a high level of Philadelphians, both white and Black readers.[28]

Certainly, these writings were influential in the creation of the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, which formed in April 1775 and became the first abolitionist organization in America. Over time, the organization readjusted into the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, a society with more explicit aims towards eradicating slavery. During its initial run, only twenty-four white men filled the organization meetings, with over two thirds being Quaker artisans. The humanitarian ideologies communicated by Benezet, Paine and others supplemented the society's assumed task of protecting Blacks claiming to be free from becoming illegally enslaved. This consisted of Quakers intervening in legal proceedings involving Blacks and Native Americans defending their status as free individuals against slaveholders attempting to reclaim them and preventing buyers from securing their purchase. The society was successful at least once during a session involving a Native American woman named Dinah Nevill, where Quaker lawyer Miers Fisher appealed a court decision that rejected Nevill's plea to overturn a Virginian buyer's claim of her and her children.[29] All of these interventions occurred in the span of its first active year. However, the duration of these endeavors halted after 1775 as the organization disbanded at the end of the year, after only conducting four meetings, and would not be revived until 1784.

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[28] Historian Gary Nash suggests that Blacks would have been quick to learn of the existence of Philadelphia attacks on slavery, including the abundance of pamphlets; Nash, Gary B., *Forging Freedom : The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1988), 39.

[29] Turner, Edward R. "The First Abolition Society in the United States,'' PMHB, 36 (1912), 92-109; Sword, Kirsten. "Remembering Dinah Nevil: Strategic Deceptions in Eighteenth-Century Antislavery." *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 2 (2010): 315–43.

Abolitionist institutions also extended to educational facilities for Blacks, albeit not

encouraged by many. Before the 1770s, the Bray's Associates School for Blacks, a subsidiary of

the Williamsburg, Virginia Bray School, was the only institution dedicated to providing

accessible education for the free and enslaved. Its operation began in 1758 and lasted until 1845

and was successful enough to reopen its doors after closing them during the American

Revolution. To compare, other Bray's Associates Schools built afterwards in Rhode Island, New

York and Virginia all ceased performance by the Revolution and did not resume. Scholarship for

Blacks combined education with religion, teaching enrollers to spell and read with the

philanthropic aim to thwart what one member of the Bray's Association called the "prejudice

that reading and knowledge in a slave are both useless and dangerous."[30]Successful as it was,

continuously faced obstacles in gathering enough available white ministers and teachers willing

to educate Blacks.[31] Presumably, the school was appreciated by many of its Black parishioners.

However, considering the institution received high levels of opposition from those against the

teaching of Black people, it was not enough to dispel presumptions of innate Black inferiority.[32]

It would take until 1773 for another white led African school to be formed in Philadelphia,

and even then, the school was endorsed and managed by one Quaker. Benezet established the

Free African School in Willing's Alley, based on his over twenty years of experience teaching

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[30] "From Benjamin Franklin to John Waring, 17 February 1758," sourced from Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1959), 378.

[31] Between 1758 and 1768, four mistresses were hired to teach Black students; the first taught from 1758 to 61, the second (Elizabeth Harrison) from 1761 to 1764, the third (Mrs. Ayres) from 1764 to 1768, and the fourth (Sarah Wilson) began teaching in 1768. According to historian John C. Van Horne, though the departure of these women may not have been racially motivated, there leave was nonetheless evidence of the difficulties in keeping qualified teachers in the school for Blacks, Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery: *The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr. Bray, 1717-1777*. United States: University of Illinois Press, 1985. 36, 161–62, 222, 270

[32] No information regard specific criticisms against the Philadelphia branch of Bray's Association is available. That said, white opponents expressed their doubts towards the institution's overall effectiveness. In 1762, Rev. Alexaner Rhonnald, in his response to Rev. John Waring, asserted his belief that no master or mistress will undertake the school, stating that Blacks were generally too "very dull and Stupid" for suitable teachers to instruct them long term. Similarly, Rev. William Yates and Robert Carter Nicholas wrote to Waring how it was "generally observable that the most sensible of our Slaves are the most wicked & ungovernable," Religious Philanthropy, 182, 186.

free and enslaved Blacks at his home. His motivation for teaching was guided by his belief in natural human rights and the idea that slavery was responsible for Africans being placed within a degrading status. To him, Africans carried with them "a variety of talents," and were "equally capable of improvement, as amongst a like number of whites."[33] Quakers most likely were appreciative of Benezet for issuing this task, but mainly because he was doing something few were willing to commit to themselves. It was Benezet who took the responsibility for funding, building the school, and hiring a teacher while the Religious Society of Friends gave general approval. Despite not much assistance from Quakers, over 250 Black students between 1773 and 1779 were taught rudimentary skills such as reading, writing and potentially arithmetic, a subject Absalom Jones mentioned he was taught while attending a night school operated by Benezet in 1766.[34] The school produced several alumni, some of which would become defining leaders in the Philadelphia Black community, including Jones and Richard Allen.

For most others with little to no interest in educating Blacks, focus was concentrated on the contraction of slave importations and the increase in slave manumissions. Slave importations reached an all-time high in Pennsylvania between 1757 and 1766, when around 1300 enslaved people marched onto the docks.[35] However, importations underwent a dramatic change during the ensuing decades, to the point where the practice ceased entirely, thus reducing the slave population to around four hundred in Philadelphia by 1780.[36] Historians rightfully link the decline in importations to defiant actions on the part of the First Continental Congress. The inspiration for this decision came from Congress' refusal to remain compliant with Great

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[33] Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. "Short observations on slavery" New York Public Library Digital Collections, 11-12.
[34] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 120.
[35] Nash, *Freedom by Degrees : Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1991), 74.
[36] Nash, 74.

Britain's colonial trade and tax policies, which included a high import tariff on slaves imposed in 1761. As a result, they gathered the support of all thirteen colonies to ban slave importations altogether in 1774 in hopes of pushing the British to enact a change.

Yet, this protest against Great Britain was also coupled with rising antislavery sentiments and Quaker abolitionism. Quaker pamphleteers, Benezet and Rush in particular, effusively expressed their appeal for all colonies to abate further slave importations in order to "emancipate the whole race" of the enslaved "restoring that liberty we have so long unjustly detained from them," and then resettle them in the south or elsewhere outside the colonies.[37] Shortly after Congress ended slave importations, Rush wrote to abolitionist Granville Sharp that the decision was proof of enthusiasm for abolitionism and African freedom gaining significant traction.[38] Most historians contend that his belief in an abolitionist surge was naive and miscalculated, especially his predictions that slavery would be obsolete in America after forty years. Not much evidence suggests the adherence to pausing slave importations was based even partially on a desire to free African slaves. That said, Quaker abolitionists most likely had considerable influence over developing moral outrage towards slave importations. Founding Father George Mason wrote in the Fairfax County Resolves in 1774, which included the slave trade ban, bluntly called the slave trade a "wicked, cruel and unnatural Trade" that all colonies wish to see an entire stop to.[39] Working class colonists probably echoed similar sentiments, although they may have been connected more to their frustration with Great Britain than anything.

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[37] Pennsylvania Chronicle, Nov. 21-28, 1768, sourced from Darold D. Wax, "Reform and Revolution: The Movement Against Slavery and the Slave Trade in Revolutionary Pennsylvania," Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine 57 (1974): 410-11.

[38] John A. Woods, Benjamin Rush, and Granville Sharp, "The Correspondence of Benjamin Rush and Granville Sharp 1773—1809," *Journal of American Studies* 1, no. 1 (1967): 20–21.

[39] *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, vol. 10, *21 March 1774–15 June 1775*, ed. W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995, 119–128. Mentioned in the sixteenth paragraph.

Meanwhile, slave manumissions became slightly more frequent during the height of the

Revolutionary era among both Quakers and other slave holders. The rate of individual Quaker

slave owners who manumitted the enslaved experienced an increase during the mid-1770s as the

abolitionist movement blossomed in Philadelphia, and in particular after 1776 when slave

owning was declared an offense worthy of excommunication within Quaker society. Compared

to years prior in Philadelphia when only 17 percent of 87 Quaker slaveholders became slave

manumitters, most between the period 1775 and 1779 had disassociated themselves from slavery,

leaving about 16 slaveholders left by 1780, far outpacing other religious groups.[40] Although the

transition for individual Quaker slaveholders was far from seamless, many who still valued the

economic and social privileges of slave ownership were reluctant to release the enslaved without

some equivalent form of compensation.

Some Quakers manumitted enslaved Blacks without compensation to fulfill personal efforts

in their objection to slavery (which became more clearly a part of the Quaker doctrine after the

Revolutionary War), while others required individuals to pay their way out of bondage. This

included an enslaved man named Cuff who paid 60 pence and an additional 30 pence in 1770 to

free himself from Quaker merchant Benjamin Mifflin.[41] Some members of the Philadelphia

Yearly Meeting made some efforts to confront non Quaker slaveholders about manumitting their

slaves possibly appealing to humanitarian rhetoric, and while official numbers are not available,

a September 1775 proceeding claimed a "considerable Number" of enslaved people had been

freed in eastern Pennsylvania due to committee pleadings with slaveholders.[42] The number could

not have been major, as only 5 percent of the 390 slave owners in Philadelphia became

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[40] Statistics by Nash, *Freedom by Degrees*, 81–84.
[41] Manumission certificate for Cuff signed by Mifflin; in Society Miscellaneous Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
[42] Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting mins., 25-30/9M/1775, cited from Nash, *Freedom by Degrees*, 89-90.

emancipators from 1775 to 1779,[43] some of which released enslaved people for non-moral reasons such as reduced need for labor or losing confidence in the economic viability of compelled labor.

   In spite of the difficulties, Quakers and their active abolitionist campaigning had a hand in the gradual abolition bill. George Bryan, court judge and vice president of the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council, authored the legislation that became the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 after pressing the idea of an abolition bill to the state General Assembly in 1778. Though not a Quaker, Bryan was an early abolitionist. This is reflected in his draft for a gradual abolition bill, which advised the legislature to halt slavery "as the number of [enslaved Blacks]...has been much reduced by the practices and plunder of our late invaders."[44] To extinguish the slave trade would be to gain the respect of "all Europe, who are astonished to see people urge for Liberty holding Negores in bondage."[45] Not once in his drafts would he propose the legislation to free those enslaved, a circumstance that would be repeated as the General Assembly pushed forward in crafting a definitive law. This was indicative of beliefs and fears led by many whites that complete and immediate emancipation would potentially result in social disorder. Nevertheless, Council intolerance of slavery, though primarily communicated within revolutionary ideologies (as evidenced by a member in 1779 who claimed slavery was "disgraceful to any people, and more especially to those who have been contending in the great cause of liberty themselves,")[46] was maintained and displayed in the final gradual abolition act preamble, part of which states

> And whereas the condition of those persons who have heretofore been denominated
> Negro and Mulatto slaves, has been attended with circumstances which not only deprived
> them of the common blessings that they were by nature entitled to, but has cast them into

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[43] Nash, *Freedom by Degrees*, 93.
[44] The Pennsylvania Packet, Nov. 8, 1778, quoted in Burton Alva Konkle, *George Bryan and the Constitution of Pennsylvania, 1731-1791* (Philadelphia : Campbell, 1922), 165.
[45] Ibid, 165.
[46] Journals of Assembly, Vol. I, 307, quoted in Konkle, 169.

the deepest afflictions, by an unnatural separation and sale of husband and wife from each other and from their children; an injury, the greatness of which can only be conceived by supposing that we were in the same unhappy case. In justice therefore to persons So unhappily circumstanced, and who, having no prospect before them whereon they may rest their sorrows and their hopes, have no reasonable inducement to render their service to society, which they otherwise might; and also in grateful commemoration of our own happy deliverance from that state of unconditional submission to which we were doomed by the tyranny of Britain.[47]

It is suggested that Benezet, a major supporter of the act, discussed the act with all legislatures before the final vote. Historian Gary Nash even suggests that Benezet, due to the language of the preamble, may have been involved to some degree as an advisor over this section of the bill.[48] While Quakers only played a small role in the passing of the law, it garnered immense support from the community to a level that George Bryan was able to notice. At one point, he remarked that the bill "astonishes and pleases the Quakers. They looked for no such benevolent issue of our new government, exercised by Presbyterians."[49] Both Bryan and Quakers were responsible for raising awareness for the bill, as several letters published in Philadelphia newspapers released in 1779 and early 1780 served to alleviate the fears of rural private slave owners against the abolitionist movement. How much support it received from the general public is debatable, but one archived quotation from an anonymous letter published in the Pennsylvania Gazette regarding the bill probably exemplifies the majority sentiment:

> "The liberal spirit which this act breathes, the substantial justice which it dispenses, and the profound policy it suggests in almost every part, will be standing testimonies to future ages of the free principles of the people of Pennsylvania."[50]

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[47] See Sec. III of act, cited from Roger A. Bruns, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother : The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America, 1688-1788* (New York : Chelsea House, 1977), 447.

[48] Nash, *Freedom by Degrees*, 102.

[49] Quoted in John Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (L. H. Everts & Company, 1884), vol. 1 405.

[50] Cited from Bruns, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 476.

More legislators and residents began to see slavery in a different perspective because of this act. Though much of the shift is attributed to a decline in the economic vitality of slave labor, there is also a clear sign of shifting moral standards influencing the detachment from slavery. Written thoughts and reactions of the Philadelphia or even the Pennsylvania Black community before 1780 have not been archived or preserved. There are no recordings of how the enslaved and free responded to white abolitionists, Quakers, or their institutions, nor is there evidence of Black social activism prior to the Gradual Abolition Act. That said, the language of revolution and abolition flowed along all corners of the nation, and Black Philadelphians must have listened closely and absorbed the white abolitionist rhetoric while talking amongst themselves. Clearly, they did not have to be told of their own oppression, but the ways in which Black struggle and slavery was communicated within the community during the Revolutionary period most likely followed that of African born slave Boston resident Philis Wheatley, who expressed in 1774, "for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the leave of our modern Egyptians. I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us."[51]

Talks of universal rights and calls for abolition presumably had a role in the enslaved taking the matter of obtaining freedom into their own hands. Attempts from slaves to escape captivity had been acknowledged in city newspapers well before the Revolution. However, compared to the first half of the 1770s when fewer than 10 slaves fled annually, the runaway rate more than doubled during the latter half to about 24 slaves per year.[52] The dramatic increase probably occurred early into the Revolutionary War once Philadelphia became occupied by the British

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[51] Philis Wheatley, Letter to Samson Occum, Feb. 11, 1774, cited from Woody Holton, *Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era : A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA : Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 50–51.
[52] Nash, *Freedom by Degrees*, 95. This approximate statistic stems from the number of runaway advertisements published in Pennsylvania and Philadelphia magazines.

army between 1777 and 1778, as during this time, the British offered enslaved Blacks the special opportunity to gain their freedom by joining the British. While some stayed behind with some hope American victory would lead to more manumissions and the eradication of slavery, several seemed to have felt entrance into British military lines offered better and immediate prospects for them. The case was similar for many slaves in all colonies who ran from slave owners in 1775 after the announcement of Lord Dunmore's Proclamation which also offered freedom to slaves. Dozens of slaves marched along with the British army once they departed Philadelphia, a situation not ignored by white colonists as a Philadelphia newspaper in late 1779 stated "by the invasion of this state, and the possession the enemy obtained of this city, and neighbourhood, [a] great part of the slaves hereabouts, were enticed away by the British army."[53]

Those who remained in Philadelphia must have been appreciative of the Gradual Abolition Act to some degree. The population of free Blacks had experienced a slow increase since the late 1760s. This was in part due to abolitionist manumissions, but primarily because of the banning of slave imports and the migration of the free from nearby territories. With the release of the Gradual Abolition Act, in spite of its limitations to emancipation, opportunity for Philadelphia's free Black community to develop significantly widened, and its population had increased from 240 in 1780 to surpassing a thousand in 1783 with about 400 people still enslaved.[54] The passing of the act must have caught the attention of free people from other states such as Richard Allen, who moved from Delaware to Pennsylvania in 1784, then situated himself in Philadelphia shortly after.[55] For many emancipated Blacks inside and outside the city, the abolition act was the first

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[53] Pennsylvania Packet, Dec. 12, 1779, source from Nash, Freedom by Degrees, 95.

[54] Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 65. The data was drawn from Nash's compilation of manumissions recorded in the Philadelphia Court of Quarterly Sessions, Manumission Books of the PPAS, reels 23~25; and in the record of manumissions compiled by the three Philadelphia Monthly Meetings

[55] Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen.* Although there is no mention of the specific reasonings behind his travel to Philadelphia, Allen does say that he came there in early 1786; the city by

sign of Philadelphia becoming a potential safe haven for the community, and possibly an initiator

for greater social, political and economic opportunities.

For as desirable as these prospects were, the Gradual Abolition Act also represented the

unfortunate realization that such a cause would require further assiduity and dedication from

legislatures, abolitionists and white residents. The free Black community found faith in the act,

but simultaneously were keenly aware of potential threats or disruptions to its declarations, and

listened closely for any violations or amendments that might come. That moment arrived in early

1781 when conservatives attempted to have the act repealed, and when the assembly considered

a compromise by extending the slave registration date from November 1780 to January 1782,

which consequently returned newly free individuals back into slavery if requirements were not

met by slave owners.[56] How Quakers responded is unknown, but Philadelphia's Black denizens

who felt intimidated reacted immediately by creating a petition. In one of the first known

demonstrations of Black collective social activism, a group of free people petitioned the

assembly to prevent the potential repeal of the amendment in mid-1781. The appeal mirrored the

negotiation tactic used by Philis Wheatley, in that it infused white interpretations of liberty and

freedom from British tyranny into their own expressions for Black safety to create a common

understanding. The petition even directly quoted the preamble of the abolition law, which was

layered with revolutionary rhetoric. After addressing their gratitude toward the law that allowed

Blacks to emerge "from a state of hereditary slavery" and indulge in "the sweets of that freedom

so forcibly described in the preamble,"[57] the petition quickly proceeds to assertively argue for

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this point was known to have a rapid increase in Black residents compared to others due to the gradual emancipation law.

[56] Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 63.

[57] Freedom's Journal, Sep. 19, 1781.

their rights as "the grand question of slavery and liberty is too important for us to be silent."[58]It

cited inconsistencies within government and stressed their unwillingness to "believe that this

honorable house, possessed of such sentiments of humanity and benevolence, will pass an act to

make slaves of those whom they…have freed by law; and to whom they have restored the

common blessings they were by nature entitled to."[59] Shortly after the petition was received, the

legislature voted against amending the Gradual Abolition Act.

While Black petitioners most likely were filled with triumph that their actions had not been

ignored by the legislature, it did not eclipse the reality that agency and self-sufficiency for the

community was of little concern for white Philadelphians. The abolition law included no system

for the recently emancipated to cleanly transition from slaves to free people, nor were there plans

for social and racial equality. The discriminatory obstacles remained in place and given little

attention, which only decreased further by the end of the Revolutionary War. As the city was

realized to be in economic disarray after the war, minds were set for Philadelphia to have a full

social and economic recovery. Rebuilding prewar commerce, placing a halt on inflation, and

healing the divide between radicals and conservatives that fought over the constitution and rising

political conflicts of the 1780s were issues that held greater urgency for white residents and

leaders. These were seen as more important than developing a strategy to end slavery or create a

space for Black people to be socially or economically comfortable in the city's society. Benjamin

Rush in 1783 commented on Philadelphia's change in attitude towards Blacks, optimistically

stating that abolitionists transitioned from being seen as "fanatics, and considered as the

disrupters of the peace of society" to being treated as "benefactors of mankind and the man who

dares says a word in favor of reducing our black brethren is listened to with horror, and his

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[58] Ibid., Sep. 19, 1781.
[59] Ibid., Sep. 19, 1781.

company avoid by everybody."[60] Clearly, Rush's comment portrays an above average sense of enthusiasm for the abolitionist movement, but he grossly misinterpreted the situation. White residents may have grown less accepting of slavery and allowed Blacks to live in the city, but most had not given much thought over their struggles or considered them "black brethren."

Some whites, especially Quakers, aided the emancipated in their process towards freedom after the war. Slave owners manumitted around less than 300 slaves between 1781 and 1790, the most of any decade at that point.[61] Education services such as Bray's Associates school for people of color and Benezet's free school remained fully operational.

A few churches like the St. George Methodist Episcopal Church opened their doors for Blacks, albeit due to their small number in attendance. After the Quaker led Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society formed in 1784, its members eventually arduously pressed for the matter of banning of slavery to be brought to the United States legislature, with its most famous member Benjamin Franklin petitioning U.S. Congress to enact a nationwide abolition law in 1790.[62] But these Quaker endeavors faced internal difficulties as support for their cause began to wane, particularly after their enduring pacifism during the Revolution received a massive unpopular public response, and after losing heaps of property because of their refusal to pay fines for not joining the Patriot militia.[63] Thus, Philadelphia's Black community found themselves grappling with a social structure filled with opportunities and numerous barriers that make obtaining a sustainable livelihood strenuous.

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[60] Benjamin Rush to Granville Sharp, Nov. 28, 1783. cited in Woods, Rush, and Sharp, "The Correspondence of Benjamin Rush and Granville Sharp 1773—1809," 20.
[61] Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 72. The data comes from his compiled manumission master's list
[62] "Petition from the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery to Vice President John Adams signed by Benjamin Franklin (front), February 3, 1790; Records of the U.S. Senate, RG 46." (Accessed on April 14th, 2024). https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/franklin
[63] Nash, Forging Freedom, 71.

Due to neglect in social structural changes, the status of Blacks in Philadelphia fell, as historian Edward Raymond Turner claimed, within an intermediate position, no longer legally slaves but do not completely fit within standards of complete freedom, and were generally servants before becoming free people.[64] Information regarding their occupations and family life during the 1780s are scant, but considering the Black population rapidly increased to over two thousand in 1790, it has to be assumed that the influx of residents of Blacks viewed Philadelphia as a primary location for employment opportunities despite the city's post-war economic downfall.

Seemingly, most Blacks in the first decade after the Revolution worked as mariners, day laborers in the industrial and rural front, and domestic servants. A much smaller group were able to become artisans, professionals of skilled labor, preachers, and possibly teachers. In the Philadelphia directory from 1795, 17 Blacks are listed to be proprietors and retailers, which could indicate that some owned property and (small) business during the previous decade.[65] Some of these residents were successful enough to acquire their own living spaces by the 1780s, as the federal census from 1790 counted 183 independent households containing 950 people, around half of the Black population. The other half however lived in white households,[66] and several of them may have been people who reluctantly voluntarily placed themselves into domestic servitude.

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[64]Turner, Edward Raymond. *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery-Servitude-Freedom, 1639-1861*, 1911, 89–90.
[65]Hogan, Edmund. *The Prospect of Philadelphia, and Check on the Next Directory, Vol. 1: Giving, at a Single View, the Numbers of the Houses, Names of the Streets, Lanes, Couts, and Alleys; With the Names of the Present inhabitants, and Their Occupations: Together with Other Interesting Occurences, and Useful Observations.* (Forgotten Books, 2018).
[66] Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C., 1908); cited from Tom W. Smith, ""The Dawn of the Urban-Industrial Era: The Social Structure of Philadelphia, 1790-1830" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1980), p. 178, tables 64 and 65.

From a closer look, some members of the first generation of emancipated Blacks carved inroads for themselves and their families to live desirable lifestyles one way or another. Yet all knew that slavery and freedom, contrary to popular beliefs among white Philadelphians, were more complex than most thought. The white consensus assumed slavery was the rejection of freedom and freedom was the refusal to slavery. Blacks, stuck with limited circumstances, saw these concepts in more subtle ways, and understood slavery and freedom as terminal points, with several difficult intermediate stations situated on the road to complete freedom. In the words of Turner, "the ascent was slow and laborious, and the negro was compelled to halt for long periods on his way up."[67]

Regardless, free people in the early 1780s began to see Philadelphia as a city in which a free Black community could thrive. Several Black migrants from the rural landscapes of Pennsylvania or nearby states such as Delaware, Virginia and Maryland came in droves in hopes of claiming a suitable life. Immediate freedom may not have been promised, but an increase in a society of all free people was gradually in pursuit. All hands were on deck to structure a society where Blacks could assume independent lives within a constrained social, political and economic system. While Blacks respected the benevolence of the abolitionists and its biggest organization the PAS, they also realized that to achieve self-sustainability, they must commit to their own form of institutionalization. A Philadelphia Black voluntary association was in order. Such was the concern of Richard Allen.

Born in 1760 into slavery, Allen managed to purchase his freedom in 1783 from his slave owner for two thousand dollars and traveled from his home state Delaware in search of a position as a Methodist preacher. Protestant Christianity had played a beneficial role during his time in

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[67] Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania*, 89.

enslavement, ever since he experienced a religious awakening after attending a local Methodist Society held by a traveling Methodist preacher. Notably, his slave owner Sturgis, who was not a converted Methodist for some time, fully supported his visits as he believed religion "made slaves better and not worse."[68] This referred to his interest in slave moral improvement, which he believed directly correlated with becoming better laborers. However, Allen's strong attachment to spirituality related more to how most Black people by the late 18th century conceptualized Christianity. He found the evangelical faith and message of spiritual equality before God appealing, and the biblical theme of deliverance comforting. Its lessons and themes were used to articulate grievances over slavery, social equality and freedom from oppression. According to Allen, after his spiritual awakening, he saw himself "poor, wretched and undone, and without the mercy of God must be lost."[69]

Allen aimed to organize his own religious services while in Delaware, as he was fully aware of the difficulties in attempting to preach at the predominantly white meetings he had attended. He and his brother collaborated with a local preacher named John Gray to structure meetings at the local Methodist Society every two weeks, where he might have served as minister to several Black visitors. Services were most assuredly held in secret due to a Delaware slave law that prohibited meetings involving a group of slaves or free people. These meetings presumably were impressive enough for Gray to give Allen permission to request Reverend Freeborn Garrettson, manumitter and emancipation supporter, to preach at the house of Sturgis. Sturgis, whose entire family listened to Garrettson's sermon, was moved by his recital of the biblical verse from Daniel 5:27 "Thou art weighed in the balances, and thou art found wanting." According to Allen, this passage was used to point out God's disdainful judgment towards slave owners. Sturgis thus

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[68] Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen.*, 6.
[69] Ibid., 5.

began to consider the sin of enslaving individuals, which eventually led him to offering Allen

and his brother the chance to buy their way out of bondage.[70]

Like many people within the free Black community, Allen struggled to secure an adequate

livelihood as a newly freed person. Traveling northward from Delaware to New Jersey, southeast

Pennsylvania, and for a brief time Baltimore, Maryland, he took menial jobs that offered low pay

including bricklaying and woodcutting, and suffered serious cases of inflammatory rheumatism

and feet sores along his migration that lessened his success in finding other occupations. On the

other hand, he found some solace in preaching to residents in the towns he worked in, which

sparked the beginning of his preaching experience. During his stay in Randor, Pennsylvania in

early 1784, he happened to gather a large congregation of mostly white people who asked him to

preach for them. To his bemusement, many deeply admired his skills, and allowed him to preach

at the town meeting house for several weeks. One person named Mr. Davis, as a result of his

ministry, presented him a horse to aid his travels and rest his aching feet. Allen prided himself in

being able to affect the lives of both pious worshipers and those he considered "dead to religion."

While his transition from slavery to freedom remained a slow process, his early stints as a

minister of methodism came with its fair share of rewards.[71]

During his local sermons, one thing Allen took notice of were the small quantity of visible

Black congregants. Allen traveled from Delaware in search of a better personal future, and while

he was able to carve pathways for himself to prosper in some capacity with support from

residents and reverends he affiliated himself with, he was not ignorant of the typical tepid

support given to most Blacks around this time. For as many preachers as he compliments in his

memoir, he most likely drew the most inspiration from outspoken abolitionist ministers like

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[70] Ibid., 6-7.

[71] Ibid., 7-8.

Garrettson who, like the sermon he delivered in the household of Sturgis, demonized the practice

of slavery and openly advocated for the emancipation of slaves. It is possible that Allen, shortly

before receiving his official license to preach, had already planned to focus on courting a

predominantly Black audience, and combine the evangelist ideas with language denouncing

systemic oppression under his own ministry most useful for the community. This may be part of

the reason why Allen rejected Francis Asbury in 1785, an American bishop who permitted Allen

to travel with him on the condition that he not "intermix with the slaves" and frequently sleep in

a carriage. Allen did not accept this offer.[72]

After becoming qualified as a preacher in Baltimore at the first ever General Conference of

the Methodist Episcopal Church in December 1784, Allen once again set sights on Pennsylvania.

This is partly due to the state's employment opportunities but perhaps the rising population of

Black residents motivated his decision as well. Immediately upon arriving at Philadelphia in

February 1786 and after the St George Church bestowed him the opportunity to deliver religious

sermons, Allen saw "a large field open in seeking and instructing my African brethren, who had

been a long forgotten people and few of them attended public worship," and saw "the necessity

of erecting a place of worship for the colored people".[73] Even before directing the organized

church walkout in 1787, Allen had been negotiating with ministers and church elders across the

city to gain support in financing an independent African meetinghouse of religious service. All

were adamantly opposed to the idea, some of which used "degrading and insulting language" to

prevent him from continuing his efforts.[74] Interestingly, seemingly the majority of Black

churchgoers were also not eager about the notion of an independent church in the way Allen was,

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[72] Ibid., 8-11.
[73] Ibid., 12.
[74] Ibid., 12.

perhaps because they feared the tension from white religious leaders that might spur if such an institution were to carry through. Allen mentions he "had but three coloured brethren that united with me in erecting a place of worship — Rev. Absalom Jones, William White, and Dorus Ginnings) ...as soon as it became public and known by the elder who was stationed in the city," a statement that might represent his disappointment in Blacks who rejected his proposal.[75]

It must be clarified that Allen's suggested church was conceptualized not simply as a mode for mass Blacks conversions into Methodists, but as a social community building event. Across the nation during and after the Revolutionary era, Black Christians developed a unique theology shaped by the circumstances of their lives. While white Baptists and Methodists proved to be phenomenally successful in converting Black people to Christianity (with over 20,000 Black Methodists listed in all northern states by 1800), white and Black interpretations of biblical stories and messages assumed different value judgments. They generally identified with the child slaves of Israel who found freedom and claimed the promised land. Since the 1760s, slaves and free people communicated in secret religious gatherings (in spite of slave codes denouncing such actions) as a means of racial camaraderie, to establish a shared experience, create a sense of unity, and generate hope that the holy law and commitment to God's work will triumph over slavery. Allen realized the impact Black religion had in Philadelphia and felt an independent place of worship would solidify the church's status as the heart of the Black community. In addition, he desired for his church to manifest the Black theology into something productive, kick starting an initiative other Black church would follow. To quote an observation made by

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[75] Ibid., 12.

historian C. Eric Church, the church would deliver for its "peculiar constituency of black slaves and freedmen what no one else was willing to do for them, or have them do for themselves."[76]

It is understandable that Absalom Jones agreed to an independent Black church, since he shared a connection with Allen in that both were ex slaves who worked extremely hard to earn their emancipation. Jones was also native to Delaware but was separated from his family and subsequently transferred to Philadelphia in 1762 with his slave owner Wynkoop. Since the incident, Jones strove to work towards obtaining a self-sufficient life, starting with fulfilling his aspiration to educate himself by any means necessary. Not only did he successfully convince Wynkoop to allow him to attend the Benezet local night school, but he earned enough money to purchase a primer, and collected several books after a few years, including a Bible. He was also given consent to marry an enslaved woman named Mary Thomas in 1770. Eight years later, Jones purchased her freedom through the help of his father-in-law and a series of donations and loans from principal Quakers. Sometime after this, he and his wife were fortunate in owning property, acquiring a small house and "a lot of ground" for 150 pounds, which according to him amplified his desire for freedom even more. Jones had been persistent in requesting Wynkoop for his manumission ever since his arrival in Philadelphia but wound up ineffective each time. All three attempts in persuading Wynkoop were immediately rejected, and it would not be until 1784 (six years after his third appeal in 1778), when Jones was finally released from bondage.[77]

Jones and Allen went on to have a lifelong friendship presumably because of their similar upbringing, their status as the two sole Black preachers in Philadelphia, and their fervent interests in social galvanizing. Jones offered spiritual assistance to Black worshipers as a

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[76] C. Eric Lincoln in Andrew Billingsley, Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xx.

[77] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 119–21.

minister at St. George, yet his benevolence for the plight of Blacks went beyond religious addresses, especially later into the 18th century. In 1799, he was one of many people of color in Philadelphia to sign a petition pressing Congress to undo the fugitive slave law, which many southern slave owners took advantage of by kidnapping free Blacks in northern states and selling them into southern slavery, thereby endangering the free community.[78] Before he would go on to be one the most influential Black leaders in Philadelphia, the potential impacts of building an independent church and co-leading a Black benevolent society was probably a deeply compelling endeavor for him, on a similar level as Allen. However, in realizing the apparent difficulties in establishing an independent church, for the time being Allen and Jones opted for a more approachable first step in situating a race specific civil organization in Philadelphia: a Black voluntary association.

In 1862, Reverend William Douglass, abolitionist and priest of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, presented his account of the creation of the church and Black institution building in Philadelphia. His description evokes feelings of triumph against social injustice and appreciation for Black community development. Guided by revolutionary ideals, principles of human rights, and the 1780 Gradual Abolition law that gave slivers of hope in severing those trapped in unwarranted bondage, a group of "obscure but worthy [Black] men," he states, made it their main priority to erect a long lasting place of spiritual assistance to bring about the uplift of all Black Philadelphians.[79] These men faced a great hurdle however, as such prospects required the creation of an effective union, which had existed around them but the Black community was

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[78] Petition of the People of Colour…Philadelphia, Dec. 30, 1799. quoted in Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-1800* ([Greenwich, Conn.] New York Graphic Society, 1973), 92–93.
[79] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 12.

overall unaccustomed to. The unfortunate circumstance of lacking experience and liberal education meant that establishing a church was considered "impractical and visionary."[80] Yet, these men were undeterred, and with persistence took on the heavy challenge of forming an organization "having the two-fold objects of a beneficial and moral reform society."[81] This became the Free African Society (FAS) of Philadelphia.

Much validity can be given to this statement since, excluding the burning passion of the Black community (especially its leaders Richard Allen and Absalom Jones), subscribers of the FAS were at an undeniable disadvantage. They had little choice but to start from the very bottom with scarce resources and support. Allen and Jones most likely had been visualizing and discussing a voluntary association since Allen began his preaching duties at St. George church in early 1786, most certainly alongside their explorations in finding an independent church. Yet, both probably knew most Black Americans inside and outside of the church had next to no knowledge of how to network on a level efficient enough for an association to function. Social gatherings, among slaves and free, have transpired in Philadelphia before, although usually in small scales and done discreetly to bypass slave code prohibition laws. Though the abolition act rapidly increased the city's free population by 1786, Black public organizing was not widely actively encouraged by white leaders or abolitionists. In some ways, public cooperation came with dangerous risks, whether it relates to highlighting one's exposure enough to be captured by white southern slave smugglers or having a meeting house raided and vandalized by residential opposers or being struck with a cease-and-desist notice permanently ending operations. Presumably, Allen and Jones did not promote the idea of a voluntary association to white church elders or other leaders precisely because of these possible issues, not to mention the potential dismissal.

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[80] Ibid., 13.
[81] Ibid., 13.

Black Philadelphians were also generally not economically prepared to raise an organization

of their own. Many voluntary associations in Pennsylvania by the time of the FAS were led by

whites with wealthy backgrounds. While each had been troubled with financial issues, those who

ran them came with sufficient financial resources to raise themselves relatively smoothly and had

accumulated years' worth of capital to sustain themselves long term. Even the Philadelphia's

Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick, a mutual aid organization established in 1771 for Irish Americans

(who also experienced job discrimination and poverty like Black people) was founded by

middle- and upper-class figures such as Continental Congress representative Thomas Fitzsimons

and received backing from prominent bankers and merchants to extend its reach across the

nation.[82] Pecuniary advantages had been closed from the Black community by design, leaving

the FAS with an almost insurmountable obstacle to overcome.

Amidst these challenges, Allen and Jones remained confident in their creativity and elevated

determination to assist and lead the Black community out of social and economic

marginalization. In the preamble of the FAS articles, Allen and Jones are stated to have regularly

communed to plan a means to help those of African heritage, whom both have "beheld with

sorrow, because of their irreligious and uncivilized state."[83] While this is candid and can be

perceived as demeaning, the statement is meant to signify societal suppositions of Blacks;

typically non respected, second class citizens seen as incapable of rising beyond their status. For

Allen and Jones, this harsh description of Blacks may have been included to serve as a constant

reminder of the aims of the organization, and as such clarify and accentuate its identity. It may

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[82] Early founders Geore Meade and John Dixon contributed extensively to the Bank of Pennsylvania and Bank of North America, *History of the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick for the Relief of Emigrants from Ireland of Philadelphia:* March 17, 1771-March 17, 1892, 1.

[83] Preamble of the Free African Society, Apr. 12, 1787. Cited from Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 15.

have also been used to maintain solidarity, for Allen and Jones to keep their association body together so all can focus on achieving the same prosperous future.

Maintaining order and constructing a sensible, manageable system became the first prime objective of the FAS. Rules and regulations were set for all people interested in joining the association, which other Black voluntary groups adapted closely into their organization. The FAS unanimously agreed to require members to contribute a monthly payment of one shilling for the benefit of the treasury, then after one year pay three shillings and nine pence per week "to the needy of this society."[84] They also negotiated for the length a member can neglect their monthly subscription to be three months, and for members who continued not to pay their dues (unless they require the social and economic assistance of the society) to be excommunicated without receiving back any of the subscription money.[85] Accompanying membership payments were moral disciplines all were expected to follow and respect. Disorderly behavior was strictly interdicted, and the articles demanded all patrons to abstain from drinking, gambling, thrifting and maternal infidelity or face indefinite expulsion.[86] These moral requirements reflected Allen's evolving interest in positioning himself as moral mediator for the black community, as his later work would lecture Black Americans about the responsibilities of liberty. The examples of social disorder presented in the articles were transgressions Allen felt should be avoided at all costs in order to suppress common stereotypes suggesting all Blacks were lazy, idle, frivolous and disorganized. He understood these "sinful" tendencies to not be innate features of Blacks, but problematic choices that nonetheless affected the reputation of the entire community. The FAS

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[84] Articles of the Free African Society, May 17, 1787. Cited from Douglass, 16.

[85] Ibid., 16-17.

[86] Ibid., 31-32. In a reply to Prince Hall, a Black resident of Boston and founder of the Prince Hall Freemasonry, the Free African Society mentions striving for all Blacks to refrain from "shameful practices" such as gaming and feasting, not only for being immoral but also inconsiderate of those in bondage.

displayed itself as more than a simple avenue for black moral uplift, but morality and appropriate etiquette were crucial components for instructing members.[87]

Historians have debated as to the source of inspiration behind the fundamental structure of the association. A less common argument is that Blacks utilized West African traditions and concepts.[88] As will be discussed in Chapter 2, some early black institutions consisted of, and were led by, African born men taken at a young age who incorporated their knowledge of African customs and Euro American values as a central model. Meanwhile, Allen and Jones were born and raised on American soil (as may have been the case for most FAS members). While both admired their African heritage, it is unlikely either sketched the association with any direct African traditions in mind.

The more accepted claim is that Black Philadelphians partially modeled their organization based on white benevolent societies, specifically ones supported by Quakers. Philadelphia's Religious Society of Friends never required a monthly subscription service for its members, but the group established a set code of ethics for all its followers that closely resemble the FAS. By December of 1787, the FAS had enough people to institute a visiting committee responsible for inspecting the conduct of members and "give such advice as may appear necessary,"[89] a tactic that Gary Nash calls a "Quakerly method of exercising stewardship," and an early reflection of their influence.[90] Indeed, Allen and Jones must have had a high degree of affinity for Quaker institutions, not the least due to both receiving their education in the local Philadelphia African

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[87] Allen's moral uplift messages can be found in his 1794 essay To the People of Colour, cited in *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen.*, 47–48.

[88] Such concepts include the Sou-Sou, a cooperative African savings practice where several people pool money and make regular contributions to a common fund, the total of which gets dispersed to a single member, which rotates so all can become recipients. Although, it is highly unlikely the structure of their directives had little congruence with the Sou Sou banking system.

[89] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 19.

[90] Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 100.

Free School on Raspberry Street, and in Jone's case having Quakers assist him in freeing his wife. Almost certainly did Black members respect the insistent missions enacted by Quakers to bring about abolition, but just as much attention was given toward their philanthropic and charity organizations, ones that promoted community improvisation and care for the poor, one of the major identity marks of the FAS. It was perhaps for these reasons that the FAS confided in Quakers to have their meetings take place within the Free African School in late 1788 instead of the house of Allen or the commodious room inside the house of Sarah Dougherdy.[91] Quakers were also granted more than a background role, with at least one appointed as the association's Clerk and Treasurer. Even more significant, it was expressed early on "whenever another should succeed [Joseph Clarke, the Clerk and Treasurer], it is always understood, that one of the people called Quakers, belonging to one of the three monthly meetings in Philadelphia, is to be chosen to act as Clerk and Treasurer of this useful Institution," a decision representative of Black awareness of the Quakers' experience in overseeing finances within their own organizations.[92]

Membership contributions were used to build programs designed to support various social and economic needs of the Black community, and the articles promised members in good standing to expect several of these benefits from the mutual aid fund. For starters, the FAS sponsored an operation that provided burial insurance and financial assistance for widows and other deceased family members. It should be noted that these funerals and burials often took place at the Philadelphia potter's field, the "stranger's burial ground," as church funeral plots were sold only to white congregants, in part due to systemic racism and because white families had the privilege of being able to afford the fee. Blacks generally faced exclusion from the churchyards, including people with Black visitors, meaning potter's field served as the last

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[91] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 18.
[92] Ibid., 17.

option for a burial. This is no indication that the potter's field was exempt from segregation, far from it. The burial ground was meant as the final resting place for all people too poor to secure a spot in the churchyard, unclaimed bodies found on the streets or in hospitals, or indignant prisoners who died in their cells or were executed. Deceased Blacks could meet all criteria, yet potter's field regulations forbid any Black bodies to be buried next to whites and were to be buried in a specific isolated section. Black Philadelphians, as was the case for Black communities in all states, had little autonomy over burial accommodations, and the knowledge that Black bodies were consigned to intermixing with that of criminals and those impoverished only further alienated the community from the concessions whites enjoyed. In spite of these hapless conditions, the potter's field held a particular value for Blacks in being the only space to lay claim to land and honor the dead in a manner that would be impossible elsewhere. It is not clear as to how many funerals were insured by the FAS during its first few years, but these burials were a means for the organization to not only assist families in need of a funeral, but to gain some control over the burial ground.[93]

For the children of these deceased individuals, the FAS proposed a system to ensure their wellbeing and future. In the first recorded meeting, it was announced that children were to be under the care of the organization, their education would be paid for if unable to attend the free school for people of color, and offered apprenticeships to learn suitable trades if necessary.[94] No other mention of this directive is mentioned in later meetings, and updates related to the number of children granted education insurance or apprenticeships were not documented. Despite these absences, it is safe to assume the FAS felt a major responsibility to give Black American

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[93] For more on the Stranger's Burial Ground, see Jubilee Marshall, "Race, Death, And Public Health In Early Philadelphia, 1750–1793," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 87, no. 2 (2020): 364–89.
[94] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 17.

children access to schooling and job opportunities. This was both for their own benefit and possibly to reduce the rate of children falling into the indentured servitude of white residents. As the free Black population gradually increased in Philadelphia, it was common for parents unable to make ends meet to bind out their children to white families for long term indentured service. The number of indentures (of all ages) between 1781 and 1785 averaged around twenty-one per year, and in 1790 one quarter of the 947 free people living in white households were children placed in labor contracts.[95] Until it was feasible for the organization to construct their own schools, keeping the young attending Quaker schools or the Bray's Association School for Blacks, or alternatively working in satisfactory jobs, may have been seen as the most approachable solution in avoiding indentured servitude and guiding the young generation.

Over time as the FAS steadily grew in membership, social and economic objectives expanded to care for their larger network of subscribers and wider population of Philadelphia Blacks. For some of these activities, the association took advantage of the available backing they received from white patrons, abolitionists and Quakers especially. For example, the FAS in 1790 petitioned the city's Common Council "to have the said burial-ground under the care of the said Society, and [their willingness] to pay the same rent that hath been offered by any other person, and a year's advance as soon as the said ground is enclosed, and they are put in possession thereof."[96] An effort by Blacks to protect the Black burial section of potter's field was made previously in 1782, when six Black men troubled by constant reports of body snatching submitted a petition to the state government to build a fence around the perimeter of the segregated spot. This request would not grant them legal ownership of the land, but instead gave

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[95] Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 76–77. The data comes from the indenture books of the Philadelphia House of Employment and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society

[96] The petition of the Free African Society for the benefit of the sick, in the City of Philadelphia, sourced from Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 34.

them legal permission to independently police and turn the structure into a private site for formal

ventures, as a means of officially distinguishing the Black section from the rest of the burial

ground.[97] Similarly, the FAS petition also requested for authorization to construct a barrier

around the Black burial space, thereby symbolizing authority over the enclosed lot and protecting

it from grave robbing, but added an additional appeal to legally lease it for proper conversion

into a Black specific cemetery. Unlike the 1782 request, the organization sought out for the

voices of white supporters, and included in the petition the following endorsement statement

from them:

> We, the subscribers, having for some time past been acquainted with several of the members of the 'FREE AFRICAN SOCIETY, ESTABLISHED IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, FOR THE BENEFIT OF SUCH AMONG THEM WHO MAY BECOME INFIRM,' do certify, that we have informed ourselves of the rules and order established by the said Society, and approve of their Institution, and can therefore recommend the members thereof, as well their humane design, to the notice and attention of their fellow citizens, they being worthy of a degree of confidence and encouragement.[98]

This petition included the signatures of several prominent white men such as Benjamin Rush,

political economist Tench Coxe, and abolitionist William Savey, all of which were allies of the

voluntary association. Ultimately, like in 1782, the Common Council outright denied the

petition, but it nevertheless represented a strong step in Philadelphia residents of African heritage

working within legal limitation to obtain burial rights.

When the time was right, the FAS began to use their influence as a testing ground for

responding efficiently to city public health concerns, while also collaborating with white

professionals. During the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793, Rush (an ardent believer in the

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[97] "1782 Petition to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Supreme Court," Pennsylvania State Archives, Records of Pennsylvania's Revolutionary Governments, Executive Correspondence and Petitions, 1777–1790 [RG # 27.28], item #633.

[98] Endorsement on the Back of the petition of the Free African Society, sources from Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 35.

environmental notion that race directly dictated susceptibility to disease), enlisted the

Philadelphia Black community to treat those (referring to the larger white population) who had

fallen victim to the disease, entrusting them to nurse and perform the labor necessary to keep the

city from potential collapse. The request from Rush lies in the pseudo-scientific idea that Blacks

were immune or resistant to yellow fever, something that Allen and Jones quickly realized was

completely unfounded, and in fact discovered that Blacks contracted the disease at a higher rate

than whites due to their living conditions increasing the chances of exposure. Regardless,

Richard and Allen answered the call immediately, bringing in as many members from the FAS

(as well as other Black Philadelphians) to care give, bury the dead, and transport the sick to the

outer quarters of the city where they could be quarantined and provided medical aid. Though the

FAS committed to public health service with vested interest in combating the crisis, it also was

intended to raise the legitimacy of the organization, for Allen and Jones to justify Black

institutionalization and gain more support for further institution building within the community.[99]

    Of the Society's well-known accomplishments, it was their public service labor that garnered

the most attention from the white majority. Residential responses were generally conflicted, with

some vocal critics claiming the increase in Black service to be a part of a "finesse or stratagem of

the whites, to facilitate the attainment of their assistance," a conspiracy that may or may not have

basis in historical fact, but all the same a form of scientific racism prevalent at this time.[100] The

most notable critique came from Irish immigrant and member of the city's health committee

Mathew Carey, who published his bestselling pamphlet *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever,*

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[99] Absalom Jones et al., *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793 : And a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia : Printed for the authors, by William W. Woodward, at Franklin's Head, no. 41, Chesnut-Street, 1794), 3–4.
[100] Marshall, "Race, Death, And Public Health In Early Philadelphia, 1750–1793," 383.

Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia in October 1793, in which he gives his accounts of the epidemic

along with accusations over the greed and malpractice of Black nurses.

He claimed blacks, in requesting money for their services, were exploiting those infected for

their own financial benefit, committing high levels of extortion in nursing the sick and carting

the dead, and in some cases "plundering the houses of the sick."[101] It is worth mentioning that

Carey was an antislavery advocate who published several pamphlets by abolitionists and Black

writers denouncing slavery. Even more striking, in the same pamphlet he compliments their

services in saying "Jones, Allen and Gray, and others of their colour, have been very great and

demand public gratitude."[102] Yet, his arguments against Black public health treatment

exemplifies common proslavery rhetoric that treat free Blacks as immoral deceivers, and serve to

undermine their hard work and sacrifice.

Taking issue with the statements made by Carey, Allen and Jones released a response three

months later entitled A *Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful*

Calamity in Philadelphia, In the Year 1793. The publication acted as a defense for Black public

services during the epidemic, emphasizing their efforts to have been sensible, courageous, and

for the greater good of all city residents who were sick, distressed, and perishing. They

ascertained the accusations made by Carey to be unfounded and filled with prejudice, stating that

attending the ill with malicious intent would be of massive consequence in raising the reputation

of the Black community, and only encourage further racial displacement and discrimination.

Several Black nurses (some named and some not) were described as Black men and women who

went house to house visiting neglected people, usually with little to no assistance and typically

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[101] Mathew Carey et al., *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia : With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States* (Philadelphia : Printed by the author, 1793), 77.
[102] Ibid., 77.

never compensated, and some even tragically losing their lives soon afterwards. Still, it was

claimed, these predicaments did not stifle their tasks, and Black nurses "found a freedom to go

forth, confiding in him who can preserve in the midst of a burning fiery furnace, sensible that it

was our duty to do all the good we could to our suffering fellow mortals."[103] The pamphlet also

extended criticisms to other whites, bringing mention to the hypocrisy of those who throw

criticism towards Blacks without providing any medical care themselves. These criticisms,

according to Allen and Jones, are clear forms of slander, and for backers of Carey to "propagate

such willful lies" is "dangerous, although unworthy."[104] The pamphlet not only represented their

exasperation with the unfair accusatory words of Carey and others, it expressed years' worth of

annoyance with racism and mistreatment of the Black community, even during time of serious

peril in which Blacks have made grueling yet respectable attempts to help all in need of service.

As such, their commitments and response to the ungratefulness for Black public health labor

displayed by many whites intensified feelings of empowerment among Blacks, and must have

contributed greatly in boosting morale for their institution development.

By 1794, internal struggles that had been brewing since the early years of the FAS would lead

to a schism that would drastically affect the organization's community building plans. As stated

in the preamble of the articles of the association, the Society presented itself as a non-

denominational institution, seemingly allowing a diversity of religious identities to join so long

as they can carry themselves morally and professionally. That said, Allen, even more than Jones,

envisioned Methodism to be best appropriate for the needs of the Black community. He recalled

that during a religious meeting held at a meeting house purchased by the FAS (that would

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[103] Jones et al., *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793*, 5.
[104] Ibid., 20.

eventually transform into the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas), an election was held to decide what religious denomination its worshipers should follow. He was aggrieved when the majority of voters chose to associate with the Church of England over Methodism (he and Jones were the only two who chose Methodism), as he remained "confident that there was no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of the coloured people as much as the Methodist."[105]

He glorified Methodism for its broad appeal to free and enslaved people of African heritage, declaring that Methodists "were the first people that brought good tidings to the coloured people" and that all are "beholden to the Methodists, under God, for the light of the Gospel we enjoy; for all other denominations preached so high-flown that we were not able to comprehend their doctrine."[106] For Allen, if the FAS were to have a religious identity, he hoped that Methodism would be the predominant pick.

To the dismay of Allen, FAS members quickly began to adopt Quaker styled traditions into their meetings. Presumably, this decision was made of their own accord, primarily influenced by appreciation they had for Quaker ideologies and Quaker led Black relief institutions, as well as unwillingness from members who did not want to continue aligning with a denomination that segregated them. Marriage ceremonies ran parallel with Quaker customs, and starting in late 1788, the committee agreed that meetings incorporate a fifteen minute pause for a silence prayer at the start of each session, similar to devotional exercises used by the Religious Society of Friends.[107] Historian Carol V.R. George suggests that while Allen had no animosity towards

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[105] Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen.*, 16.
[106] Ibid., 16.
[107] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 34–42. According to a recorded meeting, the FAS in June 1790 had established "a regular mode of procedure with respect to... marriages", a quasi ecclesiastical function.

Quakers, he viewed Quaker traditions as "purposeless gestures," and that their religious practices were not nearly as relevant to his aims or the Black community as Methodism.[108] He allowed for the organization to bring in Quakers to serve as Clerks and Treasurers, as he agreed it was in their best interest. The value of Quakerism was not lost on Allen, but Methodism as he saw it brought immediate observable positive results for a structured organization that discouraged idleness, attributes he felt were desperately needed for the Society.

Becoming increasingly detached from the organization's use of Quakerism, Allen separated from the FAS around the spring of 1789, attracting a few other members to follow him. This caused a minor stir in the association, as they argued his disunity to be in violation of the rules of the Society, and claimed that his actions "attempted to sow division among us…[a] breach of good order which he has thereby committed."[109] In this signed statement, Jones' name does not appear alongside other members involved, presumably as he directed his focus on leading the organization and had little interest in contributing toward the tension. W.E.B Dubois analyzed both Allen and Jones as aspiring leaders with elevated prospects for their people, but stated that compared to Jones' more introspective demeanor who supervised around the judgment of the majority, Allen was "shrewd," having strong desires to oversee the behavior and reputation of the Black community.[110] Perhaps Allen also felt the FAS were trying to persuade him into complying with their Quaker traditions, and left as a result. He tightened his dedication to Methodism and refused to be pulled in any other direction.

From thereon, Jones who was more tolerable toward refractory members took the helm as sole leader of the FAS. Allen never attempted to return, although when the opportunity struck, he

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[108] George, Carol V. R. *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840*, First Paperback Edition (Oxford University Press, 1973).
[109] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 24.
[110] Dubois, W.E.B. *The Philadelphia Negro A Social Study* (Schocken Books, 1899), 21.

continued to collaborate with the organization, such as during the Yellow Fever Epidemic and

when the association successfully purchased their first meetinghouse on Fifth Street in 1792 to

be converted into the St. Thomas Church. This church, which officially opened its doors in 1794,

would not include the oversight of Allen due to the choice of having the first independent Black

place of worship be Episcopalian rather than Methodist. He would instead spend the next few

years funding and attempting to establish his own church. This decision effectively divided the

FAS into two branches: one under the leadership of Jones and the other (considerably smaller

camp) consisting of Allen and his followers.

Plans for the Episcopal church began around early 1791, but went into high gear in early 1792

after Jones and a few of his cohorts from the FAS purchased two adjacent lots between Fifth and

Adelphi Streets for 450 dollars. The association's treasury by itself lacked sufficient funds to

afford estate (as of 1790 held only 42 pence on deposit), meaning association members resorted

to appealing for donations, including contributions from Black Americans they approached while

taking to the streets, Benjamin Rush, and the Free African Union Society of Newport. While the

organization gathered just enough for the plots of land, it would take another generous offering

to acquire the materials needed for construction, which they knew would not come from the

elders or leaders of St. George or many other white residents. Fortunately, a Welsh immigrant

named John Nicholson issued a substantial loan of two thousand dollars, which the Society

planned to use to commence the building process. Nicholson never explained as to why he lent

the money, but it was an act of charity no matter the reason that assisted the community in rising

out of a bind.[111] Several months were spent waiting for the mortgage to be carried out and

drawing up building contracts before the FAS was given the greenlight for construction in March

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[111] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 51–52.

of 1793. Allen remarked his excitement of this achievement, saying that he "put the first spade in

the ground to dig a cellar for the same" since he was the first person to propose an independent

church.[112] Although, people like Allen filled with anticipation for the church's eventual

completion would have to wait over a year to see their vision fulfilled (the church may have

finished sooner if the Yellow Fever Epidemic had not interrupted developments between August

and November of 1793). Though Allen had fully removed himself from the FAS in July of 1794,

dreams for the first absolute Black church had finally come true, and thus the African Episcopal

Church of St. Thomas was born. Jones was quickly positioned to act as its minister, making him

one of the first preachers of a Black episcopal church. It should be noted that he was only

allowed to read services until given authority by the Episcopal Convention of Pennsylvania to

become an official minister nearly a year later.

Meanwhile, Allen, despite having relatively meager financial and subscriber advantages than

Jones, still made considerable headway in formalizing his church. Backed with a group of ten

Methodists, he organized several meetings to discuss plans for an independent African Methodist

institution. He purchased a blacksmith house (referred to as the Blacksmith Shop Meeting

House) using a combination of his own money and contributions from residents and prominent

whites such as Rush. This house was then hauled to a plot of land that he also acquired, located

between Sixth and Lombard Streets. For several weeks, Allen hired carpenters to remodel the

edifice into a place of worship, ultimately opening its door on July 29th, 1794, less than two

weeks after the nearby St. Thomas church was complete. For its ceremonious opening, Allen

commissioned Francis Asbury to officiate at the dedication service, and brought in Reverend

John Dickens from the St. George Church to attend as well, possibly to resolve tensions between

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[112] Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen.*, 16.

him and the Methodists of his church. In fact, it was Dickens who suggested the church be called a Bethel for the gathering of thousands of souls.[113]

Despite the church being purchased by Allen and his members, conflicts over its ownership had heated up soon after its establishment. St. George proposed for the church to be placed under the guardianship of white Methodists, arguing that denominational policies required control of all Methodist related property. The very thought of stripping control of the church from Black Methodists was unsurprising but appalling for Allen, as well as the notion that people of color "could not be Methodists unless we did."[114] Debates over ownership of the church represented a tug of war for power between a white congregation insistent in absorbing the newly erected place or worship and African Americans determined to secure their self-reliance away from white paternalism. He attempted to stand his ground, but eventually agreed to incorporate the church under the Methodist Conference. This unfortunately came with the side effect of the entire property becoming completely consigned to the white Conference. Allen lamented the situation to be a sign of ignorance of incorporation among his members, but also considered it to be duplicitous on the part of the white negotiators. While Allen implemented regulations to retain some level of autonomy—including limiting attendees to "descendants of the African race"— it would take until 1816 for the courts to grant Bethel its full independence, and by that time Allen became ordained as its first bishop.

Difficulties in church development aside, the FAS achieved what many white and black Philadelphians thought was unfathomable: producing not only one, but two places of autonomous worship. While no longer a united organization by 1794, the Society's independent Black community building movement was nonetheless emblematic of growing self-confidence

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[113] Allen, 17–18.
[114] Allen, 18.

and zeal for furthering the social and psychological emancipation of Philadelphia residents of African heritage. Both churches situated themselves as the vanguard for action, fostering the humanitarianism originated by the activities of the FAS. Though these institutions faced numerous changes and disruptions over the course of their lifespan, they demonstrated the pride, strength and conviction of Black egalitarianism, self-sufficiency and freedom amidst a constricted social environment with limited opportunities for people of color.

Meeting minutes of the Free African Society fell silent after 1794, as both camps had completely infused themselves into the St. Thomas and Bethel African American churches. Both churches essentially acted as outgrowths of the FAS, although their aims centered more on moral support and religious guidance than the mutual aid activities enacted previously. The St. Thomas Church in 1809 established an "African Society for Suppressing Vice and Immorality," a program where free Blacks would visit "some of the more dissipated parts of the city and suburbs, on proper occasion" and provide advice and the best "persuasive measures" to produce "reformation of manners among [its people]." It was an act of moral supervision that echoed similar prospects Allen and Jones had during their time in the FAS.[115] Richard Allen, keeping in mind his venture in developing education facilities for Black Philadelphians, organized a Sunday school at Bethel in 1795, which became especially important after 1800 once Pennsylvania withdrew support of the existing Quaker schools.[116] As the churches progressed further into the 19th century, they became the hotbeds for African American activities including abolition movements, protests, and serving as stopping points for the Underground Railroad.

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[115] Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*, 113.
[116] Wesley, Charles H. *Richard Allen,: Apostle of Freedom,* First Edition (Associated Publishers, 1935), 92.

The impacts of the FAS were additionally felt in Black residential patterns. In the early 1790s, most Black families had settled in the city's periphery, particularly the north and south edges. Most were unable to find affordable housing within the white centric commercial core. The number of Black residents flooding into the northern and southern outer districts were almost equally distributed. According to Gary Nash, it was a geographical trend that persisted for the rest of the decade. Beginning in the early 19th century, the population of people of color in the southern periphery increased dramatically. The region had over three times the number of households compared to the north.[117] Though many resorted to living in poorly maintained living spaces that resembled the look of sheds, these areas, as observed by Emma Lapskansey, contained around two-thirds of all Black Philadelphia tenants in 1810, spaces that were enlarged into three quarters a decade later.[118] Nash attributes this shift to both city land developers who manufactured cheap homes in the north and especially south perimeters, the cultural forces of the southern area, represented by the churches.[119] While the St. Thomas and Bethel institutions had no direct involvement, their status as centers of Black collectivity and religious community made them the basis for forming Black American neighborhoods. Dozens of independent houses surrounded the church, a result Allen and Jones must have found immensely satisfying. With the assistance of the FAS, a full-fledged black community was created, one that would go on to have monumental impacts in Philadelphia society for years to come. Its beneficial features would be replicated by the various Black Philadelphia mutual aid institutions that arose after and inspired many other Black institutions across the nation.

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[117] Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 165.
[118] Lapsansky, Emma Jones. "South Street Philadelphia, 1762-1854: 'A Haven for Those Low in the World.'" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975)
[119] Nash, 165.

CHAPTER 2

RHODE ISLAND BLACKS: THE FREE AFRICAN UNION SOCIETY AND AFRICAN

BENEVOLENT SOCIETY

Sometime in August of 1789, while on his way to Boston, Massachusetts to speak with its

prominent Black leaders, Free African Society of Philadelphia member Henry Stewart visited the

Free African Society of Newport, Rhode Island. No documented information exists to explain

why Stewart specifically prioritized this visit, nor is there available intel regarding his prior

awareness of the organization. Regardless, his presence in Newport received a friendly reception

from FAUS members. In realizing a glowing opportunity to make strong connections across the

northern states, Stewart made an effort to secure a congenial network between Philadelphia,

Newport, and eventually Boston Black associations. A letter written by the FAUS on August

22nd certified Stewart's visit in Newport, recognized the beneficial society he was a part of, and

considered him "a truly worthy member," worthy of a strong recommendation "to all our friends'

more particularly to the African Company now in the town of Boston."[120]

By the time of Stewart's sojourn in Newport, the FAUS were knee deep at work developing

its foundation, attempting to secure the necessary materials to provide mutual aid for its Black

community. Since its creation in 1780, the organization had dedicated itself to playing a major

role in Rhode Island Black cultural matters. By 1789, two branches had been set up; one in

Newport and another in Providence, both of which contained the largest population of Rhode

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[120] Robinson, William Henry. *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 1st ed (Providence: Urban League of Rhode Island, 1976), 22. The letter is also included 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, in Its ... Their Condition, With the Co-Operation Of* (Forgotten Books, 2018), 30.

Island Black citizens.[121] Though the Union Society lasted shorter than its representatives probably expected, the sedulous efforts of its leaders carried through, as evidenced by their push to establish the African Benevolent Society in 1808. As this chapter shall explain, though the history of both Rhode Island Black voluntary associations carried numerous successes and failures, both organizations were persistent and assiduous in their mission to support Blacks in Newport and Providence. Their hopefulness in releasing the community from socioeconomic turmoil and providing a landscape for Black American cultural expression and freedom to live their lives is what was most appealing to other Blacks like Stewart when he came to visit. However, the history of these organizations cannot be given without first detailing the previous endeavors of the Rhode Island Blacks community.

Many eighteenth century historians have commented on the unusually large population of Blacks in Rhode Island compared to other New England colonies. While only third behind Massachusetts and Connecticut, Rhode Island had the highest proportion of free and enslaved Blacks from 1708 to the early nineteenth century. According to available census records, the population reached in 1755 when approximately 4,697 Blacks were documented to have occupied the colony, which was 11.5 percent of the total population, or around three times the proportion of Connecticut. To further compare, no other northern colony had their proportion of Blacks larger than 3.5 percent of the complete population.[122] Rhode Island's distance from typical New England Black population statistics has been attributed to its mass volume of

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[121] A letter written in 1789 addressed to "all the Afficans in Providence" called for Blacks in Providence to join them in their institution, to which Providence Blacks agreed to in their July of 1789 response letter. Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 19–20.

[122] Statistics derived from Lorenzo J. (Lorenzo Johnston) Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (Port Washington, N.Y., Kennikat Press, 1966), 85–86.

commercial activities, resulting in a substantial slave holding aristocracy. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, Rhode Island's economic system transitioned from a primarily agricultural market – mainly raising livestock – into one heavily based in mercantilism and oceanic commerce. Merchants had first experimented with trade in the West Indies in the 1660s, exporting agricultural products to Barbados and London – beef, pork, butter, and livestock – in exchange for molasses, sugar and especially rum, which were then sent to Boston, Massachusetts in exchange for English goods. Though these early ventures opened the possibility for a widely lucrative trade network and generated motivation among merchants to participate and enrich the local economy, these trade arrangements came with several problems, such as trade often being sporadic, slow and limited to a narrow network of ports. It would take until the early eighteenth century for a new generation of merchants (whose diverse group consisted of people born in Rhode Island or transferred from Massachusetts, Virginia, the Caribbean Islands or Europe) to expand Rhode Island's seagoing commercial system involving copious voyages to newly established ports throughout the West Indies and continental colonies.[123]

As Rhode Island merchants solidified its trading patterns and situated its dependence on commercialism, traders and the government made aggressive efforts to further involve themselves in the business of slavery. The earliest reports of enslaved Blacks entering the colony were in 1652, though the enslaved importation rates are unknown. An early report from Governor Sanford in 1680 estimated there to be a combined total of 175 Blacks and Native Americans, and in 1708, the year in which [enslaved] Blacks were first officially recorded, 426

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[123] See Coughtry, Jay. *Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade 1700-1807* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 1981; Withey, Lynne. *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island: Newport and Providence in the Eighteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1984; Clark-Pujara, Christy. *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: New York University Press), 2016.

were counted.[124] This indicates a relatively slow growth of African immigrants between the late

seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, an experience all northern colonies faced due

to geographical and environmental conditions that made subsistence farming, and thus African

agricultural labor, less viable than southern territories.[125] The pivot towards domestic trading and

industrialism sparked renewed interests in incorporating the slave trade and enslaved Black labor

tightly into their economic system. Substantial increases in the Black population probably began

after 1698 when the English Royal African Company had their monopoly on English slave

trading (which it held since its establishment in 1672) lifted by the British Parliament, which was

then followed by a flourish of Rhode Island slave transportation ships. Historian Christy Clark-

Pujara states that 514 Rhode Island slave ships were sent to the coast of West Africa during the

colonial period, a disproportionate number when compared to all other colonies which sent less

than 200.[126] Between 1708 and 1730, 1222 Blacks were added to the population, and as the time

difference between population records shortened between 1708 and 1755 – only four are

available (one for 1708, 1730, 1749 and 1755) – the value of Blacks added to the total continued

to increase (1,429 between 1730 and 1749, and 1,620 between 1749 and 1755).[127] The colony

became one of the most dominant players in the global slave trade, as a majority of slave ships

that sailed from British North America came from Rhode Island ports. Newport and Providence

in particular served as the most significant commercial slave trading districts, as both were

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[124] United States. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States. Part 2 : Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington : U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census , 1975), 1168. Though the statistic states 175 "Negroes" resided in Newport in 1680, Blacks were not included in Rhode Island census documents until 1708; The action from Governor Sanford to estimate was suggested by Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 85.

[125] This period of slow growth is what Ira Berlin classifies as the moment when Northern States were "Societies with slaves" rather than "Slave societies". Ira Berlin, *Ebook of Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 8–10.

[126] Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 17.

[127] Statistics cited from Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England,* Table 6 *1620-1776*, 87.

designed to be the hotspots of the colony's import and export of rum, candles, fish, furniture, silver and other goods that fueled the local economy. Historian Jay Coughtry argues Rhode Island's contribution to the slave trade was so substantial that the colony served as the principal carrier for the American slave trade.[128] According to him, the colony controlled about 60 to 90 percent of the trade in African slaves in America, had no significant American competitors, and "held a virtual monopoly in that brand of commerce."[129]

By 1770, Rhode Island's dedication to the slave trade resulted in over 3,700 transported Blacks populating the territory, about one quarter of which were concentrated in Newport and Providence. Nearly all were enslaved and performing skilled and unskilled labor, including transporting goods to and from manufactories, loading and unloading boats and running rum distilleries. They were positioned to operate the commercial trading ports efficiently and maintain the growth of the maritime economy. On a comparable level to southern colonies, almost every facet of Rhode Island's commercial enterprise fell under institutional slavery including banking and insurance, shipbuilding, and production of other manufacturable goods. This is all on top of the slave labor used to subsidize large scale agricultural plantations – specifically those in North and South Kingstown, Charlestown and Westerly counties – to maintain their production of agricultural commodities. About one quarter of Blacks were sent to these rural areas to fulfill domestic and farm labor.[130]

As was part of the course of all New England colonies, while the slave trade fastened Rhode Island's economic security and political autonomy, it came at the expense of the

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[128] Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807*, 1981, 5.
[129] Ibid, 25.
[130] For more on enslaved Black contributions to Rhode Island maritime labor, see Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*; Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*; Crane, Elaine Forman. *A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era* (Fordham University Press, 1992).

disenfranchisement of Blacks. Increased ardent investment in chattel slavery by the mid-1700s

resulted in the passing of several race based slave laws that reflected the desires of colonists to

maintain their economic and political status.[131] Using racism to protect enslavement had been

cemented as a part of slave focused jurisdiction since 1703, when Rhode Island's general

assembly passed a curfew law stating: "if any negroes or Indians either freemen, servants, or

slaves, do walk in the street of the town of Newport, or any other town in this Collony, after nine

of the clock of the night, without a certificate from their masters, or some English person of said

family with them, or some lawfull excuse for the same, that it shall be lawfull for any person to

take them up and deliver them to a Constable."[132] Subsequent laws further escalated deliberate

connections between Blacks, slavery and dependency, much of them enforcing an unequal racial

hierarchy such as the 1708 law that prohibited whites from socializing with Black slaves.[133] A

law passed in 1729 imposed a £100 fine on slave owners who manumitted their slave. The intent

was to not only give slave owners less of an incentive to release Blacks, but to declare Blacks as

an dependent class, thereby extending the practice of racial slavery beyond bondage.[134] The few

Blacks able to gain their freedom were not absolved from legislative restrictions, as the 1703 and

1708 law applied to them as well, and punishments threatened to place them into indentured

servitude. They were generally barred from enjoying a similar level of success as higher class

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[131] In comparison to previous years, African slave labor in the seventeenth century was economically marginal, meaning it was considered inessential to create race codified legislations. Interestingly, colonial officials in Providence and Warwick in 1652 produced a law that banned the enslavement of "blacke and white mankind", indicative of the fact that slavery was not considered inherent or racially specific until after it became a viable business strategy; John Russell Bartlett, trans., Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England , vol. 2, 1664– - 1 677 (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 534– 35.

[132] Bartlett, John Russell. trans. Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, vol. 3, 1687–1706, 492.

[133] Bartlett, trans. Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, vol. 3, 1707– 1740, 50.

[134] Bartlett, *Records,* vol. 4, 415-416

whites. Free Blacks, in the eyes of white colonists, were anomalies more than anything, yet still strapped to the same constructed ideologies of blackness as those enslaved.

How Rhode Island Blacks navigated their civic lives prior to 1756 is difficult to assess due to the minimal amount of information available. However, it can be safely assumed that the Rhode Island Black community, despite the limitations forced upon them, were far from passive bystanders. As was the case across colonial America, African communities, in realizing their shared marginalized status and common restrictions and experiences, understood the necessity to develop internal adaptive systems in response to the social and economic limitations imposed upon them.[135] Beginning in the 1750s, enslaved Africans who entered the commercial districts Newport and Providence were usually shipped directly from the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa, though the exact amount remains unclear. [136]

Africans who came from the other side of the Atlantic retained and protected their cultural identities, enough for West African culture to impact and persist in New England. Their influences can be seen through the gravestone marking at Newport's Common Burial Ground – the segregated graveyard designated specifically for both free and enslaved Africans since 1703 – as many of the names written on the tombstones carry distinct West African naming patterns (such as Occramar Mirycoo, Salmar Nubia, and Duchess Quamino).[137] This persistence for West Africans to preserve their culture almost certainly affected their redesign of internal Black social systems. American anthropologist Sidney Mintz suggests that the loss of traditional familial and

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[135] For more on this topic, see Sidney W. (Sidney Wilfred) Mintz, *The Birth of African-American Culture : An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston : Beacon Press), 1992.

[136] Before the 1750s, African slaves were generally shipped from the Caribbean Islands. That said, the first record of Rhode Island slave traders purchasing Africans was in 1696. Fourteen were bought and sailed on the ship Seaflower directly from Africa to Newport; Bartlett, *Records*, vol. 4, 50.

[137] Burial markers have been stored digitally with the assistance of the 1696 Heritage Group, God's Little Acre: America's Colonial African Cemetery, accessed May 25, 2024, www.colonialcemetary.com/burial-markers.

social institutions dictated that Blacks transform their African cultural customs into something uniquely African American, establishing a community that combines familiar African traditions with white social ideas within the confines of slavery and legal discrimination.[138]

The Rhode Island Black community was at its liveliest in Newport, mainly because it was the central port for African slaves and the commercial seaport district in which Africans labored. By 1755, over 1200 Blacks resided in Newport, nearly twenty percent of the total Black population, and Newport became the city with the second largest concentration of Blacks in the American mainland.[139] Despite rigorous restrictions built to control and stifle Black socialization, the urban clustering and the nature of northern colonial urban slavery offered more freedom of movement, possibilities of communication and networking for Newport Blacks than those on plantations. Urban enslaved Black men typically worked for merchants and tradesmen, and their tasks often required them to traverse the city without much supervision from slave owners, which naturally offered opportunities for encounters with other enslaved, indentured and free Blacks. It was much less likely for women to have the same level of freedom of mobility, since most were relegated to domestic work and confined to the household of slave owners much of their time. An exception would be given if they were tasked with running errands, which gave them brief interactions with other Black people. For most Newport Blacks (mostly men), the frequency in their encounters with other Black inhabitants allowed a unique Black American social network to bloom.[140]

Some Newport enslaved Blacks were able to take advantage of urban slavery and maneuver their way into free society, as was the case in all north colonial cities. Though there may have

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[138] Mintz, *The Birth of African American Culture*, 42-51.

[139] Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776*, 87.

[140] Cottrol, Robert J. *The Afro-Yankees : Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 1982), 16–17.

been a few Blacks who were freed by slave owners, whether it be through good deeds or the owner's will upon their death, the colonial government designed slave labor to situate the Rhode Island industrial economy, As evidenced by the 1729 manumission regulation ordinance, there was active discouragement against manumissions. Realizing the low chances of voluntary manumissions, Blacks who were paid for their services saved their money for the purposes of escaping their position as dependent people. There was a small number of Black laborers with large families who became head of their own households.[141] Abraham Casey, one of the founders of the Free African Union Society, was an enslaved chocolate grinder in Newport for Aaron Lopez sometime before 1768 receiving low wages for his work.[142] No available document details the date of when Casey achieved manumission (he was freed by 1789 according to FAUS records), but he is recorded in a 1774 Newport census document – the first year in which Blacks were included — as the head of property with eight other residents.[143] The circumstances of his freedom cannot be confirmed, but it is possible that both his freedom and house were self-purchased via the money he earned as a skilled worker. Forty-seven other Black homeowners in total are included in the census report, all of which presumably felt an urgency to obtain something resembling a comfortable life and push past common social constraints in the colony.[144]

Rarely did Blacks attempt to migrate to West Africa. Fascinatingly, a regional newspaper reported in 1735 that an unnamed free couple from Rhode Island "scrap'd together two hundred,

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[141] It should be noted that primary evidence of early Rhode Island Black household leaders is found in late eighteenth-century documents.

[142] Magra, Chris. "The 'Negro Chocolate Grinders' of Newport: Slavery and Freedom in Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island," Newport History 94, no. 283 (2021): 15, https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol94/iss283/2, Accessed May 25, 2024

[143] Documentation of Rhode Island Black residents from census records was cited from Benard, Akeia A.F. "The Free African American Cultural Landscape: Newport, RI, 1774--1826." PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2008, 180-229 https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/dissertations/AAI3308227 Accessed on May 25th, 2024.

[144] Benard, *The Free African American Cultural Landscape*, 162-163.

or three hundred pounds" and sailed from Newport to Guinea "having a Desire to return to their own Country."[145] Perhaps these people had little interest in developing a sustainable life in the American colonies, and figured the chances for successful social and economic opportunities were higher if they returned to their homeland. Their departure, however, was the exception to the reality that most free and enslaved Africans in Newport remained in the colony and used the nature of urban slavery to form a community through their common plight and incorporating colonial functions with African cultural ideals. This was not to copy white created institutions, but instead to create and sustain social networks, boundaries between Blacks and Euro American people, and systems for Black autonomy most productive and satisfying for the population.

The first demonstration of Black community building in Newport was not voluntary associations, but instead Black election festivals that were commonly referred to by whites as Negro Election Day. These events took place around the time of general annual elections attended by whites. They were scheduled during the third or last Saturday of June, consisted of free and enslaved Blacks from various spaces in Newport gathering to elect a "governor" or "king," and involved a celebration filled with a banquet, parading, dancing and music. Black election day festivals found popularity in several northern colonies from the mid to late eighteenth century.[146] In fact early recorded instances goes as far back as 1741 in Salem, Massachusetts, when Benjamin Lynd Jr. recorded in his journal that two enslaved Blacks of his household Scipio and William attending the occasion.[147] One of the oldest recollections comes

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[145] Boston Evening Post, September 22, 1735. Cited from Weeden, William B,"The Early African Slave-Trade in New England," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, New Series, 5 (1887): 109.

[146] For more on Black election festivals, see White, Shane. "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834." *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994): 13–50; Reidy, Joseph. "Negro Election Day and Black Community Life in New England, 1750–1860," Marxist Perspectives (Fall 1978); Wade, Melvin. "'Shining in Borrowed Plumage': Affirmation of Community in the Black Coronation Festivals of New England (c. 1750-c. 1850)." *Western Folklore* 40, no. 3 (1981): 211–31.

[147] Lynde, Benjamin. *The Diaries of Benjamin Lynde and of Benjamin Lynde, Jr.* (Priv. print. [Cambridge, Riverside Press], 1880), 109.

from Newport resident Henry Bull in 1837, who recounts a festival that took place in 1756, considered by historians to be the second earliest year of Black election days.[148]

Bull, along with several other nineteenth and early twentieth century secondary commentators, classified Black election festivals as pure impersonations of white general elections, organized by "creatures of mimic and imitation." Bull in his interpretation was adamant that Blacks conceived of their election events only by closely "observing the pride which their masters took in a Charter Government, and their ambition with which they strove and contented with one another for honor, office and preferment."[149] These writers acknowledged that Blacks crafted social and political systems at the festivals on their own accord, while simultaneously bringing mention to Blacks needing the direct approval of the white slave owners who attended these events. This most likely served to further embolden the impression that Black elections existed to mirror Anglo-American political culture. Bull also considered the white supervision applied at these election festivals proof of an immature and childish African race, stating that masters "foresaw that a sort of policing" was necessary and effective in "keeping [Blacks] within the bounds of morality and honesty, than if the same authority were exercised by the whites." This was a direct attempt to affirm the superiority of white citizens and institutions.[150]

Meanwhile, modern scholarship has disputed these claims, emphasizing the creative and fundamentally African American nature of Black elections. William Dillon Pierson marked Black elections as significant celebrations of Black awareness that "borrowed from African

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[148] Bull, Henry. *Memoir of Rhode Island*, Rhode Island Republican, August 19, 1837, I/I, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/ accessed May 25th, 2024
[149] Bull, Memoir of Rhode Island, 1/1.
[150] Ibid, 1/1.

forms and satirized white society as much as it imitated Euro-American institutions."[151] Which is to say that Black election festivals were intended to be defined not by their similarities to white political systems, but by their ability to blend white establishments with African customs in such a way that appealed specifically to the Black community. As far as white commentators could recall, the voting process (in Newport at least) bore resemblance to Euro American general election formal standards, with Blacks utilizing a paper ballot system and implementing the stiff decision to limit voting rights to owners of property (in this case a pig and a sty). Other supposed comparisons include Blacks escorting incumbents of office candidates over to their place of appointment (which was the head of Thames Street in Newport), politicians lecturing the crowd during polling as a means of influencing voters, and the situation of men only being allowed to vote, although women did lobby for their desired candidates.[152]

It was also stated in secondhand accounts of elections in other locations that attendees dressed themselves in extravagant attire, borrowing hand-me-down clothes from slave owners that acted as holiday wear. North Kingstown delegate Wilkins Updike commented that some Black celebrants in Narragansett, Rhode Island were lent the horses of wealthy slave owners, "mounted on the best Narragansett pacers, sometimes with their master's sword, with their ladies on pillions, and "pranced to election."[153] According to Pierson, the donning of Euro American regalia was a choice made by Black attendees and not something enforced upon them by slave owners. It may have been a persuasive tactic to convince slave owners to contribute materials for the election festivals. Pierson claimed that enslaved Blacks assumed the social and economic

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[151] Piersen, William Dillon. *Black Yankees : The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 109.
[152] Bull, *Memoir of Rhode Island*, 1/1.
[153] Wilkins Updike, James MacSparran, and Daniel Goodwin, *A History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island* (Boston, D. B. Updike, 1907), 213.

position of their slave owners.[154] From the perspective of many white slave masters who oversaw these events, Black elections reflected their own economic rank. Thus, white slave owners must had felt a need to ensure their slaves were given suitable dress wear compared to others and the festival supported with enough money in order to protect their own reputation.[155] It is unclear how intentional this was on the part of Black organizers, but given the flair of these election celebrations, it has been said that Black elections were excessive in cost.[156]

Observed from a wider lens, and one can understand that Black elections came with a hefty number of African influences as well. Consistently, the locations of Black elections approximated an area of open grounds, typically in boundary with a large tree. There is no definitive reason as to why Black Newport residents chose the head of Thames Street as the central spot for their election festivals. Geographically, it was not a convenient area for the urban Black community, as Blacks were scattered residentially across various parts of town and thus most had to travel a great distance to arrive there.[157] That said, the head of Thames Street was separated from the Newport commercial center and sat away from white populated areas, a fact that may have played a significant factor in Blacks picking the location. Even though white slave owners were reported to have seen these events, Blacks perhaps sought for an area in the fringes of town with a low volume of critical eyes from white observers in order to practice their elections without interruption.

Scholars have highlighted African ideas over the sacred meaning of trees as another reason. The large spread in Thames Street (as well as other trees in colonial America) is most famous for

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[154] Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 120.

[155] Updike, MacSparran, and Goodwin, *A History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island*, 213.

[156] Ibid, 214–15.

[157] See 1774 census: John Russell Bartlett, Census of the inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (Providence: Knowles, Anthony, 1858).

serving as the site for colonial protests against the Stamp Act during the mid-1760s. This Liberty

tree, as white residents called it, was a symbol of aggrievement toward British tyranny, a

politically specific value and continued to be so in secondary accounts.[158] However, for Blacks

who surrounded the location beforehand, the tree most likely embodied a spiritual significance

based in West African religion. Anthropologists have found that African creation stories

commonly used trees as sacred spaces that represented both life and death. Trees were

simultaneously the sources of regeneration and healing as well as the dwelling spaces for dead

souls.[159] It was partly for these reasons that many trees in West African countries became areas

for communal gatherings and worship, on top of its natural benefit of being a fount for food and

materials for goods such as silk-cotton and wine. One African prince recalled a gathering that

took place under a palm tree, stating that he and attendees "divided ourselves into many

congregations," and described the tree as "extremely large, high, and majestic."[160] African

huddled in north Thames Street seemed to have carried these cultural meanings with them when

practicing their election. Not only was the tree old and large, but researchers have also noticed

that the chosen tree was only a few yards away from the Common Burial Ground, where

Africans regularly held funerals. Henry Bull expressed rather unflatteringly that Blacks "took

pride in making their funerals as pompous as possible," which suggests both the use of West

African rituals to carry out their ceremonies, and possibly the tree serving as an African

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[158] For a discussion of Liberty Trees in Rhode Island, see Andrews, Edward E. 2007. "'Creatures of Mimic and Imitation': The Liberty Tree, Black Elections, and the Politicization of African Ceremonial Space in Revolutionary Newport, Rhode Island." *Radical History Review* 2007 (99): 121–39.

[159] For a look into the case studies of the relations of West African related human communities to trees, see Roothaan, Angela. *Hermeneutics of trees in an African context. Enriching the understanding of the environment 'for the common heritage of humankind',* cited from Jonathan O. Chimakonam, *African Philosophy and Environmental Conservation*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 135-147; Parrinder, Geoffrey. *African Traditional Religion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1962), 52-53.

[160] Gronniosaw, James Albert Ukawsaw. *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African prince, written by himself* (Newport, R.I., 1774), 8-9.

intermediary between the town and the cemetery, or the space of the living and dwelling for the dead.[161]

Election festival activities also came with unique African forms of amusements blended with Euro American pastime interests. Several white accounts claimed that Blacks engaged in wrestling, stick fighting, and dancing.[162] These were all activities practiced in white annual elections, but Piersen distinguishes them via their distinctly African form (West African ring dances for example were incorporated).[163] Bull made note of the "various languages of Africa" that filled the space, accompanied with music from instruments that either have roots in Africa or found immense popularity with the Black community including the banjo, fiddle, tambourine, and drums.[164] Common athletic based activities such as running races and jumping contests were also used as an exercise for men to showcase their masculinity towards women spectators, who apparently performed physically exhausting dances to the tune of violin music.[165] Commentators made special mention to the dancing, music playing, drinking, and gambling Blacks involved themselves with. Once again, white voters regularly allowed these activities in their annual elections, yet it was these amusements that accounts claimed generated some alarm among white observers, as they demonstrate a sense of rowdiness that necessitated policing.[166] No supporting evidence exists to prove that Black elections ever led to urban rioting, nor are there any archives of complaints from white residents regarding the activities. No objections were given even when Blacks wielded and fired rifles during the inaugural Black parades that began the ceremony.[167]

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[161] Bull, *Memoirs of Rhode Island*, 1/1.
[162] Ibid, 1/1.
[163] Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 124
[164] Bull, *Memoirs of Rhode Island*, 1/1.
[165] Bentley, William. *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D., Pastor of the East Church, Salem, Massachusetts* (Gloucester Mass., P. Smith, 1962), 457.
[166] Bull, *Memoirs of Rhode Island*, 1/1.
[167] Phillips, James Duncan. *Salem in the Eighteenth Century,* 1st Edition (Houghton Mifflin, 1937), 272.

Most white observers may have viewed the elections as inoffensive as they felt Blacks were simply copying white led customs, and thus felt the festivals to be undisruptive to the manufactured social order.[168]

By contrast, Black celebrants seemingly organized these elections as a gateway for both community development and expressions of cultural representation. Elections were considered an annual holiday, a moment in which Newport (and many other New England towns) allowed enslaved Blacks to have time off from labor commitments, and thus one of the few times Blacks could congregate for religious and family purposes.[169] For enslaved and free individuals, the election provided the biggest opportunity for more overt displays of Black social uplift and bonding within the constraints of slavery, and to counteract the forces of cultural and social fragmentation to which the community was subjected.

Melvin Wade postulates that Black election festivals fostered several processes characteristic of future Black social systems including communication, boundary maintenance, socialization, systemic linkage, social control and institutionalization. Communication networks, while they had been informally practiced previously in rural areas of New England based on work alliances formed in kitchens, gardens and field plantations, was most effective in the festivals due to it being used to structure organizational hierarchies and link communities together through releasing information by word of mouth. Much like churches, community lodges and meetinghouses, Black election festivals became a space for discussion, drawing people in from multiple corners of town.[170] The open nature of the festivals, according to Wade, enabled Black partisans to momentarily realign dominant social boundaries, creating a sufficient place for the

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[168] Bulk, *Memoirs of Rhode Island*, 1/1.
[169] White, *It Was a Proud Day*, 17, 19.
[170] Wade, *Shining in Borrowed Pilgrimage*, 213-215.

Black community to emerge. Black festivals were meant to be "displaced from conventional constraints of role and status," for people with "acutely consciousness of their commonality," and to manipulate the white-over-black social hierarchy by presenting a "revised model of social stratification." The rituals – dancing, music, parading, coronations of elected governors – were all in support of Black socialization as they created further community awareness of social limitations, transferred authority for themselves, and built a charismatic environment for Blacks to enjoy.[171]

Further, Wade claimed that Blacks perceived these election festivals as manifestations of social control over themselves, as Black governors "believed their influence so great that they held jurisdiction over the entire Black population of their respective states."[172] This is in spite of coronations being more symbolic and Black elected candidates having little political power outside of these events. In Narragansett, governors were "consulted as to the settlement of many petty disputes of his black brothers, and his decision was law." The Black courts established at the elections "thus had a certain power, and commanded some respect among white people, who through him could obtain small settlements and adjustments, and arrange many matters in their relations with the negroes, without the trouble of personal effort."[173] Additionally, Piersen states that Black governors took significant pride in their position as leaders of their community and held their heads high with dignity, as evidenced by their desire to wear military garments or emblems of royalty (such as crowns).[174] In many respects, Blacks managed to achieve enough of a level of autonomy at these festivals to creatively practice their own culture without much supervision from white authority, asserting themselves in a complex fashion.

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[171] Ibid, 217.
[172] Ibid, 226.
[173] Earle, Alice Morse. *In Old Narragansett* (New York, 1898), 81.
[174] Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 132.

Black election festivals continued in northern American territories into the nineteenth century, although it has been said that ones hosted in Newport specifically effectively ended after British troops took possession of the town in 1776.[175] The legitimacy of this claim is debatable, though there are no reports of Black elections in Newport after this date. Regardless, these events provided the basis for a solemn, elaborate community system for Black Rhode Islanders, one with African American characteristics that carried with it forms of independence, cultural expressionism, a social hierarchical structure, and Black representation. These attributes were essential in Blacks maintaining unity with each other, and in some ways acted as a prelude for the voluntary associations that were soon to arrive in Newport.

The Free African Union Society, the first established voluntary association in Rhode Island, supposedly had its first meeting in November of 1780 in the house of Abraham Casey.[176] This also makes the FAUS the earliest Black mutual aid institution in America, founded seven years before Pennsylvania's Free African Society, originally considered to be the first known. Unfortunately, available recorded meeting minutes of the society only go as far back as 1787, and no references related to prior organization activities are included in these documents. Thus, it is difficult to analyze precisely the history behind the inception of the FAUS.

The state of Rhode Island and its Black inhabitants after the termination of the Black election provides some clarity on the creation of the organization. Rhode Island underwent a major transitional period during and after the Revolutionary War, one that affected the lives of all

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[175] Bull, *Memoir*, 1/1.
[176] Charles A Battle reported a full date November 10th, 1780. Battle, Charles A., Sidney Wright, and Mrs. Sidney Wright. *Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island*. Newport's Black Museum, 1932.

Black residents and called the practice of black slavery into question. For starters, Rhode Island's

engagement in the war for Independence against British occupation hinged on having as many

available Continental army soldiers as possible, especially by 1778 when the infantry began

depleting at an alarming rate which made seizing Newport and a great portion of the state from

the hands of the British a struggle. In response, the General Assembly passed the Slave

Enlistment Act in February 1778 to increase their numbers, making it the first attempt to legally

integrate Blacks into the military. It also came with an additional statement that enslaved Blacks

accepted into the infantry to be "immediately discharged from the service of his master or

mistress, and be absolutely free, as though he had never been encumbered without any kind of

servitude or slavery."[177] Though data concerning the amount of slaves (and free Blacks) admitted

into the militia is unclear, they made up nearly all of Rhode Island's 1st Rhode Island Regiment

after 1778 to the point that the unit was called the "Black Regiment." The Black troops played an

integral part in the war effort, contributing to several important battles such as the Battle of

Rhode Island, where they deflected British attacks and "three times threw back the charges of the

Hessian mercenaries on the slopes beyond Newport."[178] The incursion near Points Bridge, New

York was another, where they fiercely fought against the opposition to avenge the Rhode Island

commander Colonel Christopher Greene, who was killed in battle. It was one of the few

regiments to last up to the end of the Revolutionary War.[179]

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[177] Slave Enlistment Act was cited from Michael Lee Lanning, *Defenders of Liberty : African Americans in the Revolutionary War* (New York : Citadel Press, 2000), 205–6

[178] Battle, *Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island*, 14; Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *Black Profiles in Courage: A Legacy of African American Achievement* (Perennial, 2000), 31; quote is from Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Urban League of Greater Providence, 1954), 20.

[179] For more on the 1st Black Regiment, see Greene, Lorenzo J. "Some Observations on the Black Regiment of Rhode Island in the American Revolution." *The Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 2 (1952): 142–72.

Secondly, progress was brewing in the Rhode Island abolitionist movement. As stated before, white protests against slavery and the slave trade in Rhode Island began several years before the Revolutionary War. The Quaker community since the seventeenth century had been some of the first to recommend slave owners free their slaves, although many disagreed and several Quakers were slaveholders themselves. More social pressure was placed on them to manumit slaves by the dawn of the Revolution as Age of Enlightenment ideals like liberty and progress spread further across the colonies. The New England Yearly Meeting, a religious and mainly Quaker populated institution held in Massachusetts, even declared in their Book of Discipline in 1773 that all enslaved people held by Quakers were to be set free, though again several did not commit. Still, their efforts were partially responsible for the General Assembly to pass an act in 1774 prohibiting further importation of slaves in Rhode Island, although historians claim this law to have been ineffective as it included a loophole where slaves who were unable to settle in other colonies could settle in the state for any period of time.[180]

It was ultimately the growing political rhetoric for independence from the British mixed with increased awareness over the casualties of the transatlantic slave trade that accelerated the abolitionist movement, with efforts ranging from private manumissions to petitions for state legislative orders. Quaker abolitionists expressed their feelings over slavery in meetings, considering it to be heresy to true Christianity, which gives the impression that most who push for the manumission of slaves were probably primarily doing it more for personal desires for religious salvation and less out of consideration for the rights of captive Blacks. Nonetheless in 1772, the Quaker Society of Friends in Rhode Island formally denounced slavery through published broadsides and religious discourse, and between 1773 and 1803 manumitted nearly 50

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[180] Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen*, 18–20; Lemons, J. Stanley. "Rhode Island and the slave trade." *Rhode Island History* 60, no. 4 (2002): 96.

enslaved Blacks.[181] Samuel Hopkins, one of the most renowned abolitionists in Rhode Island,

had no interest in abolishing the slave trade before meeting Congregationalist Sarah Osbourn—a

women who ran a home school for free and enslaved Blacks—introduced him to the abolitionist

movement. Afterwards, he ran the First Continental Church between 1773 and 1803 preaching

for the complete end to slavery, mainly due to his belief that colonial practice of slavery resulted

in the intensified British tyranny. He also privately tutored some enslaved and free Blacks,

training them to become missionaries for potential congregations in Africa.[182] Another notable

individual abolitionist was Moses Brown, a Quaker who freed his slaves in 1773. It was he who

drafted an emancipation and slave abolition bill in 1775 that was rejected immediately by the

General Assembly. He sent in a second draft in December of 1783 after the conclusion to the

American Revolution, this time with signatures from members of Rhode Island town council

members and endorsements from Quakers and Blacks. After that was also rejected, a revised

version of the proposed ordinance won the support of the Providence Town Council and

officially passed in March 1784.[183]

The efforts of Black militia troops and the expanding abolitionist movement, both of which

connected to the Revolutionary era of Rhode Island's history, paved the way for the Gradual

Emancipation Act of 1784, a law that declared the end of hereditary slavery and called for all

children born into slavery to be freed. However, while the act resulted in the releases of several

Blacks from bondage, it also carried the stipulation that slaves were only eligible for

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[181] Total manumissions were tallied in Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 67.

[182] Conforti, Joseph. "Samuel Hopkins and the Revolutionary Antislavery Movement." *Rhode Island History* 38, no. 2 (1979): 39-49.

[183] Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen*, 21; Charles Rappleye, Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 226– 29; John Russell Bartlett, trans. Records of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England , vol. 9, 1780–1783 (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 735.

emancipation once they reached maturation age (18 for women and 21 for men). Only thirty-two

slaves were manumitted in the five years after the law was passed, most of which were older than

21, as the law also stated that healthy slaves between 21 and 40 could be manumitted without

slaveowners assuming financial responsibility. For many slave owners, the act provided an

incentive to release older slaves in an attempt to avoid having to post bond and support them.

Further, the original version of the law asserted towns to be responsible for providing economic

and educational support for children of slaves until they reached the age required for freedom

under the assumption that towns would bind them out and recuperate their financial losses. But

countless objections from town councils led to an revision eight months later, where

responsibility for support for newborns of enslaved mothers was transferred over to slave

owners, absolving towns from any obligation to grant mutual aid or social support for enslaved

and free Blacks.[184]

    Even though the emancipation act included Revolutionary rhetoric to claim "all men are

entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and that holding "mankind" in a state of

lifelong slavery to be "repugnant" and "subversive of the happiness of mankind," it only softly

applied to Blacks.[185] Complete dissolution of institutional slavery would not occur in Rhode

Island until 1842, and though the General Assembly banned Rhode Islanders from participating

in the slave trade in 1787, it was not entirely enforced as slave trafficking continued for several

years afterwards. The Gradual Emancipation Act paved a pathway for enslaved Blacks to gain

their liberty with specific caveats that would take decades to resolve. In addition, the act had not

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[184] Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 68–76.

[185] Document was cited from Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. "Act for the gradual Abolition of Slavery from the General Assembly of the Governor and Company of the state of Rhode Island, February 1784." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed May 26, 2024. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/

touched upon the century-long systematic development of intertwining blackness with dependency. Former enslaved Blacks were generally not given proper financial or social support from towns and were stuck living in enclaves forced to carry themselves through limited means, which helped curate the stereotype that Blacks were underdeveloped, childlike, and depended solely on whites. Though the rise of the free Black population was sharper than before the gradual emancipation act, the "pursuit of happiness" for many Blacks in Rhode Island was set up to be a long and treacherous one.[186] This history of Rhode Island's conflicting relationship with Blacks is clearly a major reasoning behind the creation of the Free African Union Society. As stated in the discussion of Black election festivals, disenfranchisement played a major role in motivating the Black community to build this benevolent organization, and thereby release them from the social stigmas enforced upon them.

On top of Black elections, Black resistance tactics against discrimination during the Revolutionary War were also integral contributing factors. With sentiments of liberty and inalienable rights echoed across the state, enslaved and free Blacks took advantage of the situation and utilized multiple mechanisms to gain their freedom and independence. Many fled from the bondage of their owners and into British lines located in both New England and southern colonies, particularly after 1775 when Dunmore's Proclamation, a document passed in 1775 by Virginia's British royal governor that promised to grant freedom to all slaves who joined the British army.[187] Those who did not want to wait for slave owners to admit them into the militia after the Slave Enlistment Act of 1788 were probably motivated to leave to join the British Army after the release of the Philipsburg Proclamation in 1779. The Rhode Island

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[186] Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 76–83.
[187] Egerton, Douglass. *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

newspaper *The Newport Mercury* frequently posted fugitive slave advertisements during the

Revolutionary era, along with reports of theft, murder, and fake travel papers.[188] There were

others who took to the courts to negotiate their freedom, a privilege northern state slaves were

not exempted from unlike the south. A court document from 1781 mentions a former slave

named Quaco who was "disposed of" by his slave holder to a British officer and, after escaping

and "given liberty for providing information," was "disagreeably alarmed with a claim upon him

as a slave by Mr. William Tweedy, administrator to the estate of James Honyman." His

negotiation was successful, as the General Assembly declared his freedom in 1782.[189] This was

also the case in 1785 for another former slave named Jane Coggeshall, who also escaped from

the British eight years prior.[190] In this sense, resistance fueled the flame for institutions that

provided Blacks with social and political protection.

That being said, while protection for Blacks highlights a significant aim, the FAUS, much like

the Black elections, also acted as an opportunity to create a cultural landscape for the Black

community, based on their unique social system and the ideas of those who ran it. Original

members of the FAUS were mostly free Africans with experiences in highly skilled occupations,

property ownership and personal wealth. Early representatives included Abraham Casey

(chocolate maker and carpenter), Caesar Lyndon (purchasing agent and former slave of

Governor Josiah Lyndon), Zingo Stevens (stonemason for a shop on Thames St.), and Arthur

Tikey Flagg (ropemaker).[191] Newport Gardner (real name was Occramer Marycoo) also helped

establish the organization, but during his enslavement to a wealthy merchant named Caleb

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[188] Maureen Alice Taylor and John Wood Sweet, eds., *Runaways, Deserters, and Notorious Villains from Rhode Island Newspapers, vol. 2, Additional Notices from the Providence Gazette, 1762– 1800, as Well as Advertisements from All Other Rhode Island Newspapers from 1732–1800* (Rockport, ME: Picton Press, 2001).
[189] Bartlett, Records, vol. 9, 493-494.
[190] Bartlett, Records, vol. 10, 70.
[191] Occupations were found in Benard, *The Free African American Cultural Landscape,* 133.

Gardner. Membership was restricted to free Africans, yet Gardner still supported the FAUS

attending meetings as an honorary representative, allowed to attend meetings, take notes, and

record the births and deaths of his children. It was not until 1792, shortly after his release from

bondage, that Gardner became an official member.[192]

These early followers, all of which were in the "propertied class" (including Newport Gardner

who hosted an FAUS meeting in his house during his time in slavery), most likely from the

beginning envisioned their organization as a platform to "promote the moral and material welfare

of the coloured people of Newport."[193] As social mobility and the acquisition of wealth was

difficult for most Black Rhode Islanders, they most certainly felt a sense of pride in their

socioeconomic position and responsibility to construct an environment comfortable for the

scattered urban Black community. Several of these representatives lived in or around the

southern enclaves of town, including Pope Street (labelled Negro Lane in 1803 Newport maps)

and the William/Levin Street neighborhood. These residential areas were most notable for their

high concentration of Black Americans by 1780, and likely contained a great deal of

unsupervised interactions between property owners within the Black community.[194] As evidence,

most FAUS meetings were held at the houses of members throughout its entire run, homesteads

built in these Black neighborhoods.[195] While middle class Blacks were undoubtedly spatially

marginalized from the town center, the number of Black owned homes within these enclaves

suggests some degree of choice in using urban enclaves to escape from the surveillance of white

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[192] Gardner became an honorary member of the FAUS in 1789. Robinson, "The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society", pg. 58; "Newport Gardner, 1746– 1826," - Black Perspective in Music 4, no. 2 (July 1976): 202– 7; Battle, Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island, 27-29.

[193] Battle, Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island, 16.

[194] Richard C. Youngken, African Americans in Newport: An Introduction to the Heritage of African Americans in Newport, Rhode Island, 1700– - 1945 (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, RIBHS, 1998), 24-25.

[195] Battles states one meeting to have been held at the Fourth Baptist Meeting House, Battle *Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island*, 16.

landowners. After enough Blacks settled into these spaces, the neighborhoods may have

intentionally been designed as areas for middle class Blacks to connect, communicate, and

establish a social border between them and white residents. These enclaves in that regard were

probably seen as the most ideal space for the FAUS to be established.[196]

For as much as what is not known about the early initiatives of the organization, historians

contend that the FAUS erected itself to serve as the public voice for Black economic and social

stability, which is reflected in their post-1787 documented aims. On the economic side, a central

goal of the organization was to secure proper burials for deceased members. The African

Common Burial Ground remained a segregated graveyard, never to be purchased by a Black

organization during the time of the FAUS or after. While no records indicate the FAUS even

attempted to acquire rights to the property, the acre nevertheless played an essential role in the

Black burials conducted by the organization. Archeologists of the burial ground (colloquially

called "God's Little Acre") have found tombstones engraved with the names of many FAUS

members.[197] According to a meeting recorded in early 1790, the funerals for deceased members

were to involve the attendance of all representatives, some of which served as bearers upon

instruction and requested not to refuse. Representatives were also expected to "dress themselves

and appear decent on all occasions, so that they may be useful to all and every…burying."[198]

FAUS burial regulations seemed to have borrowed somewhat from formal white customs, but

its cultural meaning for the Black community remained unique. Black funerals maintained its

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[196] The idea that Blacks had a degree of choice in living within their neighborhoods was suggested by Benard, *The Free African American Cultural Landscape*, 119 & 146.

[197] Garman, James C. "Viewing the Color Line through the Material Culture of Death." *Historical Archaeology* 28, no. 3 (1994), 86. 85 members have been found and have been collected on the Newport Historical Society Collections Online Database.

[198] Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 61-62.

status as a celebration of life and a farewell to the recently deceased throughout the eighteenth century. Dancing, singing and spoken testimonials were the primary activities of these funerals, which included hundreds of Black participants. Reverend Ezra Stiles of Newport's Second Congregational Church described one African burial in 1770 that involved "a procession of Two Hundred Men and One Hundred and Thirty Women Negroes."[199] With the FAUS having access to traditional white materials, the funeral rituals codified in the meeting documents were adjusted to accommodate. Representatives were notified "by the sexton or by some other member" of a member on the verge of death and told the time in which one will be buried. Leaders of the FAUS were to lead the procession from the center of Newport to the burial ground with the body of the deceased on a wagon. The procession was organized by a ceremonial undertaker, a well-respected position within the Black community. After the burial concluded, time was given for reflection and celebration of the dearly departed, possibly similar to the burial aftermaths previous Black funerals.[200]

Burial expenses were covered by the Pall and Biers Union Society, a branch of the FAUS established sometime possibly in the late 1780s.[201] Some of the organization's Treasury filled with mandatory contributions from members went into supporting this branch. In addition to supplying deceased members with palls and biers (but possibly not a coffin), the organization also promoted provisions of a horse accompanied with a suitable carriage in the event of storms, exceedingly hot or cold temperatures and other forms of uncomfortable weather.[202] Most Pall and Bier Union Society members are not listed in the meeting minute documents, the only

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[199] Ezra Stiles, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles ...* (C. Scribner's sons, 1901), 52.
[200] Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 124.
[201] Ibid, ix.
[202] Ibid. 62.

exceptions being Charles Chaloner, Tony Overing and Duchess Quamino. Chaloner served as head of the Society's treasury,[203] Overing was appointed keeper of the Pall, and it is presumed most other members like Chaloner were both men and held dual roles in both organizations.[204] Quamino, whose role is not specified, stands out from the rest, in that she is a woman and not an official member of the FAUS. She is most likely the only female given a position in the organization overall.[205]

With the Pall and Bier Society situated, the FAUS had the ability to grant financial relief for families of deceased members. In 1792, Susannah Wanton, the widow of Newport Wanton, applied for payments from the Treasury when her husband was ill.[206] The organization also handled the cost of his funeral, and even paid for the tea, sugar and rum used in the ceremony. Genny Gardner, after the death of her husband Pompey Gardner in 1794, was given one dollar from the FAUS "for her present relief."[207] For unfortunate individual members with an interminable illness or on the precipice of death, the organization decided in 1793 that the Treasury would issue "one shilling a month; or three shillings every three months; or six shillings every months" for "as long as any such misfortune or member or members in this Society and any money in the Treasury." The act did not apply to those who recovered from their sickness, and these people who neglected their subscriptions during their time were under obligation to repay or risk excommunication from the association.[208] It is not clear how often

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[203] Ibid. 103.

[204] Tony Overing requested Biers to be made for the deceased in 1791, Ibid, 77.

[205] Duchess was a well-known baker whose husband John Quamino was an active member in the FAUS. While she was inducted into the Pall and Biers Union Society sometime around 1792, it is unclear what her occupation consisted of. In the FAUS meeting documents, she is referred to as Dutchess Quammany, Ibid, 94.

[206] Ibid, 119.

[207] Ibid. 131.

[208] Ibid. 116.

either of these situations occurred, but the act was indicative of how the FAUS regulated forms of financial relief for the living and dead.

Related to the organization burials, the FAUS intended to expand their level of operations. An effort was made to have organization members record the births, marriages, and deaths of all Rhode Island Blacks. This aim seemed to have been inspired by the suggestions of state senator Theodore Foster, who released a statement in January addressed to various notable free Black organizations in America that put forward this proposition.[209] Shortly following the address, the FAUS purchased three ledger books for such vital statistics; one for births, one for deaths and one for marriages.[210] The title of the first ledger reads "The Records, For Births. Purchased by the Members of the African Union Society, In Newport Rhode Island For the Benefit of Free Africans and Other Free People of Color Within the same, and AdJoining Towns Who Shall Come and Bring the Ust One Half the Feeds For Recording [illegible] Union Society & Other For Recording December Twelve MDCCLXXXXVI."[211] However, for unknown reasons, little evidence of statewide tallying of births, deaths, and marriages exist in either the ledgers or the meeting proceeding documents. According to Robinson, a few members listed the births of their own children such as Newport Gardner, Charles Chaloner Sr. and Chaloer Jr. In an April 1789 roster of membership names, some death dates of deceased members (along with their names) were included. No marriages were ever tallied.[212]

The FAUS also had prospects to invest in real estate and community institutions. At a meeting held in early 1791, the committee recommended the organization to set up a free African school "for the Advancement of Instruction of the poor, distressed, despised and outcast

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[209] Ibid. 145-146.
[210] Ibid. 147.
[211] Ibid. xi.
[212] Ibid. xi.

Africans" in Newport.[213] Since the early known years of the organization's history, its leaders highly valued education, as most received education themselves. Bristol Yamma, a messenger for the FAUS, was instructed under Hopkins in the 1770s, and in 1774 was sent along with another African named John Quamino to enroll at the College of New Jersey (modern day Princeton), making both the first Blacks to attend an American college.[214] The value was less because education was significant in of itself, and more related to the fact that representatives were keenly aware of how few Blacks were given access to schooling due to slavery. It was because of abject slavery they assured that a majority of Blacks were "sunk down in ignorance, stupidity and vice" and forced to live in terrible social and economic conditions.[215] As was believed by members of the Philadelphia Free African Society as well, independent schools specifically for Black children and adults were seen as a solution to the socioeconomic displacement the Black community were subsumed under. The state would make no effort in considering funding for a public education system for Blacks until after the passage of the Rhode Island Schools Act in 1828. While eighteenth century white sympathizers Samual Hopkins and Sarah Osborn offered schooling opportunities for nearby Blacks, their capacity was quite limited.[216] However, proposals for an African school were never brought up again for the remainder of the organization's lifetime. It would take until the arrival of the African Benevolent Society in the early nineteenth century for one to be established.

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[213] Ibid. 74.

[214] Bamberg, Cherry Fletcher. "Bristol Yamma and John Quamine in Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 73 (Winter/Spring 2015): 5-31

[215] Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 25.

[216] Kujawa, Sheryl A. "'The Path of Duty Plain': Samuel Hopkins, Sarah Osborn and Revolutionary Newport," Rhode Island History 58, no. 3 (2000): 75– 89;

The lack of success from the FAUS in constructing a school can probably also be said for

their attempts at purchasing real estate. Charles A. Battle suggests that the organization

emphasized the acquisition of property.[217] He states members pooled financial resources to

facilitate the purchase of houses, most likely ones located in or around Newport Black enclave

neighborhoods. However, the validity of this statement is complicated by the lack of

documentation. Several Black owned houses and businesses were built and purchased in the

Levin/William/Thomas Street neighborhood by the 1810s, possibly involving people that

supported the organization at some capacity. Richard C. Youngkin mentions that the Rice family,

who built their home in the Black neighborhood circa 1815, had Isaac Rice who became one of

Newport's early Black entrepreneurs running a catering business, and involved himself with

local free Black American social organizations including the FAUS and the African Benevolent

Society.[218] Discussions of house purchases or home construction were never mentioned in the

FAUS meeting documents. A few disputes between members over real estate and personal

holdings are the only moments in which real estate is referred. One such dispute took place in

1792, when the committee discussed the Newport property of former vice president Kingston

Pease, whether the land should be given to its owner Cupit Brown, be in possession of the

organization, or continue to be rented by Pease after he moved to New York.[219] Another

involved John Robinson in March 1793, who offered to trade some of his estate (worth 90

dollars silver) for money from the Treasury, which the organization declined citing the value to

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[217] Battle, *Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island*, 17.

[218] Youngken, *African Americans In Newport*, 24. Isacc Rice became a prominent member of the African Abolition Society starting in 1809, Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 157.

[219] Ibid, 39-40.

be unsatisfactory.[220] No houses or buildings during this time were said to have been constructed or acquired by the FAUS directly.

Transitioning into Black social stability, the FAUS lectured its members repeatedly on the importance of displaying acts of righteous conduct, usually through Christian imagery. This of course stemmed from Black experiences in Rhode Island Congregational churches, even though such institutions were segregated with Blacks being placed in separate pews, rarely able to properly participate with white churchgoers. It is believed that several leaders of the FAUS attended the First Congregational Church before the establishment of the organization, where they were preached by Hopkins and taught the notion of God and divine providence. According to Hopkins, the Blacks who attended these services "behave[d] so well, that the whites who are present (for they are not excluded) can't but speak in their favor."[221] While these leaders had years' worth of familiarity with traditional understandings of Christianity, as explained in the previous chapter, Blacks reformulated the religion to appeal specifically to their specific desires for escape, freedom, and hope for societal change. When calls for individual redemption and moral goodness came about, it was related to racial activism, for the benefit of the community as a whole rather than serving a plain-styled message.

Moral disciplines were a means to lift members of the FAUS out of the despondency most Blacks were forced to contend with. In early meeting documents, notions of Christian values were not expressed much, and instead God was used consistently as a symbol for mercy and hope for the success of their organizational activities. Beginning in the 1790s, maintaining a moral character became imperative for members. In the funeral regulations of 1790, representatives were told to "be sober, be vigilant because your adversary, the Devil, is a roaring

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[220] Ibid, 106.
[221] Samuel Hopkins, *The Works of Samuel Hopkins, D.D. ...* (Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1852), 166.

lion walking about seeking whom he may devour."[222] All members were expected to be respectful and civil, not to beget habits of idleness and vice, and present themselves as rational, good moral citizens.[223] It is possible that these calls for Black moral uplift amplified after the FAUS came into contact with the Philadelphia Free African Society in 1789, who wrote the organization letters expressing their dissatisfaction with "the superfluidity of naughtiness, especially gaming and feasting," hoping that Blacks have "a good understanding by forsaking our foolish practices."[224] FAUS leaders may have been inspired by FAS standards of proper behavior, incorporating them into their cultural attitudes. For as long as Blacks continued to remain in Rhode Island, it was deemed efficient for the community to present themselves in a respectable fashion in order to refute the white created criticisms against them. However, in its early years at least, FAUS members did not expect to stay in the American mainland very long.

The FAUS is most remembered for its attempts towards resettlement in West Africa. It is the one characteristic that distinguishes the organization from Black voluntary associations established before and after. In the late eighteenth century, perceptions of Africa among the Black community were divisive. Some maintained pride in their ancestry, expressed through their continued use of their African names or the names of their associations. Others were more conflicted about their heritage, presumably mostly American born Blacks. Since many Blacks by this time were Christians, they believed that Africa and all of its inhabitants represented heathenism and immorality. Black Christians, it was assumed, were chosen people destined to raise Africans from the crutches of evil.[225] These criticisms were echoed in an open letter written

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[222] Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 62.

[223] This was also suggested to them by Theodore Foster in his January 1796 letter. Ibid. 146.

[224] Ibid. 29.

[225] Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 115.

by an FAUS member to Black residents in Providence, which stated "the Nations in Affrica, from who we spring, being in heathenish darkness and sunk down in barbarity, and are and have been for many years, many of them, so foolish and wicked as to sell one another into slavery, by which means many millions have either lost their lives or been transported to a Land of Slavery."[226] It was a belief that spread across northern America. In spite of these sentiments, FAUS leaders, most of whom were African born, felt repatriation to be the best solution for relieving the Rhode Island Black community from further misery, disenfranchisement, and the disadvantages of racism in America.

The FAUS first sought the assistance of white supporters of African colonization. Members attempted in early 1787 to contact architect, inventor, and humanitarian William Thornton. Thornton had championed African colonization since 1786, as he was an advent follower of the anti-slavery movement, and desired to alleviate his guilt for the large number of Blacks enslaved.[227] He was also fully aware of the scheme set forth by British abolitionist Grandville Sharp to create a free Black province near the Sierra Leone River in 1787. Shortly before receiving the FAUS letter, Thornton made plans to settle around seventy to eighty enslaved Blacks held by his family in the Caribbean island of Tortola (where he lived for a time) to Sierra Leone.[228] The arrangement was ultimately unsuccessful, but it generated enough confidence for Thornton to talk over crowds of Blacks in New England to claim that "two thousand freedmen were ready to follow him to West Africa."[229] Certainly, Rhode Island Blacks caught wind of his

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[226] Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 25.

[227] He was especially concerned over the 70 slaves owned by his mother, Elinor Stearns and David N. Yerkes, *William Thornton: A Renaissance Man in the Federal City* (American Institute of Architects Foundation, 1976), 9.

[228] Hunt, Gaillard. *William Thornton and Negro Colonization*. The Society, 1921, 40.

[229] Brooks, George E. "The Providence African Society's Sierra Leone Emigration Scheme, 1794– 1795: Prologue to The African Colonization Movement," International Journal of African Historical Studies 7, no. 2 (1974), 187.

arrival and promises, and felt some sense of rejoice. The letter from the FAUS to Thornton was written with enthusiasm that Thornton would help Blacks in planning a method for the organization members to settle in the independent area.[230]

FAUS members and Thornton however had different intentions for African colonization. The FAUS intended to resettle in West Africa mostly on their own terms, without having to rely solely on white institutions or individuals. In the letter addressed to Thornton, it clarifies early that the organization, despite having strong urges to emigrate, lacked the finances to do so.[231] What the FAUS longed for the most from Thornton was information regarding the means Blacks can possess Sierra Leone, and the proper funding needed to successfully arrive at the province. Members used their connection to hopefully influence Thornton to smooth travel to West Africa but had no interest in white African colonial advocates controlling their independence. Black desired to handle their own futures. By contrast, Thornton's plans for Black independence involved more paternalistic ideas. He felt Blacks needed the protection of those applicable to save them from their perceived helplessness. While planning to send the Tortola enslaved Blacks to Sierra Leone, he intended to both grant land and have them purchase land from him, hoping "to arouse in them habits of independence."[232] While this was not what Thornton told the FAUS in his written response to them, members caught on his implication that he, as well as other organizations, would scout for possible settlements in Africa. FAUS member Samuel Stevens was fervently opposed to this idea stating, "We do not approve of Mr. Thornton's going to settle a place for us; we think it would be better if we could charter a Vessel, and send some of our

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[230] Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 16.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Gaillard. *William Thornton and Negro Colonization*. 40.

own Blacks."[233] Although the organization continued to respect Thornton for his endeavors, he was ultimately not the answer to their push for repatriation.

The FAUS received several letters of emotional support from white African colonization advocates but continued to fail in acquiring the needed resources to travel. As the organization persevered, an opportunity did open up. In 1794, the organization petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly to give members permission to settle in Sierra Leone. They asked for the appointment of Newport Gardner and FAUS officer James Mckenzie to obtain information about the settlement and represent the organization.[234] For whatever reason, only Mckenzie boarded the ship in late 1794 while Gardner stayed behind. After arriving safely in Africa on the *Charlotte* ship in January 1795, McKenzie sent a letter entrusted by the FAUS to the Sierra Leone Board of Department. The letter requested the council to hear any transitions, bargains and "agree to anything Respect[in]g our Emigrations," so as to reach an agreement satisfying for the organization and not negatively affect the desired settlement.[235] In response, the council announced that while the land was not free for the taking, they would allow up to twelve families to enter.

This decision came not without stipulations. The heads of these families were required to obtain recommendations displaying their moral character, and present themselves as honest, sober and respectful to industry. They were also expected to consent to the laws of the colony and pay one shilling annually. Finally, travelers were supposed to pay for their own mode of transportation, thus absolving the colony of any travel expenses.[236] These conditions, however,

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[233] Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 18.
[234] Ibid. 124-125.
[235] Letter cited from Brooks, *The Providence African Society's Sierra Leone Emigration Scheme*, 1794-1795, 196.
[236] Ibid, 196-197.

did not fall in the hands of the FAUS, but rather Samuel Hopkins, who was told in the response to vouch for potential Black appointed volunteers. Hopkins had been acquainted with the Sierra Leone project for years prior, but the decision came from the fact that the Board of Directors were all white men who expected other white abolitionists and humanitarians to lead colonization. The FAUS realized that the repatriation project was entirely controlled and governed by white leaders, offering no room for Blacks to take the helm.[237]

Even more unfortunate was that Hopkins, despite supporting African colonization and discussing the matter with the FAUS on occasion, rejected the emigration effort outright.[238] No direct reason was given by him, but the possible basis may have been related to his annoyance of not being fully involved in the negotiation process. Before the Sierra Leone project, Hopkins in the 1770s planned for a few Blacks that studied under him to travel to West Africa and teach Christianity to a mass of Africans. He intended for Bristol Yamma and John Quamine to be such subjects after their time at the College of New Jersey, and he hoped for Christianity to spread in its influence.[239] Essentially, he practiced acts of white patronage similar to Thornton, and may have desired to keep himself in control of Black resettlements regardless of what the organization wanted. Once he refused to vouch for the FAUS, the plan for emigration fell apart completely.

The FAUS were unlikely to receive support from other Rhode Island Blacks or communities in other states. There was lack of uninterest from other Black organizations in supporting African colonization. The FAUS appealed to the Philadelphia Free African Society about the endeavor in September 1789 to join them in preparing, only to receive an immediate decline. Their response

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[237] Ibid. 197.

[238] Irene Burnham et al., *Creative Survival: The Providence Black Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Providence: RIBHS, 1985), 30– 36;

[239] Brooks, *Providence*, 187.

letter stated that FAS members had "little to communicate on the head," and asked for the FAUS to "let us, as with the heart of one man, continue daily in fasting from sin and Iniquity, and the corrupt conversation of the world, that the Lord thereby may be pleased to break every yoke and let the oppressed go free."[240] It should be remembered that FAS representatives were not only viscerally dedicated to socially and economically supporting Blacks in America, but most were born in America with no real connection to Africa outside of their heritage unlike the FAUS. According to their response, the FAS has faith that slavery and racial inequality would eventually dissipate for as long as the Black community progressed with their activism. They encouraged each other to withstand any mishaps, and as Black Christians felt the community would be sufficient in "raising up many to promote this peaceable Kingdom, with no other weapons than that of giving glory to God."[241]

African colonization was, and continued to be, a controversial topic for many Blacks. Many felt the idea of colonization was wrong and irresponsible to abandon their community for their own self-interests, while others believed colonization to be unnecessary. Several saw the action as racist and an effort towards further Black displacement and white supremacy, and as such refused to leave. Meanwhile, subscribers of colonization were more likely to claim that Blacks would never achieve freedom, social, economic, and political equality or representation, and would only grow more miserable the longer their stay in a country that only demonizes them. Numerous times did the FAUS express this idea, both to announce their genuine feeling, but also as a strategy in promoting a presumed common feeling among Blacks.[242]

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[240] Robinson, *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824*, 30.
[241] Robinson, 30.
[242] Such a strategy was used in their letter to Black residents in Providence. Ibid. 19-20.

Ultimately, FAUS attempts at African colonization came to an end in 1797, the year the organization dissolved. Despite the outcome, their efforts in repatriation hold much significance in terms of the overall aims of the organization. Black leaders aspired to locate land separated from the systematic oppression practiced in American society. Newport Black neighborhoods, though they may not have been seen by some as permanent settlements, were envisioned as cultural landscapes for Blacks to prosper and live independent lives. In developing plans to leave toward a theoretically independent colony, Blacks sought to not only escape disenfranchisement, but also practice their freedom without interference. With the opportunity of repatriation over, Black organization members decided to dedicate their time continuing to lift the African community where they stand despite difficulties. Though the FAUS was no more, former members refused to give up institution building, increasingly committed to the Black uprising.

Over a decade after the FAUS ceased operations, several Newport Rhode Island Blacks decided to resume desired civic and educational plans with the African Benevolent Society, officially established on January 1st, 1808.[243] The ABS was most likely a redesign of the FAUS. The biggest piece of evidence to support this is the fact some of its known members were either former representatives of the FAUS or affiliated with them. Arthur Flagg Jr. became president of the ABS from its founding to 1810, and his involvement was most likely inspired by his father who had been staunchly active in the FAUS, serving as judge and treasurer for the duration of the organization. Previous FAUS member Newport Gardner was one of the most prominent socially and politically involved Black leaders in Rhode Island by the early nineteenth century, having experienced being an ordained deacon of the First Congregational Church, a composer of

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[243] A meeting was held two weeks earlier, but January 1st, 1808, is when the name African Abolition Society was first used, and when an official constitution was ratified. Ibid. 153-155.

music, and becoming the headmaster of an independent school for singing.[244] In fact, Gardner most likely led the push for a new Black voluntary association after the dissolution of the FAUS, evidence by the fact that the first ABS gathering conducted on December 21st, 1807 took place in his house.[245] Additionally, Charles Battle reported that remaining assets from the FAUS treasury were transferred over to the ABS shortly after its founding.[246] Participants of this new organization ensured that it was well equipped with years' worth of previous institution building knowledge.

That said, the influences from the FAUS did not limit the ABS to becoming a complete reflection of the former organization. The ABS came with several different characteristics. For one, customs concerning membership subscriptions had changed. At first, all representatives were expected to pay an annual fee of fifty cents. By 1810, however, the organization had revised its rules by extending its membership to "all that are willing to promote the means of education for the African Race."[247] No longer was there an annual fee all members were required to follow, although it was highly recommended that money be offered to the treasury whenever possible. The other intended effect of this decision may have been related to the white members that joined the ABS, another distinguishing feature. Reverend William Patten, a minister of the Second Congregational Church and white abolitionist, was positioned as manager of the ABS treasury and one of its main leaders.[248] It was written in the organization Constitution that seven people were to fill the Directors Board, with four of the chairs offered to white patrons. Similarly, six members were elected to conduct business transitions, two of which were held by

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[244] "Newport Gardner (1746-1826)."
[245] Battle, Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island, 18.
[246] Ibid, 19.
[247] Robinson, 169-171.
[248] Ibid. 159.

whites.[249] With the downfall of the FAUS and plans for African colonization eradicated, early

nineteenth century Blacks must have felt that assistance from whites was unavoidable. By

enacting this decision, it opened the doors for people of any race (whites in particular) to

participate in the organization. However, like the FAUS and their repatriation efforts, the ABS

aspired for their autonomy in organization commitments to be maintained even with help from

white allies. Therefore, the Constitution boldly states that all decisions demanded the approval

from all Black representatives.[250] The ABS may have relinquished in enforcing racial restriction,

but these compromises acted as carefully planted fixtures for the organization to hold onto its

status as a Black independent institution.

The design of the ABS was especially important, as its Black members had been eager to

embark on its greatest objective yet. In the 1807 assembly, attendees conversed over building

and conducting a school for Black children, a project that constituted the primary aims of the

ABS: Black community elevation and the push for an private education system.[251] In just three

months, the ABS managed to pool enough money from the treasury to purchase an abandoned

Schoolhouse located on School Street (near the Newport Black neighborhoods), refurbish the

building into a recognizable school, and have it finished around March of 1808.[252] It was the first

official Black owned school established in Rhode Island, and one of the first in all of America.

The organization insisted for its presence and ideals to be well known to all inhabitants, as

evidenced by a notice printed in a Newport Mercury newspaper from 1808. The notice

advertised the school as free education readily available for all Blacks, and called for both Black

and white residents to "encourage the attendance of the Africans under their care, who need

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[249] Ibid. 154.
[250] Ibid. 154-162.
[251] Ibid. 153; Battle, *Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island,* 18.
[252] Battle, *Negroes*, 19. Plans for refurbishments may have undergone beforehand.

instruction."[253] It would take until October for the school to be approved for operation, which by that time seventy eight children had been registered as students.[254] Soon afterwards, the organization sought to bring in a wider audience into the building, not just children. While initially the school held morning and evening sessions, financial struggles led the department to only have evening classes just a year after opening. This circumstance did not phase the ABS however, as they felt evening classes were preferable as it allowed adult attendance.

Support and financial backing for the school was the responsibility of the ABS, but another Black mutual aid community did come along to lend their hands in keeping the building intact. The African Female Benevolent Society, a mutual aid organization led by Newport's African women, was established in 1809. Its two known leaders were Black poet Sarah Lyna and former slave Obour Tanner, people who probably highly admired the value education and literacy could bring for Black women and others in the Black community. Tanner specifically may have been inspired by Phillis Wheatley, the Black female poetry writer from Boston often labeled the first African author whom Tanner befriended.[255] Records from the ABS state that the AFBS had begun their own private school for Blacks years before the ABS (sometime in 1808) that taught twenty five to thirty people, but seemed to have ended soon after its initial run.[256] It is possible that the AFBS school merged with the ABS school at some point, probably in 1810.[257] The numerous appearances of the AFBS in the ABS proceeding meeting records indicate the level of respect that was held for the female organization. They periodically traded letters back and forth,

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[253] Newport Mercury Newspaper, March 25th, 1808.
[254] Robinson, 159-162.
[255] Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21, 91, 100.
[256] Robinson, 163.
[257] Stockwell, Thomas B. *A History of Public Education in Rhode Island, 1636 to 1876* (Providence, RI: Providence Press, 1876), 30.

and the AFBS donated relatively high sums of money to help the school. No evidence proves that members of the AFBS took part in voting or decisions related to the school, as was part of the course of all male led organizations, but their dedication to the school speaks volumes, nonetheless.

Unfortunately, the AFBS and their support could only hold the school together for so long. Continuous financial and staffing trouble plagued attempts to keep the building operable. Business was in effect sporadically, only opening every few months. By 1813, the school closed until further notice due to delinquent membership payments and insufficient funding. For years after, the ABS repeatedly lamented over their inability to reopen the school, stating it reflected their own "unfaithfulness and inattention."[258] In 1819, the organization had so little in their treasury and left the school enclosed for so long that they felt it to be best to financially support children already attending other private institutions in Rhode Island. That year, thirty-two children were allotted money to enter other schools.[259]

Finding and hiring instructors for the ABS school was also particularly difficult. Newport Gardner, Arthur Flagg Jr. and a woman (possibly white) named Mary Davis were among its first teachers, though their duties only lasted between a few months and one year.[260] The ABS preferred to bring in Black women into the program, as the impression of Black female teachers fell firmly within the social uplift ideology promoted by the organization. Realizing the low chances of finding Black women teachers in Rhode Island, Black leaders, as a means of compromising, procured Black men and white women as its main instructors.[261] The ABS were reluctant to hire white males, as evidenced by a meeting held in early 1812 where the

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[258] Robinson, 182.
[259] Ibid. 186.
[260] Ibid. xii.
[261] Ibid. 160.

organization disapproved of the idea of a white man serving as instructor, approving for a male person of color to be hired instead.[262]

One last offer of support was given for the school despite only lasting for a brief time. The ABS negotiated with the Quaker Society of Friends sometime in the early 1820s to assist in donating money to the institution. Their communication with Quakers may point to another reason as to why white sympathizers were given positions in the ABS, in order to increase the chance of having reachable contact with white abolitionist organizations. Their request was successful, as soon after the Society donated enough funds for the organization to feel comfortable in reopening the school in early 1822 and operate at a lower budget than the previous year. At one time, the Quakers allotted eighteen dollars, which the organization appreciated and felt was more than expected.[263] Such fortune however only lasted two years, as the school and the ABS dissolved completely in 1824.

Both the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society ended for similar reasons. Many of its members believed in the cause for community building and mutual relief for poor Blacks families and individuals in need, but a large number did not or could pay their required membership fees or donate much to the organization treasury. Any and all construction and property acquisition efforts were made difficult by this situation, and it was unlikely either group would see voluntary help from outside Black or white residents. Newport by the nineteenth century had not been the bustling economic location it was before the Revolutionary War, which destroyed the city's economic wealth and trade centers since the 1780s.[264] During this time, both the white and Black Newport population fell at swift rates, with many transferring

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[262] Ibid. 176.
[263] Ibid. 191.
[264] Withey, Lynne. *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island: Newport and Providence in the Eighteenth Century* (SUNY Press, 1984), 79–89.

over to Providence to take advantage of its growing economic opportunities. Even when Newport began its slow recovery shortly before the antebellum period, the value and growth rate of the Black population remained less than that of Providence.

Yet, the success and failures of both organizations highlight the tenacity each had in supporting the Black Rhode Island community. Financial struggles or membership issues did not deter the FAUS or the ABS from attempting to develop its institutions. Certainly, its leaders continued to preserve. Newport Gardner led the charge in bringing Black and white supporters together to establish the Union Colored Congregational Church in 1824, the first chartered Black independent church in Newport.[265] Several years earlier in 1819, the prospects of the organization inspired the construction of the African Union Meeting House in Providence, which also served as a private school for Blacks.[266] The Black communities in Newport and Providence went on to flourish in their neighborhoods during and especially after the dissolution of both organizations. Artisans, skilled workers, working class laborers' proprietors and Black owned homes and businesses continued to fill the spaces of William/Levin Street in Newport throughout the century. Predominantly Blacks districts in Providence such as Hard Scrabble and Snow Town had gatherings of people ready to further themselves socially and economically as well.[267] These cultural landscapes, as significant as they are, owe their formation to the ideas, efforts, and accomplishments of Rhode Island Black voluntary associations and their leaders.

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[265] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, Third edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 68–70.

[266] Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 60.

[267] Youngken, 24.

CHAPTER 3

MANHATTAN BLACKS: THE NEW YORK AFRICAN SOCIETY FOR MUTUAL RELIEF

In September 1825, two Black men Andrew Williams and Epiphany Davis purchased several acres of land in the sparsely populated northern outpost of Manhattan New York from landowning couple John and Elizabeth Whitehead. Williams purchased three lots for $125 while Davis paid $528 for twelve lots. Both men were affiliates of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, a local Black independent church established in 1800 and an institution that would go on to purchase six acres of land from the couple the same week. More families of African heritage began to arrive in the area over the next several years to acquire pieces of land, and by 1832 the Whiteheads had sold portions of their land to about two dozen families. Thus, a predominately Black settlement was born, attracting members of both the laboring and middle class alike, and approximately ten houses were constructed by the early 1830s. The borough developed into a thriving Black American community over the next several decades, amassing fifty homes, three churches, and at least one school for children of color. While no name for the settlement was offered by any of its residents, modern historians have referred to this land as Seneca Village.[268]

It has only been in recent years that Seneca Village has not only been properly identified but used as a source of research amongst scholars of urban history and archeologists. For the longest

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[268] For more in-depth studies on Seneca Village, see Rosenzweig, Roy. *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1992), 65–89; Wilder, Craig Steven. *In The Company Of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (NYU Press, 2001), 101–2; Alexander, Leslie M. *African or American? : Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2008), 154–73.

time, the history of the landscape received no recognition, its history forgotten both due to the absence of notable evidence of its existence and the lack of interest from academics. Since its rediscovery in the 1990s however, historians and land preservationists have done their due diligence in working to keep the memory of Seneca Village above the surface for any and all.[269] Yet, so much of its history has yet to be written, including one important aspect that most have yet to acknowledge. Several of the citizens who resided in Seneca were members and affiliates of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, the Black independent voluntary association of Manhattan.

Of the voluntary associations discussed so far, the New York African Society for Mutual Relief was the most successful Black organization of early national America. As will be delineated in this chapter, the organization represented the general characteristics of independent Black mutual aid organizations, from their regulations, ideas, activities, and interests. The Society dedicated itself toward supporting its members and Black New York residents in need, to enrich and uplift the community, and construct a space for individual autonomy. Compared to preceding voluntary associations however, the NYASMR lasted over a century, owned two pieces of real estate occupied by multiple families by the early twentieth century, became the first incorporated Black organization in America, and had connections to the Black cultural landscape that was Seneca Village. The organization above all else is one of the most significant symbols of Black American institutionalism of the pre-Civil war period.

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[269] August of 1871 marked the first-time remnants of Seneca Village were unearthed, as landscapers working on the West side of Central Park discovered two coffins with corpses of African Americans inside of each. Interest in Seneca Village achieved popularity after Roy Rozenburg and Elizabeth Blackmar released The Park and the People: A History of Central Park in 1992.

The push for Black institution building in New York has its beginnings immediately after the American Revolution, under lessening but still strict social conditions. Sometime around the early 1780s, a group of highly educated free Blacks with backgrounds in political activism and diverse occupations came together to form the New York African Society. Little is known in regard to the organization's earliest endeavors. Archivists have only been able to identify one of their proceeding meeting records, that being from 1786 when enslaved African poet and preacher from Long Island Jupiter Hammon was invited to present a lecture.[270] What can be gleaned is that meetings were kept confidential, shrouded from the public eye as a means to bypass slave related legislations that outlawed enslaved and freed Blacks from holding public gatherings. Seemingly, the clandestine nature of the NYAF was probably true for other Black organizations in New York held around the time of their establishment, in an attempt to ensure their survival. In fact, it is possible these NYAF meetings took place even earlier, relying on community networks and covert gatherings to operate. Later vice president of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief Walter K. Beekman in 1946 adds to this statement by saying: "How many secret meetings and conferences were held, the place and time of these meetings are questions that cannot be answered ... for it must be remembered that there were positive restrictions against meeting in large numbers, and even in religious matters they were subjected to the spy system."[271]

Most of the members involved with the NYAF have not been identified, but it is assumed they had affiliations with Methodism and worshiped at the John Street Methodist Episcopal

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[270] Recent scholarship has considered the date of Jupiter Hammond's invitation to speak at the New York African Society to be September 24th, 1786. Although some historians such as Craig Steven Wilder and Leslie M. Alexander claims it took place sometime in 1784.

[271] Beekman, Walter N. *Address by Walter N. Beekman, vice president, New York African Society for Mutual Relief* (Brooklyn: n.p., 1946), 2.

Church prior to forming. The facility had attracted a small number of free and enslaved Blacks since its opening in 1766, and though predominantly white and fostering typical forms of racial segregation, the church for many Blacks was the most welcoming religious institution in the city. At least before the 1790s, racial restrictions in the John Street Church were slightly more lenient compared to others. Manhattan Blacks were expected to offer their services in the form of labor — whether it be cooking, cleaning, or performing the role of a sexton — and were banned from praying with white worshippers, but they were allowed to sit alongside white members during religious services.[272]

The social environment was also open enough for enslaved and free Blacks to register as ministers. The first of which being James Varick, who had been a member since 1766 and appointed to lead class meetings soon after.[273] Peter Williams, though never a preacher, was also a significant church participant, a converted Methodist serving as its main Undertaker while enslaved since before 1778, then purchased from his owner by the John Street Church Society in 1783. In return, Williams promised to repay the church trustees for the emancipation expenses, which he fulfilled in 1785, the year of his emancipation (although he would not receive official documented confirmation until 1796).[274] It was likely these two men who were among the Black Americans responsible for forming the NYAS. Black church goers began to involve themselves in meetings separate from white services around the 1780s, as they realized the parallels between Methodist sociology and African traditions of spiritual expression and its potential to construct a powerful model for community organizing. These meetings were most likely led by Varick along

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[272] Moore, John Jamison. *History of the A. M. E. Zion Church in America: Founded in 1796, in the City of New York* (Chapel Hill, NC, York, Pa: Ibiblio Teachers' Journal Off, 1884), 15.

[273] Wheeler, Benjamin Franklin. *The Varick Family* (Ala.,1907), 11; William Jacob Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church;: Reality of the Black Church,* (A.M.E. Zion Pub. House, 1974), 86,

[274] Wakeley, Joseph Beaumont. *Lost Chapters Recovered from the Early History of American Methodism* (New-York: Pub. for the author by Carlton & Porter, 1858), 438–44.

with other black speakers, which inadvertently made the John Street Church a viable institution for the development of black leadership.[275] Historians have suggested that Williams was one of the founders of the NYAS, as these Black church meetings may have discussed voluntary association related prospects that benefited the community.

The political activism background of these members during the earliest years of the NYAS are difficult to determine, as no records of theirs have been preserved. Considering the main goal of the organization was to provide religious and economic support, it is safe to assume that all were quite conscious of the social issues people within the New York Black community were subjected to. New York would not pass their Gradual Emancipation Act until 1799, making it the latest state of the northern region to do so. Yet the growth of free blacks had already begun to take charge soon after the conclusion to the Revolutionary War. Many of them were escapees who joined the British army who promised them freedom if they left their masters, and were taken to resettle in Nova Scotia, while others were manumitted by slave owners either affected by the liberation rhetoric of the Revolutionary era or interested in relieving themselves of further financial responsibility for them.[276]

It is unclear how many Blacks were emancipated in the 1780s, but the effects of manumission were felt more strongly in the 1790s, where the state census counted over four thousand free Black residents in the state, probably a slight increase from the previous decade. Yet until 1799, guarantee for the eventual complete abolition of slavery in New York was not anticipated among the Black community. The first noticeable decline of enslaved Blacks was in the 1790s, but that phenomenon is attributed to the growth of free Blacks rather than the dissolution of slavery. In fact, during this decade, New York saw a twenty three percent increase in total slaves, having

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[275] Moore, *History of the A. M. E. Zion Church in America,* 16; Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men*, 44–46.
[276] Hirsch, Leo H. "The Slave in New York." *The Journal of Negro History* 16, no. 4 (1931): 383–414.

one of the heaviest concentrations of slaves and slaveholders in the northern region during this time.[277] Free black New York leaders were acutely aware of contradictions between the continuation of slavery and newfound expressions of liberty and equality, with some directly addressing their grievances toward state officials. William Hamilton, member of John Street Church and future president of the NYASMR, composed a letter to state governor John Jay lamenting over the "miserable misfortunes" enslaved Blacks are forces to endure, citing the paradoxical nature of promoting America as the "land of liberty & equality…when almost every part of it abounds with slavery & oppression," and pleading those in power to take measures in eradicating the "scandal of this country," and provide security for poor blacks in need.[278]

The plea from William and by extension the NYAS was also on behalf of the free Black community. John Street Church may have been the central station for public free community life, but it was not enough to escape the boundaries bought by poverty, discrimination, and political inequality. Some newly freed blacks in rural areas where slavery was potent such as Richmond and King County settled there and became leaders of their own household, but only six free Black households across both counties were counted in the 1790 state consensus.[279] Most were limited to residing in white households, typically those of their previous owners either employed in domestic work or contracted as an indentured servant, many times under greater restraints than before they were enslaved. The case was similar for the hundreds of free Blacks who migrated to the city, despite intentions to break away from constrictive slave dependent regions and find

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[277] White, Shane. "'We Dwell in Safety and Pursue Our Honest Callings': Free Blacks in New York City, 1783-1810." *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (1988): 448. For more on slavery in New York, see Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent : The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens : University of Georgia Press, 1991), 10–66.

[278] William Hamilton to John Jay, March 8, 1796, reproduced in Frank Monaghan, "Antislavery Papers of John Jay," The Journal of Negro History 17 (October 1932), 491- 93.

[279] Statistics derived from Shane "We Dwell in Safety and Pursue Our Honest Callings," 449.

available work for social and economic uplift with relative anonymity. One third of Manhattan's 3,100 Black population total in 1790 were free, with many who were successful in finding housing choosing to inhabit property near the John Street church.[280] The reason for this was not due to residential restrictions caused by racial zoning laws, as such regulation would not come to pass until the mid-nineteenth century.

Interestingly, according to archeologists, Black households were distributed throughout the city rather than isolated in ethnic enclaves. The low level of residential segregation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is what allowed Manhattan neighborhoods to initially have racial diversity in their population.[281] However, the class segregation of city neighborhoods meant most free Blacks were relegated to purchasing (or more likely renting) property in emerging working class wards, including the area north of John Street which had marshy, ill drained low lying land filled with industrial activities and surrounded by terrible odors. By the 1830's, this district would be classified by white residents and news outlets as 'Five Points', and become notorious for its poor population, proclivity for crime and riots, and overcrowded dwellings.[282]

With social, political and economic obstacles having widespread effect, Black community leaders of the NYAS knew the daunting task of creating a social environment for an oppressed group to transition from slavery to freedom but finding clear and effective strategies to overcome these hurdles proved to be a struggling endeavor. Jupiter Hammond, the guest speaker of their early meeting in 1786, suggested moral improvement be the force that guides the Black cultural

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[280] Ibid, 451.
[281] Ibid, 461-62; Berlin, Ira. *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), 254-55; Curry, Leonard P. *The Free Black in Urban America 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (University of Chicago Pr, 1981), 54-55.
[282] Shane, 463-64.

legacy. Believing that bondspeople were in a "poor, despised and miserable" state, and concerned with the "ignorance and stupidity, and the great wickedness" of them, he stated that Blacks should focus less on their social status and more on achieving spiritual salvation by following a set of moral codes, some of which included obeying their master, not stealing, not being idle, cheating, or unfaithful, and abstaining from profanity.[283]

It should be noted that while his assessment of enslaved Blacks comes off as insulting and a specific form of demoralization towards them, his lecture fell within a standard model of 'Christian humility' where all people (including himself which he admits) were wretched, ignorant, and sinful under God. His demand for obedience from slave to master carried not a push for Blacks to please slave owners, but rather a means for the enslaved to protect themselves from harsh punishment and to become better Christians. Hammond was not a proslavery believer, nor did he ascribe to notions that Black lives were better under the thumb of slavery. Instead, he accepted the idea that enslaved and free people had more of a chance of finding happiness after death, an achievement only possible by committing to the Christian faith. Perhaps his proposal represented the tension some Blacks felt between civil and spiritual authority, feeling distrustful of civil institutions that sealed their fate and choosing to contend with the ensuing spiritual journey. More than likely however, his statements connected to his personal experiences and status as an older slave who understood absconding and rebellions but considered both tactics ineffective in ending the practice of slavery, accepting that security and unity through spiritualism reaped more rewards than individual physical freedom.[284]

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[283] Hammon, Jupiter, "An Address to the Negroes in the State of New-York" (1787), cited from Dorothy Porter Wesley, *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Black Classic Press, 1995).

[284] O'Neale, Sondra Ann. *Jupiter Hammon and the Biblical Beginnings of African-American Literature* (Metuchen, N.J. : Scarecrow Press ; [Philadelphia] : American Theological Library Association, 1993), 212–41.

Aspects of Hammond's address presumably held some merit for black New Yorkers. His lecture appreciated the humanity of Blacks, recognized the enslaved as more than property and implored them to search for safety measures via religious guidance. Though he deliberately did not offer assurance of physical freedom from bondage, he grasped the nuances of social and personal realities that determined the drive for individual freedom. His words, though wrapped in spiritual optimism, respected the community and envisioned a potential life in which Blacks found solace. His moral uplift philosophy would also eventually become a significant attribute for future New York voluntary associations.[285]

Nevertheless, the lessons provided by Hammond complicated a developing challenge. Black community leaders felt the need to transition away from the comforts of religion to a radical philosophy that could be used to empower the community. Hammond was useful for giving Blacks hope for possible social equality, but his address glossed over oppressive systemic structures and deep connections to African heritage that influenced Black American life during the colonial era. The goal for the NYAS was to be politically active and use racial solidarity and community building to speak out against the injustices surrounding them. In 1788, the African society caught wind of incidents where medical students began raiding cemeteries to acquire dead bodies for experimentation, including the remains of Black corpses. Many of these raids, according to Jules Calvin Ladenheim, took place in African burial grounds segregated at the outer corners of the city, although there were some robberies that took place in inner city graveyards.[286] Not many Black corpses were located there as Trinity Church, the institution that controlled Manhattan burial grounds, had banned burials of Blacks since the late seventeenth

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[285] Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men*, 64–72.
[286] Landenheim, Jules Calvin. *"The Doctors Mob" of 1788,* Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences, Winter 1950, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 1950), 25-29.

century. There was a clear stigma against Black bodies who according to the Daily Advertiser were not "permitted to remain in the grave," and robbers after performing bodily dissections had them disposed of "up along the docks [and] sewed up in bags."[287] To profess their concern, members of the Black community petitioned the New York Common Council to intervene and prevent the "common Practice" of burial violations, claiming

> "it hath lately been the constant Practice of a number of Young Gentlemen in this City who call themselves students of Physick to repair to the Burying Ground adjudged for the use of your Petitioners and under cover of the night and in the most wanton sallies of excess to dig up the bodies of the deceased Friends and relatives of your Petitioners, carry them away, and without respect to age or sex, mangle their flesh out of a Wanton curiosity and then expose it to the Beasts and Birds."[288]

What followed were a series of violent riots conducted by white residents agitated over new reports of graverobbing, specifically the larceny of "respectable" white corpses. As no information is available regarding the Common Council's response to the petition, these disturbances most likely caused a distraction. More focus was placed on quelling the riots which lasted for three days with little attention given to the Black community complaints.[289] Regardless, the necessity to acquire and protect the burials of Blacks had grown within the NYAS to a significant degree.

From here, the primary objective became to accumulate enough funds to purchase private property for an African cemetery, to preserve the sacred meaning given to Black burial grounds and to avoid any more desecration. Attempts were made soon after the petition, but the lack of sufficient financial resources due to poverty stymied such plans, leading members to resort to petitioning the city assistance. According to a Common Council meeting that took place in 1795, petitioners who referred to themselves as 'free people of color' signed by Issac Fortune and

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[287] Daily Advertiser, New York, February 23, 1788.
[288] Stokes, I. N. Phelps. *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, Vol. 6* (Robert H. Dodd, 1928), 46.
[289] For more on the mob, see Landenheim "The Doctors Mob" of 1788, 29-43

several others and were affiliated under the name of the African Society, stated to be an organization dedicated to moral improvement "by promoting a spirit of brotherly Love and a strict Regard to the Laws." The petition requested the authorization to purchase two lots of land located in the seventh ward of the city for the purpose of procuring the "internment of the People of Color."[290] The timing of this petition was particularly important, as just a year prior, Trinity Church announced the termination of the African burial grounds, and soon after platted the area for urban development. The cemetery was covered over a landfill and subdivided into different lots, and by the early nineteenth century would soon be neglected and forgotten until its rediscovery in the late twentieth century.[291] Pushes for the closure and urban development over and around these African burial grounds on the part of city officials represented the loss of a viable symbol of humanity and community for Blacks, which made petitioning for burial rights more integral.

In addition to burial rights, the petition also requested "a place for the creation of a building of divine worship."[292] Reflecting the desires among Black John Street church attendees, the NYAS intended for a plot of land to be used to build a church to carry out religious, social and political aims that would otherwise be difficult in white institutions. This decision coincided with rising tensions within the community, as the John Street church, which began to experience massive growth in popularity and members both the white and Black race in the 1790s, hardened their practice of racial segregation. Blacks were pressured to separate from whites by sitting in the back, and rules were put in place to prevent preachers of color from presenting sermons in

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[290] New York (N Y.) Common Council, *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831* (City of New York, 1917), vol 2, 158.

[291] For more on the New York African Burial Ground, see Andrea E. Frohne, *The African Burial Ground in New York City: Memory, Spirituality, and Space* (Syracuse University Press, 2015).

[292] *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York*, vol. 2, 158.

front of both black and white audiences. They were even barred from joining annual Methodist

Episcopal conferences as preachers.[293] Fed up with extensions of racial friction and black

proscription, Black church moderators manifested their independent community church meetings

into something active. In 1796, several black John Street church members — including William

Hamilton, John Varick and Peter Williams Sr. — split from the institution to establish their own,

one that guaranteed the self-sufficiency of Blacks and was divorced from prejudice. A separate

church house was built the same year on Cross Street, between Orange and Mulberry Streets on

the lot provided by the Common Council the previous year close to the estate purchased for a

private Black cemetery and became the principal NYAS meeting house and worship center for

Black Methodists for the remainder of the eighteenth century.[294]

By 1800, the urgency for Black institutions dedicated to community assistance grew

exponentially, especially since the passing of New York's 1799 Gradual Emancipation Law.

While the legislation declared children of enslaved mothers legally free after July 4th of that

year, freedom could only be given after men and women reached twenty-five and twenty-eight

years of age respectively, and those enslaved before the date were given no guarantee of

freedom. Movement towards abolition and racial equality for the state remained a slow and

unclear process. However, given that the law create a critical upsurge in free Blacks during the

early nineteenth century, potential for a successful independent voluntary association increased.

Though most NYAS leaders were presumably not satisfied with the emancipation law, it

motivated the organization to evolve from its usual method of private meetings in favor of

reaching out towards a larger audience. Through years' worth of promotion on the part of Black

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[293] Wheeler, *The Varick Family*, 6–7; Moore, *History of the A. M. E. Zion Church in America,* 16.
[294] Ibid. 16; Wilmore, Gayraud S. *Black Religion And Black Radicalism*, 1972, 116; Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men*, 44–49.

Methodists to members of the John Street Church, the preaching and exhorting meetings that took place at the Cross Street house proved to have a high audience turnout, enough for the community to raise enough money to snatch another private lot for the construction of a larger church.[295] They managed to acquire one on the corner of Church and Leonard street, and in late 1800 finished manufacturing the first independent African Church in New York, recognized by the state the following year as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.[296]

The Zion church poised itself to be the boldest attempt of racial self-determination committed by the Black community at that point in time. The articles of agreement of the Zion Church proudly addressed the institution (and activity in and around it) forever the sole property of "our African brethren and the descendants of the African race."[297] The founders were adamant in latching the institution with security measures in the event of potential disruption from other churches, and to illustrate the Black community as a unifying force, even going as far as to declare that "none but Africans or their descendants shall be chosen trustees of the said African Episcopal Zion Church, and such other church or churches, as may or shall hereafter become the property of this corporation, and none shall be eligible to the office of a trustee."[298] While the church maintained a union with the John Street church "in all ecclesiastical affairs and transactions," it was done with stipulations that temporal rights and property would remain governed under stewardship of its Black leaders without compromise or interference from outside authority.

An established separate religious meetinghouse intended to be free from typical social constraints had been accomplished. However, Black Methodists and the NYAS desired to

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[295] Moore, *History of the A. M. E. Zion Church in America,* 17-18.
[296] Ibid.
[297] Ibid, 20-21.
[298] Ibid. 22.

maneuver over to a mutual aid association, a venture that came with several difficulties. For one,

the Black community fell into constant financial stress, lacking the economic assets needed to

ensure the stability of a mutual relief institution. A group of Black American women, inspired by

efforts made by the NYAS and Black Methodists, sought to form their own autonomous mutual

aid organization in 1802 called the Female African Benevolent Association, which promoted

itself as a collective self-help establishment for the social and racial uplift of Black women.[299]

Though it accumulated around two hundred followers, little else is known about them,

suggesting that the FABA only lasted for a short period despite its impressive beginning,

possibly due to lack of financial support. According to William Hamilton in an address presented

to the Zion church in 1809, several Black associations around this time "perished and dwindled

away" facing similar economic issues.[300]

   Tied to financial strains were snags in developing Black independent education facilities. For

a time, free Black New Yorkers looking for educational opportunities had to rely on those

initiated by white abolitionists. The first one of which was the Free African School, built in 1787

under the management of the New York Manumission Society (1785), an abolitionist

organization consisting of white merchants and politicians including John Jay, Rufus King and

Alexander Hamilton.[301] Despite not being an independent school, the Black community had

some appreciation for its existence. Several Black Methodists such as James Varick were Free

African School alumni, and overtime the school would be instrumental in training several

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[299] Peter Williams Jr. to Thomas Tucker, New York, June 10, 1816, Black Abolitionist Papers; Alexander, *African or American?*, 12–13.

[300] Hamilton, William "An Address to the New York African Society, for Mutual Relief, Delivered in the Universalist Church, January 2, 1809," in *Early Negro Writing*, 39.

[301] Andrews, Charles C. *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools* (Book on Demand Ltd., 2013), 7–8; Moseley, Thomas Robert, *A History of the New-York Manumission Society, 1785-1849* (New York University, 1963), 170.

nineteenth century people that would become nineteenth century Black community leaders including Peter Williams Jr.[302] William Hamilton in his 1809 address even gave "unprofitable thanks" to the NYMS for establishing "a seminary of learning" that was spirited in Black pursuits for the emancipation of the enslaved.[303] For the most part, there was an undisputed agreement among Black leaders that the abolitionist society committed itself to fostering education for the community during an decisive moment in Black American history.

That said, such compliments did not eclipse the fundamental frustrations the Black community held over the methods and principles of the Free African School and the New York Manumission Society. Moral reform efforts and developing occupational talents constituted the school and organization's main objectives. Though these were valued directives within the Black community, they came with a high volume of paternalistic rhetoric. These institutions were intended for whites to assume the role of mediators over Black struggles in transitioning from enslaved to free individuals, effectively locking them into an eternal state of interdependence. A recording from an early NYMS meeting outlines this paternal mindset clearly, which states that the organization need to "keep a watchful eye over the conduct of such Negroes as have been or may be liberated" in order to "prevent them from running into immorality or sinking into idleness."[304] Visions of the school also carried with it feared assumptions of possible depravity among Blacks without white authority, and the school was used for Black to be "kept from vicious courses and [become] qualified for usefulness in life."[305] Their lessons of moral uplift and skill maturity instilled white specific values, which were not based in providing material bases for Black social and economic prosperity. For many Black observers, the NYMS and the

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[302] Andrews, *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools*, 129.
[303] Hamilton *An Address to the New York African Society*, 39.
[304] New York Manumission Society, Papers Vol. 6, 24.
[305] Ibid, 87.

Free African School's definition of usefulness was entirely one-sided, wrapped in lingering ideas of racial hierarchical standards.[306]

Yet early advances by the NYAS and the Zion Church to style Black independent schools, and thus mediums for self-reliance, had varying results primarily due to insufficient resources. In one victorious moment (albeit minor), Black activist John Teasman (who became one of the founders of the NYASMR) was appointed by the NYMS to the position of principal at the African Free School in 1799, playing a part in the 30 percent increase in attendance during his first two years.[307] He later successfully hosted an African Evening School for the educational benefit of adult Black-Americans, to further enrich the intellectual prowess of the Black community (as well as to supplement his modest salary since he was paid much less than white members).[308] His most monumental achievement however happened in 1806, when he became the first to employ the Lancastrian system of instruction in public schools, a mutual instruction method where one instructor assisted by older students teaches hundreds of other younger students. The purpose of the technique was to save money on education costs and expand the system to a wider network, and in that sense, Teasman responded to external restrictions and produced an efficient and affordable path for black children and adults to work collectively. Ironically, it would be this method and the future efforts of other hired Black school officials that would lead to a reformation of African American educational institutions in the later part of the nineteenth century.[309]

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[306] Kaestle, Carl. *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 25; Rury, John L. "Philanthropy, Self Help, and Social Control: The New York Manumission Society and Free Blacks, 1785-1810." *Phylon (1960-)* 46, no. 3 (1985): 235-37.

[307] Swan, Robert J. "John Teasman: African American Educator and the Emergence of Community in Early Black New York City, 1787-1815." *Journal of the Early Republic* 12, no. 3 (1992): 338.

[308] Ibid, 335-336.

[309] Ibid, 338-339.

Outside of the Free African Church, there were at least three independent Black schools founded by the NYAS and the Zion Church, one of which may have run inside the basement of the church.[310] Information surrounding these schools is scant, though it is safe to assume they only lasted for a short period. But while their runs may have been brief, they demonstrate the brash determination to generate avenues for Black educational assistance. The community had little intention in giving up, evidenced by the numerous African American schools that emerged throughout the nineteenth century.

The New York African Society for Mutual Relief formed in 1808, a year that proved to be momentous in terms of New York based slavery operations and the progress towards citizenship for Manhattan Black denizens. On the first of January, the transatlantic slave trade was officially banned in the United States, as prescribed in the Act for Prohibiting Importation of Slaves federal law passed in March of 1807. The time of the abolition was a moment all Blacks across the nation had been anxiously anticipating, and the Manhattan community was no exception. The very day of the slave trade ban, Peter Williams Jr. presented an oration to the A.M.E. Zion Church celebrating the decision. He congratulated abolitionists and philanthropists such as Anthony Benezet, William Wilberforce, and the Religious Society of Friends who "stepped forward to obviate the consequences" of the slave trade and make serious efforts to "restore [Black] natural rights; to guarantee them from fresh innovations…to stop the source from where our evils have frowned." With this legislative accomplishment, he believed, African Americans shall have a greater chance to "reap increasing advantages from the flavors conferred…and

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[310] Walls, William Jacob. *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church;*, 301.

posterity shall exult in the pleasing remembrance" of their African ancestors.[311] Though it would take nearly two decades for institutional slavery in New York to face its end, Manhattan Black leaders held confidence that the slave importation ban would serve as a significant bellwether for broader opportunities for their community.

Celebrations of the slave trade prohibition act among the free and enslaved were common in northern American states, and Black New Yorkers did not hesitate to coordinate one themselves. A month prior to the enactment of the law, an assembly of leaders of African heritage came together at the schoolhouse for Black children to plan a festival on January 1.[312] Soon after, Williams proposed before the city common council a memorial gathering at the A.M.E. Zion Church to be allowed, in addition to an employment of municipal guards to oversee and dispel any disruptive activity, which the Council granted.[313] Not only were leaders of the Black community in attendance, but organizers invited members of the common council and Manumission Society to purchase event tickets out of gratitude for their social contributions. The celebration was designed for people to express their merriment, as well as a means for Manhattan Black people to socialize, remark on their political and social conditions, and reflect on their connections to Africa. Orations provided by Williams and (possibly) Henry Sipkins drew on passionate and dramatic imagery of slavery's abhorrent and destructive nature, claiming slave trading to be a source of unimaginable terror, "flagrant violations of human rights" fundamentally damaging to all Africans subjected to it. This language prided itself on being persuasive for its Black listeners and encouraged all to assemble and "form an invulnerable

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[311] Williams Jr., Peter. *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: Samuel Wood, 1808).

[312] Walls*, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 89.

[313] Council, *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1784-1831*, vol. 4, 663.

bulwark against the shafts of malice."[314] While such a statement intended to invite jubilance, it also served as a reminder of the level of social activism needed to mold and secure an ecosystem in which those of African heritage can thrive with comfort.

These celebrations continued to be a staple in Black community affairs for several more years to sustain self-esteem, yet could not hide the reality of the precarious position the enslaved and free people were in. Manumissions in New York increased after the gradual abolition law and the slave importation prohibition act, as slavery in the north experienced a reputational turnaround, both due to its increasingly perceived moral reprehensibility and decline in economic feasibility. Private manumissions did not experience a considerable increase at the start of the nineteenth century from previously recorded ones, but it was partly the reason as to why freed people outnumbered slaves three to one in 1810. There may have been a substantial jump in the number of slaves who negotiated freedom opportunities with their owners, which would suggest a change in dynamics between white masters and bondsmen.[315] It was a double edged sword however, as several slave owners who engaged in private manumissions did so under the expectation that former slaves would be contracted as their primary laborers for some time. John Peter de Lancey was one such person who purchased numerous enslaved people, only to free them after several years of service.[316] Private manumissions, as respected as they were from the Black and white antislavery community, did not ensure escape from under the roof of slave owners, which is why slaves continued to risk running away.

While the enslaved faced the potential threat of indentured servitude, individuals within the expanding free Black population were not entirely protected from being transferred back into

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[314] Williams Jr. *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade.*
[315] Gellman, David N. *Emancipating New York The Politics Of Slavery And Freedom 1777-1827* (Louisiana State University Press, 2006).
[316] Ibid, 194-195.

slavery. With the end of the slave trade, the kidnapping of free people began to escalate. New York anti-slavery activists and the NYMS had addressed issues of human trafficking before through public protests and announcements in the 1780s (and particularly after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793), yet no laws were put in place to reduce the practice.[317] Once the enactment date of the slave trade prohibition law arrived, the market value of enslaved people rose sharply due to the reduced supply of slaves coupled with high demand, and with it a sporadic increase in opportunistic white entrepreneur kidnappers looking to snatch fugitive slaves and free people in order to sell to incurious plantation owners and make a profit. Inveiglement of free Blacks was a common method of kidnapping used, while others opted for direct physical abduction or apprehension of fugitive slaves.[318] Northern seaboard states were vulnerable to this practice, with New York and Pennsylvania being prime targets. Though reported acts of human capturing in New York after the slave trade ban took place years after 1808, the state legislature must have realized the rate in which kidnapping had occurred in both New York and elsewhere by that year, responding by passing the "Act to Prevent the Kidnapping of Free people of Color" only three months after the slave importation abolition went into effect.[319] Theoretically, the registration of those manumitted offered protection as well. However, these systems of safety were clearly limited in execution.

Contracted labor and human trafficking certainly were the most significant obstacles leaders that the New York Black community took notice of. Yet, their interest in building their

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[317] McManus, Edgar J. *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse, N.Y.] : Syracuse University Press, 1966), 169–70; Moseley, Thomas Robert. "A History of the New York Manumission Society, 1785-1849" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1963), 286; Gellman, *Emancipating New York The Politics Of Slavery And Freedom 1777-1827*, 67.

[318] For more on slave trafficking, see Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk* (University Press of Kentucky, 1994); Bell, Richard. "Counterfeit Kin: Kidnappers of Color, the Reverse Underground Railroad, and the Origins of Practical Abolition," *Journal of the Early Republic* 38, no. 2 (2018): 199–230.

[319] Laws of the State of New-York, Passed at the Thirty-First Session of the Legislature. . .(Albany 1808), ch. 96

community was also deeply inspired by a major national and state political and economic development that took place in 1808. President Thomas Jefferson imposed a supplement to the 1807 Embargo Act, which prohibited all exported goods from entering the country in order to preserve neutrality between Britain and France during the Napoleonic Wars. The decision had an immediate effect on the New York mercantile and maritime marketplace. It devastated merchant seamen especially, since both foreign countries regularly relied on American shipping for supplies, materials, and raw goods.[320] Even more specifically, maritime laboring was one of the predominant occupations for free Blacks, the group most affected by potential business interference. Two years later, an action was made among working class Blacks in establishing the African Marine Fund, as a platform to offer financial and social relief to any maritime workers within the community suffering under the depression.[321] But in 1808, leaders had been ready to bring about an organization that lent a helping hand to all in the Black laboring class, to the many who were shut out of available work and needed to rely on the assistance of others.

The New York African Society for Mutual Relief organized its first meeting on June 6, 1808, to outline the Constitution and thus the political philosophy of the association. In attendance were prominent Black artisans, professionals, and clergymen such as William Hamilton, John Teasman, Henry Sipkins and Peter Vogelsang. Reflecting on the troubled conditions Black people were subjected to, the preamble to the Constitution clarifies the main mission statement of the organization, which was to offer security and relief against the "occasional distresses of each other by mutual endeavor." Members of the organization were to be given social and financial protection to improve themselves and escape the "extreme exigencies to which [Blacks]

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[320] Ira Berlin, Ronald Hoffman, and United States Capitol Historical Society, *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (United States Capitol Historical Society, 1983), 8–10.
[321] "Constitution of the African Marine Fund," in Porter, ed., Early Negro Writing, 42-44.

are liable to." This promise of voluntary aid also came with the confidence that the organization

would be independent, free from intervention and more self-sustainable than the secret New

York African Society that came before (though the NYASMR was still modeled after it).[322]

At face value, many of the rules and regulations displayed in the Constitution foster a sense of

elitism. Being inducted into the organization was an intentionally rigorous procedure with

elements of exclusionary tactics. It was made a requirement for more than fifty members in the

association, and applications for entry were to be submitted in person during meetings. Members

who presented applications were also required to vouch for their moral character, and applicants

considered were referred to the membership committee for an examination. Those who reported

favorably were picked via a ballot voting process during meetings, and once chosen as a member

consented to the rules of the Constitution and paid an initiation fee of one hundred dollars, then

pay a monthly fee of twenty-five cents. Chosen representatives of the organization were expected

to have a good financial standing throughout their time inducted, a luxury most Blacks in New

York obviously did not have. Moreover, the Constitution laid out the official doctrine for

acceptable moral codes of conduct including avoiding brothels, gambling and the habitual

drinking of alcohol. If any of these rules were to be violated, members faced permanent

expulsion from the organization with their rights forfeited.[323]

As restrictive as the organization's design was, leaders may have felt this tactic necessary.

There was a sealed urgency expressed in the Constitution for financial resources and skilled

representatives to effectively manage and develop the association. Most founders of the

organization were a part of a "tiny but healthy black artisan community in Jeffersonian New

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[322] Zuille, John J. *Historical Sketch of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief* (New York: n.p., 1892-1893); 5, 45.
[323] The Constitution is cited from Zuille, *Historical Sketch*, 50-52.

York;" William Hamilton had been employed as a house carpenter, the secretary was a mechanic, and six others were cobblers.[324] Each of these men felt their talents and occupational background made them justly qualified to typify the organization's grand expedition towards Black social uplift. In an address written and presented on January 2, 1809 (in celebration of the one-year anniversary of the importation prohibition act), Hamilton expressed his dream for a social climate in which the Black community has ample opportunity to move "above the common employment of craftsmen and laborers." He believed Black people, due to the nature of slavery, had their abilities grossly undermined and narrowed, and anyone of African descent would be able to demonstrate their intellectual and moral genius if given the chance. Hamilton longed for an opportunity in which "it will soon be perceived that [people of African heritage] do not fall far behind those who boast of a superior judgment, we have produced some who have claimed attention, and whose works have been admired, yet in despite of all our embarrassments our genius does sometimes burst forth from its incumbrance."[325]

Essentially, the requirements and limitations codified in the Constitution reflected elitist characteristics, under the ethos that such a structure was most efficient in keeping the organization healthy and alive, as well as to create a steppingstone for Black independence and socioeconomic growth. To once again remark on the Hamilton address, when discussing the prospects of the NYASMR, he claimed that the institution was founded on virtuous principles compatible with the aspirations and interests of the Black community, and thus dedicated to providing reassurance for the sick, orphans, widows, families deprived of financial resources, and others in need. Unlike former established groups which all soon "perished or dwindled away

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[324] Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 48, n51.
[325] Hamilton, *An Address to the New York African Society*, 36-37.

to a number so small as scarcely to deserve the name of society", he predicted for this institution

to last long for Blacks and their descendants to "feel the rays of its beneficences" and have their

hearts "dilate by its cheering effulgence and effusions of benefits in seasons of sickness and

distress". As Hamilton confidently exclaimed, the formation of the organization is not simply

rested on prospects for socialization or even manumission. It served to protect members of the

Black community from indigency, forbid its members from remaining oppressed under deep

poverty, and provided an outlet for people to advance and improve in an exclusionary society.

Hamilton believed that these principles came the hope for unity among its members, unity that

would carry over into succeeding generations and continue the duties firmly practiced to wash

away long-standing assumptions towards Blacks, lessen the miseries of mankind, and raise the

edifices of black mutual aid.[326]

With their defined directives and ideologies established, the NYASMR quickly made efforts

to secure its status as the most successful Manhattan Black voluntary association. At the

beginning of 1809, members appealed to the common council for official incorporation into the

state legislature. Deviating far from the New York African Society who maintained strict

privacy, this effort, in the words of Vogelsang, was a chance for representatives "to strengthen

our impact, to consolidate our interest, and to raise us to the dignity of a body politic."[327] To be

recognized in full was an important symbolic accomplishment, signifying legal evidence of

Black citizenship. After signing the necessary paperwork and having their appeal petition

approved, the organization's hopes for incorporation were achieved on March 23, 1810, a date

[326] Hamilton. *An Address to the New York African Society*, 37-40.
[327] "An address delivered in the African Episcopal church, on the 25th of March, 1811, before the New York African Society for Mutual Relief: being the first anniversary of its incorporation" New York Public Library Digital Collections, 3-4, Accessed June 3, 2024. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/

members quickly appointed as the organizational anniversary, and one worth honoring to remember such a glorious triumph.

In mid-April of 1810, the African American community of Manhattan engaged in a celebratory parade across the public streets in commemoration of the incorporation, though news regarding the act took three weeks to reach the city due to difficulties in transmission and conveyance between the city and Capitol. Over a hundred men marched carrying decorated silk banners —- some of which were designed by the NYASMR, and one of which was inscribed with the figure of a black man and had the words 'AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER' — while accompanied by musicians and other individuals of color.[328] The NYASMR Constitution and other dispatches were read, an oration was delivered and another member named James Latham even composed music to be played under an ode to the incorporation. In a later celebration, organization member Samuel Hardenburgh created a bolder statement by leading the parade riding on horseback while wielding a sword, most likely a deliberate representation of Black agency within a declining but active slave state.[329]

There was initial fear brewing within the black community over the potential consequences of ostentatiously celebrating their cultural and racial pride in public as some whites pressured them to not proceed with plans, a testament to disruptive racism and discrimination. According to a secondary account from an later organization member, one 'friend' (possibly a white affiliate of the New York Manumission Society) acknowledged that the NYASMR had "the perfect right" and "immunity which any other society has under the Act of Incorporation" to host a parade, but

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[328] "Thomas L. Jennings," Anglo African Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 4 (April 1859), 126-127; Zuille, *Historical Sketch*, 6-7.

[329] Garnet, Rev. Henry Highland. *A Memorial Discourse Delivered in the Hall of the House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. on Sabbath, February 12, 1865, with an Introduction by James McCune Smith* (Philadelphia) Joseph M. Wilson, 1865). 24.

warned that city authority forces will be unlikely to protect Blacks from possibly being "torn to pieces by howling mobs" given the "malignity of public prejudice". But whatever concerns had were quelled upon the realization that the organization and its symbol of black self-sufficiency was too important to not publicly praise. "We will go though death stare us in the face", the founders responded, and thus imperatives to showcase Black strength and courage found even more importance.[330] A later member in 1865 would claim participants of the parade as "secure in their manhood and will…easily thrusting aside by their own force the small impediments which blocked their way."[331] For over a decade, these annually held celebrations served as the principal expressions of joy for the NYASMR; they reflected; Black unity and racial determination, actions that went against the expectations of most white New York residents.

Members had every intention in assembling an institution remembered for its prosperity. Within the next several years, the NYASMR had situated a steady financial base through its scrupulous payment structure and occasional contributions from non-representatives. Vogelsang reported in 1815 that the organization amassed "a respectable sum" of five hundred dollars in its Treasury.[332] In 1820, the association received a generous donation from former female Haitian slave Juliette Toussaint, which was used to invest in an apartment house priced for $1800 on Orange Street (now known as Baxter Street), located at the center of the Five Point neighborhood. The purchase was made after much consideration, as Orange Street was not their most appreciated location. Members chose the area anticipating it would be redeveloped as a part of Manhattan's commercial district expansion planning efforts during this time. They believed

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[330] Zuille, Historical Sketch, 7.
[331] Garnet, *A Memorial Discourse*, 21.
[332] Vogelsang, Peter. An Address Delivered before the New York African Society for Mutual Relief in the African Zion Church, 23rd March, 1815, Being the Fifth Anniversary of Their Incorporation. New York: Hardcastle and Pelsue, 1815.

that by investing in available real estate in Orange County during municipal redevelopment, the property value would automatically inflate, thereby making their estate "one of the most valuable locations in the city."[333] Ultimately, Orange Street did not experience redevelopment as members were hoping for, yet the rapid growth of residents entering Manhattan over the next few decades did increase the market value of their building, while costs were supplemented by renters. The estate also came with an adjacent building at the rear of the complex, which the organization redesigned to be their official Meeting Hall, commonly referred to as "African Society Hall."

The Orange Street property, despite concerns from NYASMR members, matched the desires held by the organization. Five Points, even before earning its name in the 1830s, had been infamous for its status as a hazardous unsanitary slum district since the 1820s. Houses were built on a poorly engineered landfill with their foundations constantly shifting, there was an inadequate lack of storm sewers causing poor water drainage, streets were covered in mud and excrement, and pools were both stagnant and the source of abundant parasite breeding. Middle class inhabitants fled these areas by the end of the 1810s, leaving the borough open for incoming displaced Black residents and poor European immigrants who began arriving in droves during the 1820s.[334] Though hesitant to invest in such a disreputable location, the organization took advantage of the fact that Five Points quickly became the gathering place for the Manhattan Black community. According to Wilder, renters provided a steady stream of income used to provide sick and death benefits for members and families.[335] Moreover, at some point in the

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[333] Zuille, Historical Sketch, 16.
[334] Anbinder, Tyler. *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum*, Reprint edition (New York: Plume, 2002), 14–16.
[335] Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men*, 106.

1820s, African Society Hall served as a secret way station for the Underground Railroad, possibly managed by the NYASMR or another organization that used it.[336]

The organization ensured the African Society Hall was open for other Black Manhattan associations to use as well, specifically Freemasonry lodges. Prince Hall Freemasonry – name for Black Freemasons – established a solid foothold in Manhattan during the early nineteenth century, usually entering through the A.M.E. Zion Church or the NYASMR. The Boyer Masonic Lodge No. 1 – chartered in 1812 by the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons in Massachusetts – was the first of these New York City fraternity orders. According to Bishop William J. Walls, the Boyer Lodge "worked closely together with the [Zion] church and other African organizations," presumably referring to the NYASMR and the African Bible Society of New York that formed in 1817.[337] The Boyer Lodge associated itself strongly with the prospects of the NYASMR, in terms of its ethical focus, activism against racial inequality, and drive towards social and moral reformation. Both maintained a simpatico relationship, evidenced by the numerous times during the antebellum period in which the African Society Hall was rented to host Boyer Grand Lodge political meetings. Some Masons even became full-fledged members of the Mutual Aid Society. For example, Alexander Elston, a grandmaster of the lodge in the 1850s, was accepted into the NYASMR in 1823, and eventually holding office in the organization including serving as president.[338] In its effort to connect with Freemasonry institutions, the African Society provided a social space for Black unity and political voices to grow.

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[336] Beekman, *Address by Walter N. Beekman*, 2.
[337] Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church;*, 90.
[338] Zuille, *Historical Sketch*, 29, 41; Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men*, 115.

Political activism became a major component of the organization as time went on. For example, beginning in the 1830s and until the 1890s, Manhattan residents of color – including several from the NYASMR – made efforts to repudiate the American Colonization Society, an institution founded on its aim to colonize Blacks in West Africa. A New York State Colonization branch was established in 1829 to aid the ACS, then subsequently rearranged to "assist" Blacks in transporting over to Liberia. By this time, Black American voluntary associations across the nation generally condemned the Society, believing their humanitarian concerns only perpetuated the extent of social and racial inequality, as well as the natural inferiority of people of African heritage.[339] As a combatant to the ACS, voluntary associations involved themselves in the Annual National Convention of the People of Color, assemblies committed to carrying out directives related to strategic concerns. In these conventions, leaders pleaded for free people of color to support education, work for moral reform, participate in economic uplift for the Black community, and condemn the ACS. NYASMR delegates who attended these meetings included Reverend William Miller, Henry Sipkins, William Hamilton, and Thomas J. Jennings, all of whom were experienced anticolonial advocates.[340]

Many of these representatives had dabbled in opposition-based press prior to and during their time in these annual conventions. William Hamilton, Thomas Jennings, and Peter Williams Jr. were among the founders of the *Freedom's Journal,* the first Black newspaper in America that espoused arguments for social and political uplift within the community. The newspaper helped

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[339] Devote white abolitionist Williams Lloyd Garrison, in his book *Thoughts on African Colonization,* asserted that the American Colonization Society was fraudulent, claiming "it was never the intention of the Society to interfere with the rights of the proprietors of slaves, nor has it at any time done so;" Garrison, William Lloyd. *Thoughts on African Colonization* (New York, Arno Press, 1968), 50.

[340] Meeting minutes were found in Howard Holman Bell, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York, Arno Press, 1969); These specific names were found in Ibid, 3; For further insight on convention debates, see Howard Holman Bell, *Survey of the National Negro Convention Movement* (NY: Arno Press, 1969); Reed, Harry. *Platform for Change. The Foundations of the Northern Free Black Community, 1775-1865* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994).

facilitate black journalism in Manhattan, with the tradition broadening further into the nineteenth century. Its editorials opposed slavery, bringing powerful critiques of servitude and its inhumane features. An 1827 article captures an honest portrayal of an enslaved male: "He sees the mother of his children stripped naked before the gang of male negroes and flogged unmercifully, he sees his children sent to the market to be sold at the best price they will fetch; he sees himself, not a man, but a thing."[341] Publications also expressed their displeasure for the American Colonization Society, the current issue at the time. Well established leaders such as Richard Allen and Reverend Lewis Woodson had their letters directly opposing the ACS included. Many of the Black periodicals that succeeded the Freedom Journal – The Colored Man's Journal, Colored American, The Liberator, Anglo-American Magazine, and others – involved both the management or financial backing of various NYASMR members. Therefore, they were a part of a developing venture to bring further awareness to systemic injustices and enhance the tradition of intellectual activism.[342]

The NYASMR remained undeterred in their goals throughout its lifecycle, especially amid racial tension in Manhattan. A series of Manhattan anti-abolition riots in July 1834 resulted in an invasion into Five Points and the vandalism of the African Society Hall. White rioters broke into the building, smashed its windows, caused substantial damage to the furniture, and left the interior structure completely demolished. It was partially this riot that led to the evacuation of around five hundred of Five Points Black residents.[343] Despite the destruction caused, the organization continued to use the Society Hall as their primary meeting house for several decades until the nineteenth century. They proceeded in their efforts towards Black activism and

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[341] *Freedom's Journal* 6, April 1827.
[342] For more on Manhattan Black owned newspapers, see Wilder, *In The Company Of Black Men*, 142–53.
[343] Anbinder, *Five Points*, 186, 315-316.

acquiring real estate inside urban Manhattan well into the twentieth century. Yet, some members journeyed into less populated areas for such an endeavor, namely the area of Seneca Village.

Andrew Williams and Epiphany Davis — the men who purchased lots in the area known as Seneca Village — were both charter members of the NYASMR.[344] No evidence is available to prove if the men were commissioned by the organization directly to obtain acres of land. That said, it is no coincidence that other charter members of the organization such as Samuel Hardenburgh soon followed suit in acquiring property in the area.[345] In fact, several middle class Blacks attained real estate in Seneca Village for decades after its establishment, becoming the area with the largest concentration of Black property owners.[346] From the start, there may have been a united effort to secure this land, both to satisfy real estate ventures beyond Lower Manhattan and invest in land most amenable towards a strong Black community.

Seneca Village was one of the few places where middle class blacks could purchase property, as attempts elsewhere were difficult to nearly impossible. This was due to state laws that limited black inheritance, as well as local prohibitions on land sales to Blacks (was would later be termed "red-lining"), limited financial resources within the community and high prices on real estate in downtown Manhattan. The land was also considered a gateway for obtaining voting rights/political power, as blacks were required to own $250 in property to vote (a rule not applied to white citizens).[347] There were also people who owned property in Seneca Village, but lived in downtown Manhattan, possibly using the property as investment.

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[344] Member names of the NYASMR can be found in Zuille, *Historical Sketch of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, 27-28.*
[345] Alexander, *African or American?*, 155.
[346] Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People*, 65.
[347] Hirsch Jr., "New York and the Negro, from 1783 to 1865," 420-421; Only ninety one out of the total Black population (approximately 13,000) could vote, and ten of the eligible voting population lived in Seneca Village, Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People*, 72-73.

Seneca Village attracted nearly three hundred working class residents by 1855, all people seeking refuge against discrimination in urban New York.[348] By the 1830s, Manhattan neighborhoods had been targeted routinely by white rioters opposed to further developments in abolition laws and the increased Black population.[349] Many of them fled to northern cities in Manhattan or New Jersey, but institutions such as the A.M.E. Zion church and the NYASMR may have informed remaining residents of Five Points about Seneca Village after the 1832 riots. It is also strongly believed that it was a part of the Underground Railroad, allowing those escaping captivity to use Seneca Village as a hiding spot.[350] Abolitionists such as Albro and Mary Joseph Lyons (conductors of the Underground Railroad) owned property in Seneca Village, which may have included a boarding house for black sailors that also served as a stop on the railroad. One story, not fully verified, indicated that the African Society built hidden basements for slaves to hide in.[351]

Purchased real estate in Seneca Village was not simply saved for building houses, as several community institutions were established as well. An A.M.E Zion Church (satellite church) was built in 1853; the last to be constructed.[352] Before the satellite church, six plots of land were purchased and used as a burial spot for members of the megachurch. All Angels' Church – a racially mixed Episcopalian congregation – was built in 1849, becoming the largest church in Seneca Village. There was also an African Union Church which doubled as a school (Colored School #3) that operated in the basement, this becoming one of the few schools for black

[348] The population remains in question. Most historians place the estimated number between 225 and 264, although Leslie Alexander claims there may have been up to 300, with census records probably skewed, Alexander, *African or American?*, 157.
[349] Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People*, 66.
[350] Beekman, *Address by Walter N. Beekman*, (Brooklyn: n.p., 1946), 6.
[351] Alexander, *African or American?*, 164.
[352] This church is suggested to have been called the African Methodist Zion Branch Church; see Militant Rhoda G. Freeman, "The Free Negro in New York City before the Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1966), 291; Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People*, 70.

children in New York at the time.[353] Houses were a mixture of one-, two- and three-story

buildings. Most were built out of wood, though many were built on stone foundation, iron sheets

and tiles for roofing.

The burgeoning community, however, abruptly reached its end in 1857 once the

municipality acquired the land through eminent domain, a policy that allows government

authorized confiscation of privately owned land for public use. Motivated by a push from the

wealthy populace to construct a lavish public space in uptown Manhattan, legal proceedings

were used to condemn Seneca Village as an unsightly urban squalor, one in desperate need of

recreation.[354] Black residents were forced to sell off their property, and landowners were usually

undercompensated as the government lowered the property values of their estates.[355] All

inhabitants of Seneca had to relocate elsewhere, whether it be fleeting to nearby towns

(Greenwich, Five Towns, Queens, Brooklyn) or New Jersey. The town was completely

obliterated by year's end, only to be replaced the next year by the famous urban landscaped park

known as Central Park. Currently, Central Park is forty-eight acres, which translates to over

thirty-nine million square feet, with land value estimated to be around $528.8 billion.[356]

Until its unfortunate demise in 1857, Seneca Village was a bustling community for Black

independent living. Representatives of the NYASMR never referred to the landscape during or

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[353] Rosenzweig, 71–73.

[354] Manhattan New York newspapers described Seneca Village as "shantytowns," and residents were classified as "debased" and wretched." Racial epithets were used as well, and by the 1850s, some called the town "Nigger Village," NYT, July 9th, 1856; Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People*, 66-68.

[355] Both African American and European landowners who occupied Seneca Village were compensated with approximately $700 for their property, Berman, John S. *Central Park* (Barnes & Noble Publishing, 2003), 19; Andrew Williams was compensated $2335 for his house and three lots, though he asked for $3,500; Rosenzweig, *The Park and the People*, 88–89.

[356] This value was estimated by Jonathan Miller, head of the property-appraisal firm Miller Samuel; Robledo, S. Jhoanna (December 15, 2005), "Central Park: Because We Wouldn't Trade a Patch of Grass for $528,783,552,000". *New York Magazine.*

after its development. Yet, no doubt the town symbolizes the prime characteristics of the organization. The NYASMR lasted until 1949, making it the longest running Black voluntary association of the pre-Civil War period. The organization proved to be crucial towards New York Black community progress, providing social and political activism, mutual aid, and beacons of hope through their real estate accumulation efforts.

CONCLUSION

In 1989, African American culture historian Charles Leroy Blockson launched the

"Philadelphia African American Pennsylvania State Marker Project." This project called for the

installation of several historical markers that recognized the historical significance of Black

figures, events and remaining sites that involved the contributions of Black citizens. As only two

Black history related markers had been erected by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum

Commission at the time — one for the First Protest Against Slavery (1983) and another for the

St. Thomas African Episcopal Church (1984) — the intention was to correct the severe lack of

Black history representation in Philadelphia.[357] Since then, nearly fifty Black historical markers

have been established in Philadelphia. One of the earliest was for the Free African Society,

which reads,

> "Established in 1787 under the landscape of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, this
> organization fostered identity, leadership, and unity among Blacks and became the
> forerunner of the first African American churches in the city."

This marker, along with many others, is in the organization's original location of South 6th

Street in Society Hill. It was also decided in 2019 that 6th Street be renamed Avenue of

Freedom, in honor of the area's status as the harbor of key sites of Philadelphia's Black

history.[358]

In a similar vein, Rhode Island's ethnic history consulting firms have made efforts to keep the

history of the Newport Free African Union Society and the Providence African Benevolent

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[357] Blockson, Charles L. *Philadelphia's Guide: African American State Historical Markers* (Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection/ The William Penn Foundation, 1992), 5–6.

[358] Rohan, Jess. "Philly Renames Parts of Market and Sixth Streets in Honor of Founding Fathers, Black History," https://www.inquirer.com, February 18, 2019, https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-market-sixth-street-renamed-founding-fathers-black-history-20190218.html. Accessed June 14, 2024.

Society alive. The works of Black heritage groups 1696 Heritage Group and the Rhode Island

Black Historical Society utilizes public research, comprehensive analysis and interpretive

programs to provide extensive knowledge of Black history and culture from the colonial period

to the present. Many of these projects included discussions of both Rhode Island Black voluntary

associations.[359] Nowhere is this more apparent than in the public funded web-based repository

"America's Colonial African Cemetery: God's Little Acre." The database includes online

narratives of colonial era Black civil life, which entirely focuses on the history of both

associations. Further, the website comprises over 240 burial markers with attached descriptions,

over eighty are mentioned to have been members of the organizations.[360] Currently, no historical

markers with reference to either Black association have been erected in Newport or Providence.

The Colored Union Church, the oldest and one of the few structures associated with members

from the associations, has also not been officially recognized as an historical landmark. That

said, Rhode Island heritage groups and historical societies remained determined to preserve the

remains of their efforts, from the church to the burial ground and organization meeting minute

archives.

Meanwhile, information regarding Seneca Village has been maintained by the Central Park

Conservancy. Interest in a Seneca Village conservation project rose around 1997, when the New

York Historical Society presented an exhibition entitled "Before Central Park: The Life and

Death of Seneca Village." Though there were very few artifacts presented, the exposition served

more to motivate future research.[361] In the years since, archaeological projects have been

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[359] Their projects can be found in their portfolio http://www.1696heritage.com/our-portfolio/. Accessed April 15th, 2024.

[360] https://www.colonialcemetery.com/. Accessed April 10th, 2024.

[361] Martin, Douglas. "A Village Dies, A Park Is Born," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1997, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/31/arts/a-village-dies-a-park-is-born.html. Accessed June 13th, 2024; Meyerson, Ann. *Review of Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village*, by Cynthia R. Copeland and Grady Turner, *The Public Historian* 19, no. 4 (1997): 100–102.;"Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca

conducted in the area where Seneca Village once stood. This has resulted in several uncovered

artifacts such as standard household items and remains of buildings. An official historical marker

recognizing the village was installed in its former location in 2001.[362] Later in 2019, the

conservancy stationed an outdoor exhibit of signage informed by previous research. The markers

are also placed within the approximate location of buildings that existed in the settlement.[363]

Unfortunately, these signs make no mention of the New York African Society for Mutual

Relief's involvement in Seneca Village. The African Society Hall, however, has been preserved

somewhat. The building had been remodeled since World War II, yet old remnants of the

meeting place can still be seen today.[364]

These examples indicate that while much work has been done in conserving the history of

colonial Black American voluntary associations in recent years, there is still more to learn and

accomplish. Outside of the material remains, the impacts of these societies can still be felt.

Philadelphia, Manhattan and Providence were among the cities with the largest population of

Black residents in northern United States during the nineteenth century. The Black communities

of these cities have committed to maintaining its heritage and engage in community networking.

Philadelphia especially became the epicenter of Black political, cultural and economic progress,

primarily due to institutions and figures inspired by the city's earliest voluntary organization. By

the Civil War, the Black population had experienced decades worth of cooperating for mutual

benefits and institutionalization. Today, Black denizens make up over forty percent of the

Village | May + Watkins Design," accessed June 14, 2024, https://maywatkinsdesign.com/interpretive-exhibits/before-central-park-the-life-and-death-of-seneca-village/.

[362] "Media Advisories: NYC Parks," accessed June 14, 2024, https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/media-advisories?id=8572.

[363] "Artifacts and Archives: The Rediscovery and Research of Seneca Village," Central Park Conservancy, accessed June 13, 2024, https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/rediscovery-and-research-of-seneca-village.

[364] Hart, Lucinda. "African Society for Mutual Relief Hall (1834)."Clio: Your Guide to History. November 9, 2022. Accessed June 14, 2024. https://theclio.com/entry/158785.

Philadelphia population, both the wealthy and working class. While much works needs to be done in terms of recognition, the colonial and early national Black voluntary association no doubt created a foundation for Black American institutional life that further develop into the nineteenth century and beyond.

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