

**TO PLEAD OUR OWN CAUSE: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN MASSACHUSETTS
AND THE MAKING OF THE ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT, 1630-1835**

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ABSTRACT

Christopher Alain Cameron: To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement, 1630-1835
(Under the direction of Heather A. Williams)

This dissertation explores the development of slavery in Massachusetts, including the influence of Puritan religious ideology on the institution, and the rise of an antislavery movement among enslaved and free blacks. It further examines the importance of Christianity to slave life during the eighteenth century and examines African Americans' contributions to the intellectual milieu of the American Revolution. The black abolitionist movement was based in part on the appropriation and transformation of Puritan discourse and whites' political rhetoric directed against Britain into a discourse of abolitionism. Religion was always central to black abolitionists, both in shaping their language and in cementing them into a community of activists that was able to influence both white and black abolitionists throughout the country. While this community of activists was situated in Massachusetts, they were very much intertwined within the larger Atlantic community, as developments such as the English abolitionist and colonization movements, along with the Haitian Revolution, were central to their own struggle. Thus, I explore the importance of African American activists in Massachusetts to the creation of the antislavery movement within their own country and the ways in which developments throughout the Atlantic World influenced the people who initiated organized abolitionism in America. Overall, this dissertation demonstrates that the story of black abolitionism from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century is one of continuity rather than radical change, as the rhetoric, ideas, and

strategies of activists after 1830 were heavily shaped by those of their predecessors in the 1700s.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1829 black Bostonian David Walker published his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, an exposition of whites' treatment of blacks and a call for resistance to slavery and racism from all African Americans. "Though our cruel oppressors and murderers, may (if possible) treat us more cruel, as Pharoah did the children of Israel," Walker wrote, "yet the God of the Etheopeans[sic], has been pleased to hear our moans in consequence of oppression; and the day of our redemption from abject wretchedness draweth near, when we shall be enabled, in the most extended sense of the word, to stretch forth our hands to the LORD our GOD."¹ Walker argued that African Americans were treated cruelly by whites, but that God was on the side of the oppressed and would answer the cries of blacks for freedom. Central to Walker's vision of freedom for blacks was the assistance of the Almighty. At the same time though, Walker argued that African Americans must take the initiative and work to free themselves. "There must be a willingness on our part, for GOD to do these things for us," he argued, "for we may be assured that he will not take us by the hairs of our head against our will and desire, and drag us from our very, mean, low and abject condition."² While most studies of the antislavery movement begin their examination in Walker's era, his blend of religious and political rhetoric in the cause of abolitionism was a tactic African Americans had employed in the fight against slavery since the eighteenth

¹ David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal, In Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, To the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829; New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 0.

² Ibid.

century. Therefore, Walker appears at the end of my study, which focuses primarily on his predecessors in Massachusetts.

One such predecessor was a free black man named Caesar Sarter of Newburyport, Massachusetts, who published an essay on slavery in 1774 asking whites “why, in the name of Heaven, will you suffer such a gross violation of that rule by which your conduct must be tried, in that day, in which you must be accountable for all your actions, to, that impartial Judge, who hears the groans of the oppressed and who will sooner or later avenge them of their oppressors!”³ As Walker would later do, Sarter argued that a righteous God would be on the side of African slaves and would judge America for its sin of slavery. It is a common understanding in the scholarship on abolitionism that the “radical” abolitionist movement did not begin until the 1830s. However, Sarter’s rhetoric, and that of many of his contemporaries in Massachusetts, suggests that eighteenth century abolitionism was just as “radical” as its nineteenth century counterpart and that the origins of abolitionism in America can be found among blacks in Massachusetts.

The central question of this dissertation, then, is how did blacks in Massachusetts impact the abolition of slavery in their own state in the 18th century and help build a nationwide antislavery movement that influenced abolitionists such as Walker in the nineteenth century? The dissertation examines the relationship between religion and politics in the African American communities of Massachusetts and explores why this state became the center of antislavery activity in the nation. While my earlier MA research focused on black abolitionists in Massachusetts until 1788, this project deepens that analysis and extends

³ Caesar Sarter, “Address, To Those who are Advocates for holding the Africans in Slavery,” *The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet* (Newburyport, MA), 17 August 1774, 1.

the chronology to examine the role black abolitionists played in the antislavery movement until 1830.

The demographics of Massachusetts, rights given to slaves within the colony and the injunction of ministers to Christianize slaves aided in the formation of a black community that began to challenge slavery in the public sphere during the revolutionary period. In Massachusetts, slavery itself was shaped heavily by Old Testament law, which said slaves should have specified rights, including those of petitioning the government and bringing cases in court. Furthermore, religious leaders in the colony urged their parishioners to Christianize slaves, a practice that extant church records indicate was followed by a number of owners. The fact that slaves never made up more than five percent of the colony's population and the lack of overt rebellions such as the 1739 Stono Rebellion in South Carolina made the colony more conducive to allowing slaves liberties that they were summarily denied elsewhere. The centrality of Massachusetts in revolutionary era politics also greatly contributed to black political activity as blacks appropriated whites' religious tenets and political arguments for freedom from British rule to argue for freedom from slavery.

Blacks in Boston began making these arguments in the public sphere in 1773 by presenting petitions that employed religious rhetoric similar to what Sarter would use one year later, transforming the discourse of Puritanism into an abolitionist discourse. Other tactics included publishing essays and books of poetry, as well as suing for freedom, with the suit of Quok Walker in 1781 prompting the abolition of slavery via court decision. This dissertation examines the efforts of blacks to abolish slavery in Massachusetts, paying attention to both their political activity and to the ideological origins of their abolitionist

discourse. Further, the dissertation explores how African Americans influenced white abolitionists, on whom scholars generally focus in this period.

By the late 1820s the national antislavery movement was centered in Boston, a phenomenon I trace to its origins through an examination of African Americans' community building efforts in Massachusetts in the years of the early republic. By doing this I hope to shed new light on both the study of the "first emancipation," the period in which African Americans gained freedom in the North, and blacks' broader struggle for the freedom of all slaves in the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, while the subjects of this project are located in Massachusetts, this study will demonstrate the broader contributions of African Americans to the political and religious ideology of America in its earliest years and the ways in which developments in England, Africa, and the Caribbean informed black abolitionism in Massachusetts. As such, this project is both a social and an intellectual history of black abolitionists that places their actions within the context of global freedom struggles by whites and blacks from the era of the American Revolution to the antebellum period.

Historiography:

The antislavery activities of black abolitionists in Massachusetts before 1830 have gone largely unnoticed by historians of abolition, black intellectual life, religion, and politics. In the first definitive study of the northern antislavery movement, Arthur Zilversmit claimed that "the history of the early abolitionist movement is essentially the record of Quaker antislavery activities," a claim which effectively excludes African Americans, none of whom belonged to the Society of Friends or were allowed to participate in abolitionist organizations

that Quakers ran in the eighteenth century.⁴ While Zilversmit's study focused primarily on Quakers' antislavery activities in the American North, David Brion Davis has examined the foundations of antislavery ideology throughout the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution. Despite the sweep of Davis's seminal works, he slights the importance of blacks' antislavery thought and activities.⁵

Historians who have focused on the political activity of black abolitionists have centered their attention primarily on the years after 1830. This is due to a misconception among historians such as Benjamin Quarles, Herbert Aptheker, and Richard Newman that early black abolitionists were too conservative in their approach and did not have a significant impact on the achievement of abolition. These scholars argue that most black abolitionists after 1830 were more radical because they called for an immediate end to slavery as opposed to its gradual abolition. Yet this definition of radicalism is no longer adequate. For a people who were primarily poor, uneducated, and the victims of slavery, arguably any form of political activity can be seen as radical. Furthermore, my study of black politics in Massachusetts demonstrates that a number of blacks did indeed desire and call for the immediate abolition of slavery.⁶

⁴ Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 55.

⁵ See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975); *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶ See Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974); Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Herbert Aptheker, *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

Even as there has been an increasing amount of scholarship on nineteenth century black abolitionists, there remains a dearth of literature on early black intellectual history. However Mia Bay and Patrick Rael have made important contributions to this field. Bay examines the racial ideology of African Americans toward whites in the period from 1830 to 1925, in part because she found a lack of sources for this topic in the earlier period. Rael's work has a shorter chronological focus, examining identity building in black communities between 1820 and 1860. In this dissertation I complement these important additions to the field by examining not only the political activity of black abolitionists in the eighteenth century, but the ideological origins of their political thought.⁷

In Massachusetts, these ideological origins lie primarily in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Puritan religious thought, which shaped both the religious beliefs and political activity of black abolitionists in the late eighteenth century. Only John Saillant has made the connection between Puritanism and black politics in his study of black abolitionist Lemuel Haynes, *Black Puritan, Black Republican*. Here Saillant argues that Haynes blended republican political philosophy with the New Divinity theology that dominated late-eighteenth century Calvinism in his critiques of the institution of slavery. This dissertation demonstrates that this was similarly the case among blacks in Massachusetts such as Phillis Wheatley, Prince Hall, and Caesar Sarter. Studies of Puritanism as a whole and biographies of early eighteenth century Puritan leaders such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Willard do not touch on the implications of Puritan thought and the system of slavery it set up for later black abolitionists. Harry Stout's work on preaching in New England, for instance, devotes one

⁷ Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

page to the relationship between white revolutionary ideology and abolition but does not touch on the thought of African Americans. Richard Lovelace's *American Pietism of Cotton Mather* has a brief discussion of Mather's justification of social hierarchies but does not touch on Mather's thoughts on slavery and their prevalence throughout colonial Massachusetts. Works on Samuel Willard, such as Ernest Benson Lowrie's *Shape of the Puritan Mind* similarly neglect to examine Willard's ideas toward slaves. It is clear, however, that there were important links between Puritan religious ideals, the institution of slavery, and the rise of a black abolitionist movement. This dissertation examines those links missing in the historiography on Puritanism.⁸

In addition to the work on Puritanism, the available scholarship on religion and politics in colonial and revolutionary America deals primarily with white religious and political figures. Scholars such as Alan Heimert, Nathan Hatch, and Patricia Bonomi have shown the many ways in which ministers and religious ideology played a central role in the politics of revolutionary America. This connection is generally traced to the events and theology arising from the Great Awakening. What is absent in all of these scholars' work is an examination of how religion shaped black political ideology in revolutionary America.⁹

⁸ For Haynes, see John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); For Puritanism as a system, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939); Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). For Willard, see Ernest Benson Lowrie, *The Shape of the Puritan Mind: The Thought of Samuel Willard* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974). Richard F. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1979), 233-4. Another biographer of Mather's, Kenneth Silverman discusses the fact that Mather owned slaves and felt they should be treated well, but does not examine Mather's specific views on the institution. See his *Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 263-4. Lastly, Robert Middlekauf's *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) is completely silent on Mather's views on slavery and their influence on treatment of slaves in colonial Massachusetts.

⁹ See Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the American Revolution*; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York

I address these absences in the historiography by arguing that there was indeed a significant African American presence in the early antislavery movement in Massachusetts, a presence whose origins lie in Puritan thought and the particular system of slavery that this religious ideology shaped in Massachusetts. Furthermore, I argue that the political activity of black abolitionists was central in effecting the abolition of slavery and the slave trade within late eighteenth century Massachusetts and building a national antislavery movement in the years of the early republic.

This dissertation also suggests that the importance of Christianity to slaves in the eighteenth century North was greater than scholars have realized. Much of the available scholarship on slave religion has focused on southern slaves in the antebellum period. Albert Raboteau argued that the Great Awakening did see a massive rise in conversions to Christianity among urban slaves, but it was not until the 1830s and 1840s that rural slaves began to convert en masse. Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood's more recent examination of slave religion similarly argues that Christianity did not firmly take root among slaves until the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century, and, like Raboteau, they focus on the American South. William Piersen's work on the development of an Afro-American subculture in eighteenth century New England incorporates a discussion of religion, but argues that the First Great Awakening of the 1740s was a lost opportunity because most blacks did not convert to Christianity. My examination of church records in Boston and the political discourse black abolitionists employed indicates that Christianity was indeed central to the lives of blacks in the Bay State. Many blacks attended church, whether or not they

and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977).

became members, and the discourse of Christianity was ever present in their daily lives, especially influencing their antislavery arguments.¹⁰

This dissertation addresses another gap in the historiography on the antislavery movement by examining the activities of black abolitionists between 1807 and 1835. In abolitionist historiography this period is usually neglected because scholars argue there was a lull among groups such as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Richard Newman is an exception to this trend, but he focuses on Philadelphia before the 1820s, arguing that this city was the center of abolitionist activity in the years of the early republic and that this role switched to Boston when blacks and women started participating in the movement.¹¹ I argue, however, that African Americans had been active in the movement since the 1770s, and that an examination of community building among blacks in Boston after the Revolution provides a more complete picture of why Boston emerged as the center of antislavery activity in the 1820s.

Methods and Theory:

In this project I employ an Atlantic history approach that historian David Armitage terms “cis-Atlantic history.” In his article “Three Concepts of Atlantic History” Armitage

¹⁰ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 127-53; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), Chs. 5-6; William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), Chs. 7-8.

¹¹ Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*; Also see his *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008).

posits that cis-Atlantic history, as opposed to trans-Atlantic or circum-Atlantic histories, is a national or regional history within an Atlantic context. My specific focus in this project is on people and events within the colony and state of Massachusetts. In each chapter, however, I bring in comparisons and contrasts to other regions throughout the Atlantic world that can help shed light on developments in Massachusetts. Events in these other regions include the establishment of slavery in Latin American colonies, slave rebellion in Jamaica and South Carolina, the Somerset case in England of 1772, the Haitian Revolution, and African colonization efforts in the early nineteenth century. By showing how these events affected the development of black antislavery politics in Massachusetts I have painted a complex, nuanced picture of the rise of abolitionism in that region of the Atlantic World.¹²

Throughout this dissertation I use the terms “abolitionist movement” and “antislavery movement” interchangeably. In distinguishing between the two, scholars of British antislavery generally refer to eighteenth-century abolitionism as the movement to end the slave trade, and nineteenth-century antislavery as the movement to end slavery. Historians studying the American antislavery movement, however, generally use the terms interchangeably, with some preferring the term abolitionist for the proponents of immediate abolition after 1830.¹³ I follow the pattern of scholars of the American antislavery movement; however, I do not use the term abolitionist only for proponents of immediate abolition after 1830 because I argue that a number of blacks in the eighteenth century were also immediatists.

¹² David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds. *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 15.

¹³ See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 21-2.

I refer to abolitionists as any individuals who engaged in antislavery politics. Antislavery politics comprised a number of activities, many of which historians have not considered political, but all of which helped undermine slavery. By examining the political nature of activities such as writing poetry and antislavery essays, preaching sermons, petitioning, running away from and suing slaveholders, and organizing black institutions, scholars can now recognize many people heretofore excluded from the category of abolitionist.

I take my definition of politics from Steven Hahn's *A Nation Under Our Feet*. Hahn defines politics as collective struggles for socially meaningful power. Furthermore, he asserts that politics must be defined in its specific historical context. Thus I treat the actions of black abolitionists in this study as political if they aimed at gaining socially meaningful power. Considering the fact that scholars such as Orlando Patterson and Stephanie Smallwood have argued that slavery engendered a type of social death, it seems that nothing could be more socially meaningful for a slave than to become free. Furthermore, situating my early analysis within the context of the eighteenth century, a time when most black people were still slaves, allows me to argue for the radicalism of the political activity in which blacks engaged. Although some of this political activity was aimed at securing relief from taxes and gaining equal educational opportunities, the overwhelming focus of black political thought and activity in this era was directed towards the abolition of slavery.¹⁴

¹⁴ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3. For social death, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 52-64.

In addition to Hahn, my argument relies on a conceptual framework developed by Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality*. In this work Foucault discusses the creation of what he terms discourses of “perversity,” such as that surrounding homosexuality. He argues that this discourse “made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf...often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically qualified.”¹⁵ The application to Massachusetts is fairly straightforward. Puritan slaveholders employed the rhetoric of Christianity to justify their system of slavery, often saying that slavery was God’s means of bringing Christianity to Africans. Furthermore, they forced blacks to go to church and sanctioned black participation in religious organizations, which blacks could easily shape to take on a political bent. When blacks did start to organize politically, they turned the very discourse meant to subjugate them on its head, pointing to the hypocrisy of Christians holding other Christians as slaves and warning of God’s impending judgments on America. These blacks were able to use the very tools given to them under slavery as it was practiced in Massachusetts, such as literacy, to gain their freedom. As Foucault writes, “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”¹⁶ His work provides a useful framework for explaining the ideological origins of black abolitionism, revealing the ironic twist that the institution of slavery took in Massachusetts, with the very justifications for slavery making it possible for blacks to thwart the institution by using much of the same language.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction: Volume I* (New York: Random House Inc., 1978), 101.

¹⁶ Ibid, 101.

This study focuses simultaneously on both the political activity and political thought of black abolitionists, and as such is partially a study of blacks' discourse—the creation of their own discourses and the appropriation of discourses of whites. My dissertation relies also on the work of Kathleen Brown, who argues in her study of gender, race and power in colonial Virginia that discourse is “the use of language delineating a community and its interests.” Like Foucault, Brown argues that discourse arises in a specific historical context “but subsequently acquires a myriad of other meanings and uses as material or political circumstances change, or as it is appropriated by different groups of people.”¹⁷ This was certainly the case in eighteenth century Massachusetts, as African Americans appropriated the discourse of Calvinist clergymen to knit themselves into a community and argue that God would look unfavorably upon Americans if they continued enslaving Africans.

Sources:

In this dissertation I use a wide variety of sources, many of which have been obtained through archival research. I employ six main categories of primary sources: government records; church records; sources produced by African Americans; newspapers; sermons and abolitionist writings of whites; and manuscript collections, diaries, and personal papers of whites and blacks. Government records include laws on slavery, minutes of the selectmen of the towns of Boston, as well as the journals of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. The journals of the House of Representatives contain petitions submitted by blacks to that body and debates about whether or not to accept them and what should be done with them. This has allowed me to examine the white leaders in Massachusetts who were concerned

¹⁷ Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5.

with abolition and whether or not black abolitionists had connections with them or influenced their antislavery positions. Massachusetts laws on slavery are similarly important because they have allowed me to analyze the influence of Puritan religious ideology on the institution of slavery. Furthermore, the minutes of the selectmen have pointed me to the influence of religious ideology on the practice of slavery and assisted me in constructing a picture of African American life under slavery.

Many African slaves in Massachusetts attended church with their masters, and church records have helped me to assess how many slaves became members of these churches and how many were baptized. This material was crucial in establishing the religious foundation of black political thought in Puritanism and demonstrating the formation of communities among slaves within white churches. In an era where there were not yet any all-black churches, looking at the church records of Congregationalist and Baptist churches in places with larger concentrations of slaves, like Boston, helped me to see the formation of communities among blacks and the potential for resistance to slavery. These records are available in archives at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Congregational Library in Boston, the Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, and the Peabody Essex Museum. Some church records, such as those of Trinity Church in Boston, are available in print form as well.

Sources produced by African Americans include poetry, petitions, sermons, essays and letters published in newspapers, pamphlets, and antislavery tracts. These sources point to both the ideological origins of black antislavery thought and to the ways in which blacks appropriated and transformed the discourses of others to their fight against slavery and racism. Furthermore, they indicate the methods by which blacks felt they could best attack slavery, and thus shed light on the larger antislavery movement in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. Newspapers are likewise rich sources for a reconstruction of black resistance activities before blacks produced their own sources in the period before 1773. Furthermore, some of the writings of blacks were advertised in newspapers, and these sometimes contain reviews of those works, which has helped me to analyze the nature of white engagement with the ideas of black abolitionists. Newspapers from the revolutionary period in Massachusetts also contain many articles on imperial politics and were important in helping me link blacks' ideology to the republican rhetoric of whites during the same period. Lastly, in the nineteenth century whites and blacks in the northern states published abolitionist newspapers that are important in gauging the nationwide influence of Massachusetts' black abolitionists.

The last two categories of sources—sermons and abolitionist writings of whites, and manuscript collections, diaries, and personal papers—have similarly allowed me to analyze the influence of religious ideology on the development of slavery in Massachusetts, as well as the influence black abolitionists had on white antislavery activists. Letters and abolitionist writings show how widespread black resistance to slavery was, and how whites responded to slave resistance in the state. These two types of sources are available in print form or readily accessible in a number of archives, including the aforementioned ones in Boston, along with the Boston Athenaeum, Sterling Library at Yale University, the New York Historical Society, and Harvard University's Houghton Library.

Organization:

This study is organized both chronologically and thematically. I begin each chapter with an overview of the themes and questions to be addressed and throughout each chapter I

examine the broader national or global events relevant to the theme under consideration. In most chapters I address the ideas and activities of the chapter's subjects chronologically. This format has allowed me to demonstrate the ideological influences on the development of slavery and African American political thought, as well as how blacks' ideas and activities relate to larger developments such as the Great Awakening, the American Revolution, and antislavery activity throughout the American North and the larger Atlantic World.

In addition to the introduction, five substantive chapters detail the emergence of slavery in Massachusetts and the development of an antislavery movement among African Americans in the colony/state. The periodization reflects the emergence of abolitionist activity among blacks during the revolutionary era and their influence on black abolitionists in Massachusetts during the 1820s and 1830s. This periodization extends the traditional narrative of the antislavery movement to show the continuity from one era to the next, and the influence of those traditionally left out of histories of the movement.

Chapter 1: Puritanism and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1630-1764: This chapter provides the necessary context for understanding the emergence of black abolitionism in Massachusetts. After providing a brief overview of the Puritan migration to Massachusetts in the first section, I employ a comparative analysis to address the development of a legal code in Massachusetts based on the Old Testament and demographic factors that gave slaves rights they were denied in South Carolina, among other colonies. I then examine the writings of prominent ministers such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Willard and their attitude toward conversion and education of slaves, while turning next to an examination of black religious practices in Massachusetts before the Great Awakening along with the type of work slaves performed. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the First Great Awakening, analyzing

the growing presence of blacks within white churches as well as the rise of black exhorters that challenged traditional social roles and demonstrate the influence of Puritanism of African American religion in the colony.

Chapter 2: Black Abolitionist Writers in the Age of Revolution, 1761-1784: This chapter focuses on four writers, Phillis Wheatley, Caesar Sarter, Lemuel Haynes, and an anonymous author known as “A Son of Africa.” I begin the section on Phillis Wheatley with an examination of the emerging racial and proslavery arguments prevalent throughout the Atlantic World to establish the importance of blacks’ production of literature as a tool in the antislavery movement. I then move to an analysis of the antislavery ideology contained in Wheatley’s poetry and letters, along with the reception of these by prominent whites throughout the Atlantic world. In the next two sections I conduct a similar analysis of essays that “A Son of Africa” and Caesar Sarter published in the *Massachusetts Spy*, both self-identified as black men in their articles, and I examine both their ideology and the spread of their ideas. These sections analyze Sarter’s appropriation of the Puritan jeremiad as a tool in the abolitionist movement and “A Son of Africa’s” appropriation of whites’ political ideology of natural rights for the purpose of abolitionism. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of some of the early writings of black Puritan minister Lemuel Haynes, a minuteman in Massachusetts during the Revolution, linking his thought to that of Wheatley and other black writers of his time. This chapter demonstrates the importance of black writers and their efforts to undermine ideas of white superiority, which were central to the creation of an interracial antislavery movement in eighteenth century Massachusetts.

Chapter 3: “We Expect Great Things”: Black Petitioning and Organized Abolitionism in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1762-1780: This chapter begins with a discussion of

resistance activities by blacks in colonial Massachusetts, such as running away and suing for freedom, and early abolitionist efforts by whites to show the context in which organized black abolitionism arose. I then turn to an analysis of petitions presented by committees of blacks and argue that they in fact represent the beginning of the antislavery movement in America. I discuss the language of the petitions to show the political ideology blacks employed in the fight against slavery, and specifically, how they tried to appeal to the political ideals of the American revolutionaries. In this chapter I also examine the reception of these petitions by white abolitionists and the Massachusetts legislature to demonstrate the influence the petitioners had on pushing whites to consider abolishing slavery and the slave trade. I end with a discussion of black petitions throughout New England to suggest that black abolitionists in Massachusetts were central to the antislavery movement within their state and also shaped the political consciousness of African American activists throughout the North.

Chapter 4: Abolition in Massachusetts and the Northern Antislavery Movement, 1781-1825: This chapter begins with a discussion of the Massachusetts Constitution to provide the context in which blacks were able to help abolish slavery in the state. I then discuss the case that ended slavery in the state based on an interpretation of the new state constitution in 1781 and the abolition of the slave trade in the state after the kidnapping of three blacks prompted Prince Hall and others to present a petition that initiated debates on abolition in the legislature in March 1788. I end the chapter with an analysis of the creation of all-black institutions and their role in attacking slavery materially and ideologically and the impact of individuals such as Paul Cuffe and black institutions in establishing contacts with abolitionists throughout the Atlantic world to help forward their antislavery agenda.

Chapter 5: The Politics of Slavery and the Growth of Abolition in Early Antebellum Massachusetts: This chapter demonstrates the link between eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionists in Massachusetts and the contributions of the latter to antislavery reform in nineteenth century America. I begin with a discussion of the politics of slavery in America's early antebellum period. I then analyze the writings and abolitionist activities of black Bostonian David Walker to demonstrate the continuity of radical abolitionist ideas from the eighteenth century and the importance of these ideas in the development of antislavery arguments in the 1820s and 1830s. After my discussion of Walker I turn to the interracial cooperation among black and white abolitionists in Massachusetts and examine the generational continuities among black activists. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of Maria Stewart's work and the rise in female activism to show both the continuities from earlier abolitionist efforts and the important changes that took place in the movement by the early 1830s.

CHAPTER 1: PURITANISM AND SLAVERY IN MASSACHUSETTS, 1630-1764

Masters, give unto your Servants, that which is Just & Equal, Knowing that ye also have a Master in Heaven—Colossians 4:1

Well then, poor Ethiopians, do you now stretch out your Hands unto the Lord; even those poor Black Hands of yours, the Lord calleth for them—Cotton Mather

Introduction

In 1694 John Saffin, a wealthy landowner and magistrate of the Massachusetts Bay colony, drew up a document placing his slave Adam under the service of his tenant, Thomas Shepard, for seven years. At the end of this period Saffin promised to “make free my said Negro man named Adam, to be fully at his own dispose and liberty as other Freemen are or ought to be...Always Provided that the said Adam my servant do in the mean time go on chearfully [sic], quietly, and industriously in the lawful business that either my self or my Assigns shall from time to time reasonably set him about or imploy him in.”¹ According to Saffin, he rented Adam to Shepard because “knowing the said Negro to be of a proud, insolent and domineering spirit...I thought to work upon his natural Reason; and for his own benefit to oblige him to obedience...I promised him his Freedom.”² After two years it was clear that Adam was not performing his duties as Saffin or Shepard hoped, thus Shepard encouraged Adam by giving him a piece of land on which to plant tobacco, where Adam

¹ John Saffin, *A Brief and Candid Answer to a Late Printed Sheet, Entitled, The Selling of Joseph* (Boston, 1701), 8-9.

² Ibid, 6.

made three pounds a year. Shepard even let Adam eat at the table with his wife and children, a practice that Saffin deplored. Despite these allowances Adam grew “so tolerably insolent, quarrelsome and outrageous [sic],” according to Saffin, “that the Earth could not bear his rudeness.”³ Shepard asked Saffin to take Adam back one year before his term was to expire, which Saffin did, yet in March of 1700 Adam left Saffin’s house and proceeded to go about Boston at his leisure.

Adam’s departure from Saffin’s house occurred while the latter was on a trip. Upon Saffin’s return Adam told him that he must go and see Samuel Sewall. There, Sewall produced the court document Saffin had drawn up in 1694 and informed Saffin that he should free Adam as promised. Saffin replied that Adam had not fulfilled his side of the bargain and did not deserve his freedom. Adam sued for his freedom and the case eventually went before the Superior Court of Judicature, on which Sewall sat. Adam won his freedom in this court in 1703, despite Saffin’s having brought forth at least five witnesses testifying that Adam was, among other things, “a very disobedient, turbulent, outrageous and unruly Servant in all respects these many years.”⁴ Adam remained in Boston as a free man, showing up in the Selectmen’s records on a number of occasions as a “free negro or mulatto” required to perform service for the city in lieu of militia duty.⁵

For historians of slavery and abolition this case poses some interesting questions. Why was Adam even able to enter into a legally binding contract in the first place? And secondly, how was he able to sue for his freedom and persuade the court to recognize his

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 7-8; Quote on pg. 9.

⁵ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Records of Boston Selectmen: 1701-1715* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1884), 72.

rights over that of a prominent white man? It appears that in Massachusetts, colonial leaders granted slaves rights that they did not enjoy in other British North American colonies, a situation analogous to that of Latin American and Spanish Caribbean colonies. Slave codes throughout Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean routinely granted enslaved Africans legal rights, including the right to own property, enter into contracts, serve as witnesses, and even purchase their own freedom. These practices were not as common in the British North American colonies, however. While Castilian and Portuguese slave codes made it a capital crime to kill a slave, for instance, a 1669 Virginia statute absolved masters from punishment for killing slaves during correction, arguing that no master would willingly destroy his property.⁶

The attitude toward evangelizing slaves in Massachusetts similarly had more in common with the colonies of the Spanish Caribbean than those of British North America. While white southerners were often opposed to Christianizing their slaves until the mid-eighteenth century, according to religious historians Mechal Sobel and Albert Raboteau, ministers in Massachusetts emphasized conversion of Africans from the seventeenth century.⁷ This situation in Massachusetts was similar to Spanish slave colonies, where the Catholic Church secured for slaves the right to the sacraments. Indeed as Jorge Canizares-Esguerra argues, the outlook of New England colonists drew heavily from that of their

⁶ Herbert S. Klein and Ben Vinson III, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 165-6; Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 312; In Virginia whites and blacks at times interacted on a footing of equality for two generations, but this situation started to change by the 1670s in the social realm and had already done so in the legal one. See T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *"Myne Owne Ground": Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640-1676* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 5-6.

⁷ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 127-53; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979).

Spanish predecessors in the New World, especially in the belief that the devil had occupied it unmolested for centuries and it was now their job to introduce Christianity to the land. This shared cultural outlook drew from their medieval past and influenced both their evangelization efforts toward Native Americans, and later Africans, in their midst. So why was Massachusetts' legal system and emphasis on evangelism to slaves different from the southern colonies? And how did these differences affect African American life? It is these central questions which this chapter will address.⁸

Slaves were able to exercise legal and sacramental rights in Massachusetts due to demographic and religious factors. The proportion of slaves in the colony never reached more than two percent at any time, thus masters did not feel the need to develop harsh slave codes as southern slaveholders did. Although the number of slaves remained low in the colony, the influence of religion while slavery developed was also paramount. Puritans modeled their legal system on the Old Testament, which says slaves must be given certain rights. Furthermore, Puritan covenant theology mandated that this "New Israel" conform to God's law in all endeavors. This in effect meant that Puritans would emphasize evangelism to Native Americans and later Africans, believing that converting "heathen" souls would make God look favorably upon their society.

What Puritan ministers did not foresee were the ways that African Americans would be able to benefit from the legal and religious situations in which they found themselves. By giving slaves the right to sue, petition, and enter into contracts, Puritans opened the door for slaves such as Adam to gain their freedom. While the exercise of these rights would not have a significant effect on the institution of slavery in the early eighteenth century, it was the suit

⁸ *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 165-6; Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

of a slave in 1781 that eventually brought about the abolition of slavery in the state. Incorporation of slaves and free blacks into the religious structures of the colony was equally important. In their efforts to convert slaves in the early eighteenth century, ministers such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Willard unwittingly aided in the formation of black communities that would become central to organized abolitionist activity during the revolutionary period. These black communities included religious organizations such as the Society of Negroes established in 1693. Thus, by coming together within Puritan churches, African Americans established the foundation for the later political activism that would be central to achieving the abolition of slavery within Massachusetts. This foundation consisted of group organization and the shared language of Puritan religion.

The history of Puritanism and African American life are two strands of history that are not often tied together. Doing so, however, greatly enriches our understanding of African American religion and politics, as well as the transatlantic influence of the Puritan movement. To understand the ideology of Puritanism and its effect on African American life in Massachusetts, it is useful to briefly explore the background of the Puritan migration to the colony. Under the rule of James I and Charles I in the early seventeenth century, English Puritans came under increasing persecution. This group wanted to continue the work of the Protestant Reformation by purifying the Church of England of the remnants of Catholicism. English Puritans soon ran into difficulty, however, as King James and King Charles saw the Puritan movement as an assault on their authority, which they believed should be absolute in both civil and ecclesiastical matters. Both monarchs forbade preaching by ministers, instead insisting on pre-approved readings from a common prayer book. Charles I also rejected the

idea of a priesthood of all believers, seeking instead as the head of the Church to tell his people what to believe and do in religious matters. By the 1610s and 1620s authorities were imprisoning and executing Puritans at an alarming rate, prompting desires among many to flee England. Many Puritans at first fled to the Netherlands, but finding that country's culture and manners strange, decided to found the Plymouth colony in 1620. These Puritans' primary goal was to practice their religion freely in a place where they could raise their children in a language and culture familiar to them. The Puritans who left England aboard the *Arbella* and six other ships in the spring of 1630 similarly wanted to practice their religion freely, but did not want to separate themselves completely from their English brethren as the earlier Puritans who landed at Plymouth in 1620 wanted to do. Instead they aspired to establish a godly community that would serve as a shining light for their brethren back in England. In his famous sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," John Winthrop told the people on the voyage to Massachusetts: "we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." If they succeeded in establishing a godly community in New England, the Puritans believed they could bring old England back to the ways of God.⁹

In his ship-board sermon, Winthrop articulated the belief of Puritans in natural social hierarchies based on divine will and provided a justification of sorts for slavery. He argued that "God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean and in subjection."¹⁰ In addition to a justification of social

⁹ Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), 25-46; John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" in *Reading the American Past: Selected Historical Documents, Volume 1: To 1877*, ed. Michael Johnson (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 56.

hierarchy, Winthrop's sermon is an early model for the contradiction in American thought that asserted that the nation should be a beacon of light and a shining example to others, while keeping certain peoples in thralldom by design. As it turned out, those peoples who were to be the most "mean and in subjection" in Winthrop's colony would be Indians and Africans.

White Massachusetts residents began enslaving Indians after the Pequot War of 1637, just seven years after they arrived, when they sent fifteen boys and two girls to Bermuda on the slave ship *Desire* in July of that year. According to Winthrop, this ship returned from the West Indies seven months later, bearing "some cotton, and tobacco, and negroes."¹¹ Many more voyages of this kind occurred in the ensuing years. Colonial authorities in 1639 commented on the growing number of blacks in the state, and travelers from the 1640s to the 1660s noticed the growing familiarity of Massachusetts residents with slavery. In 1644, merchants in Boston began to engage in the African slave trade, outfitting three ships for sail in an attempt to cut out the West Indian middle man.¹²

In 1641 Massachusetts Bay legalized slavery and the institution quickly became an important part of the colonial economy. The *Body of Liberties*, passed by the legislature of the colony in 1641, reads,

There shall never be any bond slaverie, villinage or captivitie amongst us unless it be lawfull captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly selle themselves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israell concerning such persons doth morally require.¹³

¹¹ George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 5.

¹² Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942; New York: Atheneum, 1971), 20; Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery*, 5-8.

¹³ *Ibid*, 12-13.

The ambiguities of this clause, which started off seeming to outlaw slavery and then proceeded to sanction the institution under certain circumstances, opened the door for those who wished to import slaves for economic gain, making Massachusetts the first colony in British North America to legalize the institution. In 1672 colonial leaders amended the law to make slavery a heritable condition by dropping the term “such strangers,” making it possible for blacks born in Massachusetts to be slaves for life.¹⁴

From the early years of settlement in Massachusetts, masters used slaves for a variety of purposes. Initially, they helped to develop the economic infrastructure by clearing land, building barns, breaking up soil, building docks, and making roads. Slaves generally worked at least twelve hours a day, yet the stamina of the owner determined the pace of work because he usually labored side by side with servants and slaves. Until the era of the American Revolution, most residents of Massachusetts earned their living by farming and masters used many slaves in agricultural work. Whites also used black slaves as domestic workers, however, and in the coastal regions a number of blacks worked in the shipping industry, either aboard ships or as ship joiners, carpenters, and rope makers. Other slaves worked as blacksmiths, caulkers, bakers, shoemakers, and tailors.¹⁵ Extant records indicate the importance of slavery to the colonial economy. In a letter to his brother-in-law Governor John Winthrop, Emmanuel Downing expressed his wish for another Indian war, writing “If upon a Just warre the lord should deliver them into our hands, wee might easily have men woemen and Children enough to exchange for Moores.” Downing wrote to Winthrop that he

¹⁴ *The General Laws and Liberties of the Massachusets [sic] Colony: Revised & Re-printed, by Order of the General Court Holden at Boston* (Cambridge: Samuel Green, 1672), 20.

¹⁵ Lawrence William Towner, *A Good Master Well Served: Masters and Servants in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620-1750* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 103-113.

did not believe the new colony could thrive without a sufficient stock of slaves. In the letter he also claimed that slavery was a much more profitable system of labor than indentured servitude. “I suppose you know verie well how wee shall maynteyne 20 Moores cheaper then one English servant,” he told Winthrop.¹⁶

The variety of occupations in which masters could employ slaves illuminates why slavery quickly became part of the New England economic system. Despite the profitability of the institution, however, Puritan-influenced law granted slaves some of the liberties and rights of Christians in accordance with biblical precepts. The 1646 revision to the *Body of Liberties* provided, “Every man whether Inhabitant or foreigner, free or not free shall have libertie to come to any publique Court... and either by speech or writeing to move any lawfull, seasonable, and materiall question, or to present any necessary motion, complaint, petition.”¹⁷ This statute demonstrates Puritans recognized the humanity and rights of slaves by allowing them access to the legal system, access that colonies such as South Carolina later denied. The case of Adam Saffin demonstrates that this recognition was not simply theoretical, and an earlier case from 1645 similarly highlights the influence of religion on ideas about slavery.

During that year two merchants, a Mr. Smith and Mr. Keser of Boston traveled to the coast of Africa where they attacked a village, killed one hundred people and kidnapped two black men to sell as slaves. Smith and Keser brought the Africans back to Boston and Richard Saltonsall immediately petitioned the General Court to prosecute the two because “it

¹⁶ “Emmanuel Downing to John Winthrop,” in *Winthrop Papers, Volume V:1645-1649* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1947), 38.

¹⁷ “A Coppie of the Liberties of the Massachusetts Collonie in New England,” *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd ser., 8 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1843), 218.

is apparent that Mr. Keser upon a sabbath day gave chace to certaine Negers; and upon the same day took divers of them; and at another time killed others.”¹⁸ Saltonsall accused the two of murder, manstealing, and breaking the Sabbath, all of which were “expressly capitall by the law of God.”¹⁹ In October 1645 the House of Deputies granted Saltonsall’s petition and ordered “that Capt Smith and Mr Keisar be laid hold on and committed to give answer in convenient time thereabouts.”²⁰ According to John Winthrop, colonial magistrates freed the slaves because Mr. Smith had kidnapped them, an unacceptable method of attaining slaves under the 1641 statute. This case demonstrates that religious precepts greatly influenced ideas of slavery in Massachusetts, causing Puritans to recognize and grant limited legal rights to African slaves.²¹

One of the reasons that Puritans granted slaves rights that other slaveholding colonies denied them was the smaller slave population. Massachusetts contained virtually no blacks in 1641, the year that the General Court first legalized the institution. As a result, colonial leaders were not in constant fear of slave rebellions. The population of Africans in Massachusetts would remain small over the next century, with only 1,374 blacks in Boston and about four thousand in the entire colony. Although the population of blacks in the colony

¹⁸ Richard Saltonsall, “Petition of Richard Saltonsall, 1645” in Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America, Volume III: New England and the Middle Colonies* (Washington, D. C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1930-5), 6-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England: Printed by Order of the Legislature* (Boston: W. White, 1853-4), III, 46.

²¹ John Winthrop, *Winthrop’s Journal: “History of New England,” Volume 2: 1630-1649* (New York: Elibron Classics, 2005), 252-3.

remained small, most slaves were clustered along the eastern seaboard, especially in Boston, thus they were still able to impact the economy and culture of the colony.²²

The proportion of blacks in Massachusetts never reached more than two percent of the population, numbers which contrast sharply with southern colonies such as Virginia and South Carolina and the British Caribbean Islands of Jamaica and Barbados. While no more than one thousand slaves lived in Massachusetts in 1700, by 1670 Barbados already had 35,000 slaves compared to 25,000 whites and Jamaica had 9,000 slaves to 8,000 whites. In the first decade of the 18th century Virginia imported 7,700 slaves, bringing their total number close to 20,000, or forty percent of the entire population. South Carolina surpassed Virginia in terms of the proportion of slaves in its population, achieving a black majority by the year 1708. In 1740 there were 40,000 slaves compared to 20,000 whites in South Carolina, prompting incessant fears among the slaveholding class about rebellion and resistance. These fears were well-founded as a group of slaves in the colony carried out the Stono Rebellion in 1739, attempting to escape to Spanish Florida. Whites stamped out the rebellion and the legislature passed a harsh slave code that denied slaves the right to hold property, congregate together, or learn how to read.²³

Demographics was one important factor that influenced the development of slavery and the rights blacks could exercise while in bondage, but the original intentions of colonial settlers in emigrating were even more significant. In Virginia most settlers were young, male, and in search of wealth. They were looking for riches such as precious metals or the

²² Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 14-22; John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 457

²³ Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 23-67; Wood, *Black Majority*, 36, 308-324; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 96, 99, 117-131, 230.

opportunity to develop staple crops which they could sell on a large scale. Slavery was not part of the settlers' original plans, yet after the discovery of tobacco it quickly became the prominent labor type in the colony and overtook indentured servitude as the primary form of labor by the end of the seventeenth century. After the tobacco boom in Virginia, British colonists settled Barbados with the hopes of replicating Virginia's success, but neither tobacco nor cotton took root and they switched to sugar from 1640 to 1660, achieving great success with that crop. South Carolinians also emigrated primarily for economic reasons. Most of the early settlers came from Barbados, where land had grown scarce and resources monopolized by the most prominent slaveholders. They brought their system of slavery with them from the West Indies, as well as their slaves, and immediately began searching for a staple crop that would thrive, which they found in 1695.²⁴

These situations contrast sharply with those of Massachusetts, where the residents emigrated primarily for religious reasons. Puritans came to the New World to establish a godly community and modeled their legal system on the Old Testament, where the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy contain a number of provisions regulating treatment of slaves.²⁵ Unlike Virginia and South Carolina, in Massachusetts demographic factors and religion combined to shape an institution of slavery that enabled a number of slaves to learn to read and write, as well as form communities within churches. This access to literacy and a

²⁴ Wood, *Black Majority*, 8-25; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 28-31; For the introduction of rice as a staple crop in SC and its impact on Lowcountry society see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 142-176.

²⁵ See for instance Exodus 21:20-“And if a man smite his servant, or his maid, with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall surely be punished”; Deuteronomy 24: 7-“If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die”; Exodus 21:16-“And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death” KJV.

church community resulted from the views of prominent Puritan clergymen who insisted that slaves were an integral part of larger religious and familial institutions.

Chief among these clergymen was Samuel Willard, a member of the second generation of Puritan divines in Massachusetts and one of the most influential ministers of his era. His prominence in the colony suggests that his views on the just treatment of slaves and duty of masters to convert them would ensure proper conformity by slaveowners to the 1646 statute. Willard served as the minister of Boston's Old South Church from 1678-1707 and as vice president of Harvard from 1701 until his death in 1707. In addition to regular preaching on Sundays, prominent Puritan ministers such as Willard often gave lectures once a month in the middle of the week. These were different from Sunday sermons in that they generally expounded on systematic theology, and thus often had other ministers in attendance. From 1688 until 1707, Willard gave one lecture every month, and these were compiled in 1726 as the *Compleat Body of Divinity*. This work, a corpus of over one thousand pages, was the largest project any printer had undertaken until that time and the only systematic theology in New England until Samuel Hopkins published his *Systems of Doctrine* in 1793.²⁶

In some of these lectures, Willard considered the nature of servitude and the reciprocal duties of masters and slaves. To Willard, the word servant "applied to all such in a Family as are under the Command of a Master."²⁷ While there were differing degrees of servitude, servants were part of the family, thus "there is a Duty of Love which Masters owe

²⁶ Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 103; For Willard's career, see George William Dollar, "The Life and Works of the Reverend Samuel Willard (1640-1707)," *Church History* 31 (1962): 232

²⁷ Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity...* (Boston: B. Green and S. Kneeland, 1726), 614.

to their servants...and the poorest slave hath a right to it.”²⁸ This duty of love, according to Willard, meant that masters should watch over both the bodies and souls of their slaves, which included treating slaves with justice. For Willard, just treatment of slaves meant that no master “hath an Arbitrary Power over his servant, as to life and death.”²⁹ This power belonged to the civil government alone, thus, unlike colonial Virginia, masters in Massachusetts could face capital punishment for killing a slave. Furthermore, owners could not command their slaves to do anything that was either sinful or unlawful. Lastly, in his admonition to servants on their duties, Willard said that they must practice patience and submission at all times; if a servant “be injuriously treated,” however, “he may make his Orderly application to the Civil Magistrate, whose Duty it is impartially to afford him a redress, upon a clear Proof of it.”³⁰

Willard’s views echoed the 1646 statute from the *Body of Liberties* which stated that all inhabitants of the colony had the right to petition and bring suits in court. Willard’s notion and the earlier law stating that slaves should have the same rights as other Christians were most likely conceived to prevent masters from abusing their slaves. Blacks could capitalize on these privileges, however, to gain recourse to the legal system when they believed they were treated unjustly. These injustices often involved promises of freedom that masters later disallowed for one reason or another, as in the case of Adam Saffin.

Other prominent ministers, including Cotton Mather, added their voices to the chorus arguing for fair treatment and conversion of slaves. Mather was one of the most well-known

²⁸ Ibid, 614.

²⁹ Ibid, 615.

³⁰ Ibid, 616.

and respected men of his era. He was born on 12 February 1663, entered Harvard at the age of eleven years, and was ordained in Boston's Second Congregational Church in 1685, with Samuel Willard assisting in the imposition of hands ceremony. Cotton Mather began his ministry as assistant to his father Increase Mather, took charge of the congregation when Increase left for England in 1688, and remained the head pastor until his death in 1728. During his tenure at the Second Congregational Church, Mather became the most prolific writer of his era on theological issues. In 1714 he also became a member of the Royal Society of London and this organization recognized him for his scientific achievements.³¹

Mather was certainly not an abolitionist, as he owned slaves for much of his adult life. Like Winthrop and other Puritans, Mather accepted the notion that gradations in society were natural and necessary. One of his biographers wrote that Mather "viewed class structures as though the world were simply a gigantic monastery without walls, a school of obedience to God, to be learned by careful subservience to superiors or responsible management of inferiors."³² An integral part of this responsible management of inferiors was the conversion and education of slaves, a viewpoint that Willard likely influenced because Mather and other ministers usually attended his monthly lectures.

In a number of writings, including his personal diary and published sermons and tracts on the subject, Mather elucidated his views of the institution of slavery and of the duties owed to both slaves and free blacks by masters and ministers. On 13 November 1698, Mather recorded in his diary: "This Day, I baptized four Negro's; and the Lord helped mee, to make this Action, a special Occasion of my glorifying Him: especially, with what I then

³¹ Kenneth Silverman, *Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, 5-45, 254.

³² Richard F. Lovelace, *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1979), 233-4.

spoke unto the rest of that Nation.”³³ In his diary entry of 13 October 1706, Mather noted receiving a slave as a gift from his congregation, an occurrence which was quite common in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. According to Mather, this gift was “a mighty Smile of Heaven” on his family. He named the slave Onesimus and determined that, with God’s help, he “would use the best Endeavors to make him a Servant of Christ.”³⁴ In naming his slave Onesimus, Mather likened himself to the apostle Paul, who, in a letter to Philemon, indicated that he had befriended his slave Onesimus while imprisoned, and the two had grown so close that Paul considered the slave to be like a son to him. Paul advised Philemon to receive the slave “not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved.”³⁵ Like Paul, Mather viewed all slaves as potential brothers in Christ, giving him a sense of obligation to his slaves as a master, and to the free blacks in his congregation as a minister. Mather’s diary also indicates that he viewed slavery as an institution that God sanctioned because he accepted a slave from his parishioners and attributed their kindness to God smiling down upon him. While many of his writings and sermons discussed his understanding of the slaveholders’ obligations to blacks, he never intended blacks to use his efforts at conversion to attack slavery.

As a minister Mather felt obligated to convert slaves and free blacks, as well as instruct them in the knowledge of God, both of which became important to the formation of a black community in Boston. He noted in May 1718: “I have a Number of black Sheep in my Flock, which it is time for me again, to send for; and pray with them, and preach to them, and

³³ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, Volume I: 1681-1709* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1957), 278.

³⁴ Ibid, 579; Slaveholding among the New England clergy was fairly common. Between 1717 and 1783, about 118 Harvard educated New England ministers held more than 200 slaves. See Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 196.

³⁵ Philemon 1:10, 16. KJV

enquire into their Conduct, and encourage them, in the ways of Piety.”³⁶ Even prior to baptizing the four blacks in 1698 Mather had been ministering to the enslaved since at least 1693. He noted in his diary that year that “a company of poor *Negroes*, of their own Accord, addressed mee, for my Countenance, to a Design which they had, of erecting such a Meeting for the Welfare of their miserable Nation that were Servants among us.”³⁷ Mather agreed to the formation of this “Society of Negroes” and drew up rules for the organization. The blacks were to meet on Monday evenings, praying together and listening to a sermon that Mather prepared for them. They were also to “at all Times avoid *wicked Company*” and to admit none to their meetings without the consent of “the *Minister* of God in this place.” Members were to abstain from the sins of drunkenness, lying, stealing, and disobedience. They also pledged that “Wee will, as wee have Opportunity, sett ourselves, to do all the good Wee can to the other *Negro-Servants* in the Town.”³⁸ The language of these rules suggests they were a synthesis of the views of the blacks and those of Mather. On the one hand it appears that Mather wanted to control who could participate in the Society as a possible way of limiting slave resistance, while on the other hand the slaves’ input is evident in their desire to do all they can to help other blacks, evincing a spirit of Christian brotherhood.

The formation of this society reveals the importance of evangelism to blacks among white leaders in Boston, but more significantly, it demonstrates blacks’ desires for Christian fellowship with other blacks in colonial Massachusetts. It was the slaves themselves who desired to form the Society of Negroes, according to Mather, indicating a clear interest in

³⁶ Cotton Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, Volume II: 1709-1724* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1957), 532.

³⁷ *Diary of Cotton Mather, Volume I*, 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

communion with other blacks. So what benefits would conversion to Christianity, or at least participating in Christian fellowship, hold for Massachusetts blacks? At a time when whites segregated blacks to “Negro pews” in their churches, and many slaves lived in households with few other slaves, this society would have been an important source of communal ties for blacks. Jon Sensbach’s work on black religion in the eighteenth century Atlantic World demonstrates that churches and religious societies served a dual function of mentorship and kinship. Coming together in religious organizations helped to socialize new Africans in the Caribbean into their lives as slaves and provided slaves with new kinship groups, as slave traders severed their old ones during the Middle Passage. For blacks in Massachusetts, the Society of Negroes also became a means of education. In 1721, Mather wrote “I have at my own single Expense for many years, maintained a Charity-Schole for the Instruction of Negro’s in Reading and Religion,” indicating that the Society of Negroes helped blacks achieve literacy, a development that historians have argued was vital to both slave resistance and political activity among blacks.³⁹

In addition to supporting the Society of Negroes, Mather published works aimed at convincing fellow Puritans to convert their slaves. In 1696 he published *A Good Master Well Served*, a tract of about fifty pages that he originally preached as a sermon in his Second Congregational Church. Mather began the tract like any other sermon, with a grounding of his ideas in scripture. Among the texts he singled out as most germane was Ephesians 6:5-8, a verse enjoining servants to “be obedient to them that are your masters according to the

³⁹ Mather, *Diary of Cotton Mather, Volume II*, 663; Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca’s Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 92-3; For the relationship between literacy and slave resistance see Wood, *Black Majority*, 324; See also Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”⁴⁰ The last verse was especially important to Mather’s thought because Ephesians 6:9 reminded owners that they also had a master in heaven. Consequently, they had important obligations towards their slaves that God would look either favorably or unfavorably upon them for fulfilling. In Mather’s view, the first of such duties that masters owed their servants was to make sure that they themselves were not servants of Satan, because only those who obeyed God were fit to command servants. Mather then noted that he believed slavery to be a family institution, writing, “masters indeed should be Fathers unto their Servants.”⁴¹ Mather reminded masters that they could not cause their servants to sin, as they were responsible for the souls of those placed under them, nor could they use their servants as beasts of burden. Masters owed their servants discipline, and must take due care to instruct them in the tenets of Christianity, as they would their own children. These injunctions demonstrate that Mather believed in the importance of treating slaves fairly, at least as far as was practicable without freeing them, as well as bringing slaves into Christian fellowship and giving them an education. This focus on fair treatment, conversion, and education by leaders such as Mather played an important role in slave literacy and black community building.⁴²

In addition to this latter tract, in 1706 Mather published a pamphlet specifically addressing the conversion of blacks. He wrote *The Negro Christianized* because he believed that all who had blacks in their household had an opportunity to engage in “the noblest work,

⁴⁰ Ephesians 6:5 KJV.

⁴¹ Cotton Mather, *A Good Master Well Served* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1696), 10; Although Mather here referred to servants, at that time in Massachusetts the words servant and slave were used interchangeably, with the recognition that a slave was a servant for life. See Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 333-334.

⁴² Mather, *A Good Master Well Served*, 10-17.

that ever was undertaken among the Children of men,” namely the conversion of the unregenerate.⁴³ He opened the tract by offering his thoughts on why blacks became slaves in the first place, speculating that God may have sent slaves to masters in Massachusetts for them to instruct the Africans in Christianity. In Mather’s view this process would be a blessing for both master and slave because the slave would receive the benefits of the Gospel, while the master would have an opportunity to gain favor in God’s eyes by working to further His kingdom.

Mather justified the conversion of slaves to Christianity by citing the biblical commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself and by telling masters: “Thy Negro is thy Neighbor.”⁴⁴ Those who did not care for the spiritual welfare of their slaves, Mather pronounced, were not Christians. He attempted to reassure masters that many practical benefits accrued to them when they converted their slaves, arguing that conversion would make slaves happier and more diligent, which would in turn improve the estates of their masters. It is clear that for Mather, religion was the engine driving his thought, but he realized that appealing to the practical benefits of slave conversion would convince more masters to allow their slaves to undergo baptism and join the church.

In *The Negro Christianized* Mather also tackled some of the emerging racial ideologies of the day, one of which claimed that blacks did not have the capacity to reason, thus it was pointless to attempt to convert them to Christianity. He insisted that blacks’ speech, their daily actions, and their improvement in education showed that they were clearly rational creatures. He believed that blacks could be barbarous, but wrote also that the

⁴³ Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, The Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 1.

⁴⁴ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 5.

ancestors of white Massachusetts residents, the Britons, were once a barbarous people before they converted to Christianity.⁴⁵ Thus, Mather espoused an early form of environmentalism whereby all people, including “barbarous” Britons, blacks, and Indians could become “civilized” through conversion to Christianity.

An important aspect of Puritan thought that can further explain their interest in converting blacks was the belief that God had entered into a special covenant with them and would punish their society for breaking that covenant. This belief meant that for orthodox Puritans it was not acceptable to have a large contingent of unconverted individuals living among them. According to religious historian Harry Stout, covenanted societies such as Massachusetts “had to erect governments that preserved internal peace and protected their citizens from outside enemies, but their governments must also establish orthodox religion and suppress rank heresy and immorality.”⁴⁶ If Congregational ministers felt that African religions were unorthodox and immoral, which they most certainly did, it then became their duty to convert slaves and free blacks to uphold God’s covenant with their society.

The conversion of blacks would become even more important as ministers such as Mather and Willard endeavored to avert God’s wrath on Massachusetts for sins ranging from disinterest in the Word of God to the excessive proliferation of taverns. From the mid-seventeenth century onward Massachusetts Puritans had felt that their society was in decline and had begun to take measures to return to the piety of the colony’s founders. Clergymen, for example, viewed King Phillip’s War of 1676 as evidence that God was repaying New

⁴⁵ Ibid, 7-23.

⁴⁶ Stout, *The New England Soul*, 75.

Englanders for the sins of the people, leading to a Reform Synod of Congregational ministers that gathered in Boston in 1679-80. Among these sins was sleeping at sermons, which Increase Mather condemned in a 1682 tract, arguing that “as for sleeping at Sermons, some look upon it as no sin; others account it a peccadillo, a sin not worth taking notice of...But my Text showeth that danger and death is in it.”⁴⁷

Puritan ministers also decried the importation and consumption of large amounts of alcohol, as this development was indicative of religious decline. Alarmed at the growing number of taverns, the General Court tried to limit their increase during the 1680s, but by the end of the decade there were the same number as at the beginning. Speaking out against both the proliferation of taverns and the increasing consumption of rum, Cotton Mather’s 1708 tract *Sober Considerations* argued that rum and drunkenness were disrupting the good order of society and would have awful consequences for New England. Mather especially deplored the trade in rum with Native Americans, charging that because of this trade “the holy and Righteous God, has Employ’d those very Indians, to come upon our Eastern Plantations, with Fire and Sword, and more than once or twice, to bring bloody Desolations upon them all.”⁴⁸ Here we can see Mather employing the Puritan tradition of the jeremiad, which was a “ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal,” according to literary scholar Sacvan Bercovitch, a ritual that Puritan ministers began to employ in the second generation of the settlement, during the 1660s.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Increase Mather, “Sleeping at Sermons,” in *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings* eds. Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2001), 349.

⁴⁸ Cotton Mather, *Sober Considerations, on a Growing Flood of Iniquity* (Boston: John Allen, 1708), 16.

⁴⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), xi.

Solomon Stoddard, minister of the congregational church in Northampton similarly added his voice to the call for reform. Examining the piety of his contemporaries in comparison to the original settlers, Stoddard proclaimed in 1705 that New Englanders “still continue to make a great Profession; but the Providences of God look dark upon us, and are a Testimony that we are departed out of the way.”⁵⁰ In his opinion too many people were practicing pride, envy, and worldliness over things of God. In this situation, according to Stoddard, “God takes vengeance on them, because they are departed from the ways of their Fathers.”⁵¹ Stoddard and the Mathers’ opinion of declining piety were yet another reason ministers worked to convert all people in their society, including slaves. By doing so they could potentially make up for the aforementioned sins of drunkenness, sleeping at sermons, and worldliness among the white population, and perhaps keep blacks from engaging in similar activities.

During the same period in which ministers publicly argued for slave conversion and humane treatment while simultaneously employing Christianity to support slavery, Samuel Sewall articulated an alternative interpretation of Christianity that opposed the institution of slavery. Seventeenth and eighteenth century Puritans had a number of differing theological views, with some considered orthodox and others considered unorthodox. One orthodox position that most subscribed to was predestination, which included the idea that none could know for sure who was of the Elect. Due to their belief in this doctrine of predestination, there was no open ministerial opposition to the conversion of slaves, because according to

⁵⁰ Solomon Stoddard, *The Danger of Speedy Degeneracy* (Boston: B. Green, 1705), 15.

⁵¹ Ibid, 21.

orthodox Puritanism, all were eligible for salvation. However, there was no orthodox position on the institution of slavery itself, thus Samuel Sewall aimed to convince Boston's prominent citizens to oppose it. Sewall was an influential merchant and member of the Massachusetts Superior Court of Judicature, the first independent court in the Western Hemisphere. He had been one of the judges on the witchcraft court of Oyer and Terminer in 1692 and was one of the judges deciding the fate of John Saffin's slave Adam. In 1697 Sewall had appeared in front of his congregation at the Old South Church and repented for his role in the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials. According to one of his biographers he spent the rest of his life trying to atone for this role.⁵²

In 1700, while Adam Saffin's case was ongoing, Sewall wrote and distributed *The Selling of Joseph a Memorial* among magistrates of Boston. On 19 June 1700 he noted in his diary that "having been long and much dissatisfied with the Trade of fetching Negroes from Guinea; at last I had a strong Inclination to Write something about it...when I was thus thinking, in came Brother Belknap to shew me a Petition he intended to present to the General Court for the freeing a Negro and his wife."⁵³ Sewall further indicated his awareness of Cotton Mather's work, noting that "Mr. C. Mather resolves to publish a sheet to exhort Masters to labour their Conversion. Which makes me hope that I was call'd of God to Write this Apology for them; Let his Blessing accompany the same."⁵⁴ Here Sewall demonstrated that despite Mather's intention in strengthening the institution of slavery by Christianizing

⁵² Eve LaPlante, *Salem Witch Judge: The Life and Repentance of Samuel Sewall* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 180-181, 199-210; For the Puritan belief that the idea of God is innate in all men see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939), 270.

⁵³ Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, Volume I: 1674-1708* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 432-433.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 433.

blacks, his efforts at evangelization aroused antislavery sentiments in some whites, and could do so in blacks as well.

Sewall published *The Selling of Joseph* five days after this diary entry, the first antislavery tract printed in New England, and while it did not succeed in gaining widespread support for abolition among whites, it outlined a number of arguments against slavery that became important to later abolitionist writers. Sewall wrote “it is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Co-heirs, and have equal Right unto Liberty.”⁵⁵ He also countered arguments for slavery that claimed blacks were the children of Ham, pointing out that it was actually Ham’s son Canaan who was cursed. Finally, Sewall refuted Mather’s primary justification for slavery by arguing that conversion was not an excuse for enslaving Africans because men were not to do evil to bring about positive results.⁵⁶

Even as Sewall deplored the enslavement of Africans, he presented a problem for blacks because he upheld and helped popularize the racialized attitudes among whites that allowed slavery to flourish. In *The Selling of Joseph*, Sewall posited that it would be impossible for whites to incorporate blacks into the body politic because “there is such a disparity in their Conditions, Colour, and Hair.” He further felt that “as many Negro men as there are among us, so many empty Places are there in our Train Bands, and the places taken up of Men that might make Husbands for our daughters.”⁵⁷ Here he was arguing that the importation of black men to the colony prevented white male emigration, a situation that could contribute to military weakness with the empty spots in militia “train bands,” along

⁵⁵ Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph a Memorial* (Boston, 1700) in *Am I Not a Man and a Brother: The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America, 1688-1788*. ed. Roger Bruns (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1977), 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 10-14.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 11-12.

with skewed sex ratios. To address the problem of too many black slaves in the colony, Sewall advocated bringing in more white indentured servants, partly because, he contended, blacks continually sought their freedom yet they could “seldom use their Freedom well.”⁵⁸

Sewall circulated his pamphlet among colonial leaders of Massachusetts, and just one year after he published his tract the Boston Selectmen passed the following resolution for the representatives of the general Court: “The Representatives ar farther desired To Promote the Encourangeing the bringing of white servts and to put a Period to negros being Slaves.”⁵⁹ While colonial leaders neither debated nor enacted a gradual abolition law, the resolution demonstrates the early formation of ideologies of black inferiority that would play a central role in Massachusetts and the British North American colonies in general. Combined with Sewall’s ideas, the resolution is early evidence of the coupling of abolitionism with anti-black prejudice that would characterize most whites’ participation in antislavery activity until the Civil War.

Shortly after Sewall declared blacks unfit for inclusion into the body politic, colonial leaders’ ideas of European cultural superiority pushed them to take concrete actions to ensure that blacks would have an inferior status. These actions included encouraging employers to import white indentured servants instead of black slaves because they believed whites could make the colony more prosperous, and legislators restricting blacks’ participation in the colonial militia, as service in the militia was a badge of citizenship they did not want extended to blacks. Instead of bearing arms for the colony, the selectmen ordered “each Free negro & mollatto man of this Town, forthwith to attend and perform four days Labour, abt

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Records of Boston Selectmen: 1701-1715* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1884), 5.

repaireing the streets or Highwayes wch is to be part of their Servi[c]e for this present year.”⁶⁰ Free blacks, mulattos, and Indians had to perform at least four days of highway repair, but some, like Adam Saffin, had to perform eight days of service. The distinction in number of days seems to have been based on age because as the years went by the Selectmen reduced the number of days Adam had to serve. In 1708 he had to perform eight days of service, but by 1715 he had to perform only one day. In addition to general highway duty, in 1721 the Selectmen ordered blacks to clean the streets and remove dirt to prevent smallpox from spreading. The evidence suggests that even as some blacks achieved freedom in the Massachusetts polity during the early eighteenth century, colonial leaders attempted to control part of their labor and keep them in an inferior status by denying them traditional participation in the colonial militia, forcing them instead to perform manual labor.⁶¹

Despite the presence of these racial ideologies and government attempts to exclude blacks from the body politic, blacks’ joining and participating in Puritan churches ensured that whites did not completely disenfranchise them and that blacks gained access to the rhetoric and worldview of Puritanism. Ministers continued to emphasize converting slaves in the early eighteenth century, often through baptism. Puritans linked the sacrament of baptism to conversion and church membership. In order to qualify for baptism, both black and white adults had to exhibit godliness in the eyes of ministers and knowledge of the scriptures. Cotton Mather argued that blacks were capable of exhibiting this knowledge through the use

⁶⁰ Ibid, 72.

⁶¹ Ibid, 232; *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Records of Boston Selectmen: 1716-1736* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers, 1885), 82-3; For the link between militia service and citizenship in New England see John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 198-199.

of reason. While no other ministers went as far as publishing a defense of blacks' ability to reason, their emphasis on converting slaves implied acceptance of black's rational nature.⁶²

Slaves' conversion to Christianity in Massachusetts began just as the *Body of Liberties* legalized the institution in 1641, but did not become widespread until the early eighteenth century, shortly after the Royal African Company lost its monopoly on slave trading and the direct importation of slaves to Boston increased.⁶³ At Boston's First Congregational Church the ministers baptized thirty-two blacks between 1700 and 1738. These baptisms included both children and adults, as in the case of "Luse Bush negro Receved [*sic*] into full communion with the church and baptized and her child Peter" on 26 September 1702. This record indicates that a minister baptized Luse and the congregation accepted her as a full member. Puritan churches did not confer membership easily. To achieve this status Luse would have had to demonstrate godliness and knowledge of the scriptures, thus she may well have been literate. She also would have had to give an account of saving grace from God. Men often gave this account to the entire congregation themselves, but Luse probably had someone read her account aloud to the church because Puritans, like many other Christian sects, prohibited women from speaking in church during this period. Accounts of saving grace often included an awareness of depravity, a struggle with this realization for a period of time, then a realization that one was among God's elect, followed by a newfound determination to live a godly life. From 1702 to 1708 at least eight

⁶² For the requirements of baptism in Congregational churches see Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment*, 110-111.

⁶³ See John Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal, 1630-1649: Volume II*, 26 for his observation in 1641 of the baptism of "A Negro woman belonging to Rev. Stoughton of Dorchester, Massachusetts, being well approved by divers years of experience for sound knowledge and true godliness"; For the increased importation of slaves to Boston after the Royal African Company lost its monopoly in 1698 see Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the 18th Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 15.

other blacks underwent baptism and became full members of the First Congregational Church.⁶⁴

By joining Boston's leading Congregational churches, slaves and free blacks helped form religious communities that gave them access to Puritan religious discourse. At Brattle Street Church, home congregation of some of Boston's wealthiest residents, twenty-four blacks underwent baptism from 1709-1736. From 1717 to 1727 Samuel Sewall's son Joseph, minister at Old South Church, baptized at least ten Africans. Cotton Mather was also successful in converting slaves to Christianity. He baptized four blacks alone in 1698, and from 1716-1736 sixteen more blacks received the sacrament in his church, including his own slave Ezor and Ezor's son Abraham. As in First Congregational, Mather's church both baptized blacks and admitted them into membership in the congregation. Undergoing baptism and becoming full members in these churches suggests that ministers saw blacks as spiritually eligible for salvation, and that masters were heeding the advice of men such as Mather and Willard to care for the souls of their enslaved people. The black presence in these churches also indicates that blacks themselves desired to become Christians, probably as a way to form communities of believers upon which they could rely, as the 1693 Society of Negroes did.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Richard D. Pierce, ed. "The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Vol.39* (Boston: The Society, 1961), 101-113; Richard D. Pierce, ed. "The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Vol.40* (Boston: The Society, 1961), 370-425; For requirements for church membership see Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 18.

⁶⁵ Second Church Record Book (Vol. 4: Baptisms and Admissions, 1689-1716 and Vol.5: Baptisms and Admissions, 1717-1741), Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; *The Manifesto Church: Records of the Church in Brattle Square Boston, With Lists of communicants, Baptisms, Marriages, and Funerals: 1699-1872* (Boston: The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), 100-187; Old South Church Records, Microfilm Reel 4, Congregational Library, Boston.

An increasing number of blacks underwent baptism and joined congregations such as Old South Church and Brattle Street Church during the Great Awakening in Massachusetts. The revival period began in 1734 in the western part of the state, Northampton, under the stewardship of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards's grandfather Solomon Stoddard had initiated periodic revivals of religion during the early eighteenth century, but none approached the scope of the Northampton revival of 1734-5. In *A Faithful Narrative*, an account of the revivals written in 1737, Edwards described the conversion of over three hundred people in his community alone. According to Edwards, the revivals touched at least thirty-two other communities in the Connecticut River Valley. Edwards also mentioned that "several Negroes...appear to have been truly born again" during the revival, and that nine blacks joined his church, including one of his own slaves.⁶⁶ His recognition of black conversions further underscores the importance of the Great Awakening to Africans and indicates that Boston was not the only area of the state where whites introduced blacks to Puritan religious precepts.

Edwards's account of the earlier revivals played a key role in initiating even greater revival activity later in the decade. After reading Edwards' account, George Whitefield of England came to preach in the American colonies in 1739 and helped to initiate a flood of black conversions. On 28 September 1740 Whitefield preached at the Old South Church in the morning "to a very crowded auditory" and Brattle Street Church that same evening. He wrote in his journal that after giving these two sermons, "at their request, I then went and

⁶⁶Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprizing Work of God* (London, 1737) in C. C. Goen, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 159; Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 76-77.

preached to a great number of Negroes on the conversion of the Ethiopian.”⁶⁷ In this biblical story the angel of God commanded Philip to travel south from Jerusalem to Gaza, where he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch. Philip and the eunuch spoke about scripture and Jesus and the eunuch asked Philip “see, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Philip replied that “if thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.”⁶⁸ For the slaves and free blacks to whom Whitefield preached, this story would have conveyed that all are equal in the sight of God and that they had just as much right to salvation as white people, including the masters of those enslaved.

Like Mather, Whitefield indicated that it was the blacks themselves who came to him for religious instruction, demonstrating that they viewed Christianity as an important aspect of their lives, one that could help them either build new communities of like-minded believers under slavery or strengthen existing ones. Returning to Boston nine days later, Whitefield again preached in the morning and evening at Brattle Street Church. His efforts at this church seemed to have paid off as twenty-seven blacks underwent baptism in this congregation from 1739-1744. The revival spurred a similar increase in black conversions and church membership at Old South Church, with twenty-four receiving the sacrament during the same period.⁶⁹

African Americans also helped forward the Great Awakening in Massachusetts by participating in church splits and exercising spiritual leadership, both of which assisted them

⁶⁷ George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals* (1738-41), (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 464.

⁶⁸ For the full story of the conversion of the Ethiopian see Acts 8: 26-39; For the quotations see Acts 8: 36-37, KJV.

⁶⁹ *The Manifesto Church: Records of the Church in Brattle Square Boston*, 100-187; Old South Church Records, Microfilm Reel 4, Congregational Library, Boston.

in further internalizing and articulating the discourse of Puritan religion. One such split occurred in Ipswich, Massachusetts, where New Lights, the supporters of the revivals, formed the Congregational Church of Chebacco. Of the original twenty-two members of this new church, four were slaves, including Flora, who left a brief account of this revival period. Flora was the slave of Thomas Choate of Ipswich, a seacoast community about twenty-five miles north of Boston, and she gave a testimony in 1746 concerning the state of her soul and desire for communion with the church. She had been a lay exhorter, demonstrating the opportunities blacks gained during the Great Awakening, yet she fell into sin and felt that her moral shortcomings hurt the revival cause. According to Flora, her chief sins as an exhorter were “spirituall Pride, Ingratitude, Unwatchfulness and Levity or Lightness”—some of the same sins Stoddard and other Puritan ministers had decried in their writings on the declining piety of New Englanders. Her confession was the means by which she would become a church member, and it revealed a realization that she was a sinner. She experienced a subsequent feeling of grace, which she felt God helped her achieve by “bringing home to [her] soul some Texts of holy Scripture.” Flora further wrote that while in a state of sin “God gave me a Spirit of Prayer, out of the Deep I cry’d to him...and the Lord heard, to my Surprize & Astonishment, he ran to my Relief.”⁷⁰ Her language here demonstrates the influence of Puritan discourse on blacks in Massachusetts. She notes that she was surprised that God reached out to her, evincing a feeling of depravity on her part and absolute sovereignty on the part of God, both staples of Puritan rhetoric that would come to play a prominent role in Africans’ political ideology in the years to come.

⁷⁰ *The Confession of Flora Negro To the New-Gathered Congregational Ch[urch] in Chebacco* in Erik R. Seeman, “‘Justise Must Take Plase’: Three African Americans Speak of Religion in Eighteenth Century New England,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 56(1999): 408, 410.

In addition to general fears of social upheaval and distaste for emotive religion, the presence of black exhorters such as Flora caused many individuals to oppose the revivals. Charles Brockwell, an Anglican missionary for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in Salem, wrote derisively that ““Men, Women, Children, Servants, & Nigros are now become (as they phrase it) Exhorters.””⁷¹ Charles Chauncy, minister of Boston’s First Congregational Church, similarly wrote in his *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion* that “another Thing that very much tends, as I apprehend, to do Hurt to the Interest of Religion, is the Rise of so many Exhorters...there are among these Exhorters, Babes in Age, as well as Understanding. They are chiefly indeed young Persons, sometimes Lads, or rather Boys: Nay, Women and Girls; yea, Negroes, have taken upon themselves the Business of Preachers.””⁷² In addition to his opposition to black exhorters, Chauncy opposed religious affections in general, both of which explain why his congregation was not among those that gained a significant number of new converts during the Great Awakening. His and Brockwell’s opposition to black exhorters such as Flora also suggests that this practice was becoming increasingly widespread in some locales, a testament to the influence these revivals had on both black conversions and the gaining of some measure of social standing by blacks in colonial Massachusetts.

The work of itinerant minister Daniel Rogers further confirms the growing presence of black exhorters in Massachusetts. Rogers was a Congregational minister who traveled the eastern seaboard preaching with both George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent. While in Kittery, located in the far eastern part of Massachusetts, during May 1742, Rogers noted that

⁷¹ Ibid, 396.

⁷² Charles Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England* (Boston: Samuel Eliot, 1743), 226; See also his *Enthusiasm Describ’d and Cautioned Against* (Boston: 1742).

“a Negroe man servant of Colonel Pepperell’s broke out and spoke in a wonderful manner of the sweet love of Jesus which he said he felt in his heart to great degree that he could die for Christ. He exhorted all to come and talke of the love of Christ. Another negroe man servant of Colonel Pepperell cryed out in distress.” Rogers then spoke on the history of the blind man in the book of Matthew whom Jesus healed, and “after the blessing a poor negro spoke again.”⁷³ It is clear that Rogers felt the evangelical work of ministers such as Edwards, Whitefield, and himself was having the desired effect among the black population. While on another visit to the eastern part of the state less than one year after his stay at Colonel Pepperell’s he spoke to a young woman who had “a view of ye coming of ye kingdom of God, and particularly of ye negroes being brought into It, and that the Scripture figures of It—viz. ye Stretching out ye hands to Christ 68 Psalm 31 vers. Which word has at this day be remarkably fulfilled in the conversion of many poor negroe slaves in New England.”⁷⁴

While many of Rogers’ entries discuss his efforts at promoting Christianity among blacks, like Whitefield he makes it clear that it was often the blacks themselves who desired religious instruction. Shortly before the split that formed Flora’s congregation in Ipswich, Rogers was in town and noted that “at the Desiree of Some Negroes who came from Rowley, a meeting was called and Mr. Jewel preached in the evening discoursing with poor negroes. The Spirit of God came Sweetly upon me in Faith and Love—we prayed and gave thanks.” After the split that formed the Congregational Church of Chebacco, Rogers preached there periodically, perhaps encouraging Flora’s efforts at exhorting others to come to Christ.⁷⁵

⁷³ *Diary of Daniel Rogers*, New York Historical Society Manuscript Collections, 6 May 1742.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 30 April 1743.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 14 June 1747 and 2 April 1749.

Less than twenty years after Flora's testimony to the church, another series of revivals swept over the community of Ipswich, initiating conversions that further provided blacks with the religious discourse central to the abolitionist activity they would begin in the 1770s. Among these new black converts in the 1760s was Phillis Cogswell, a forty-year-old slave of Jonathan Cogswell. Cogswell initially began attending church during the revivals of the 1740s, but she never had become a full member and felt a decline in piety over the years. Her decision not to join a church changed with the onset of the Seacoast Revivals of the 1760s, however. Like Flora, Cogswell had to give a testimony to the Congregational Church of Chebacco in order to become a member, and her wording similarly evinces the influence of Puritan religious discourse on her worldview. In discussing her awareness of depravity she wrote "I was made sensible my heart was nothing but Sin, and that I had never done any Thing but sin against God and it would have been just with God to cast me into hell."⁷⁶

Phillis's language here echoes that of Jonathan Edwards' famous "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon, in which he told sinners that "the sword of divine justice is every moment brandished over their heads, and 'tis nothing but the hand of arbitrary mercy, and God's mere will, that holds it back."⁷⁷ After the recognition of her sinful state came the relation of God's mercy, when "Christ appeared lovely to my soul.—Sin appeared odious to me, and I tho't I should never sin any more."⁷⁸ Phillis's testimony, less than ten years before the onset of organized abolitionist activity among Massachusetts blacks, highlights the importance of Christianity to blacks in the colony and the growing influence of Puritan

⁷⁶ Phillis Cogswell, *Conversion Narrative of Phillis Cogswell, Negro* in Seeman, "Justise Must Take Plase," 413.

⁷⁷ Jonathan Edwards. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* eds. John E. Smith et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 91.

⁷⁸ Cogswell, 413.

discourse on their own rhetoric. Just as Flora and Phillis Coggswell adopted the Calvinist language of sinners, so too would later black abolitionists adopt a Puritan rhetoric of freedom.

Conclusion

While most studies of abolitionism tend to focus solely on antislavery activity and not on slavery itself, this chapter argues that an examination of the institution of slavery in Massachusetts is a necessary precursor to fully understanding the development of abolitionist activity among blacks in the revolutionary period. The religious ideals of the original settlers to Massachusetts profoundly influenced the way people conceived of slavery and the rights that blacks could exercise while in bondage. These original settlers conceived of their society as a covenanted one, similar to ancient Israel, in which God played a direct role, for good or ill. In order to keep God's favor, Puritans had to follow his commandments and strictures as laid out in the Bible, chief among these being the conversion of non-Christians. Thus, in addition to granting blacks certain rights that leaders in other slave societies denied them, Puritans also emphasized the importance of converting slaves, a practice to which many masters adhered, as extant church records indicate. The emphasis on slave conversion, and the success of ministers in actually achieving conversions, had a number of important consequences for African American life in the colony, including bringing slaves together in organizations such as the Society of Negroes and within churches themselves. Religion also gave slaves access to education. One of the most influential ramifications of Puritans' evangelism to blacks, however, was the use of the discourse of Puritanism itself. By sitting in Congregational churches and absorbing the language of their oppressors, blacks in

Massachusetts gained access to a rhetoric that would prove essential to them in their fight against slavery. This rhetoric would appear in the petitions of slaves to the Massachusetts legislatures during the 1770s, in poetry, in antislavery essays, and eventually in sermons by black ministers. In the long run, African Americans in Massachusetts and throughout the nation would co-opt the language of a covenanted people, arguing that their struggles in this American wilderness were akin to that of ancient Israel and that God would be on their side in the fight against slavery.

CHAPTER 2: BLACK ABOLITIONIST WRITERS IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION, 1761-1784

Introduction

Just three years before the Seacoast Revivals swept through Massachusetts and led to the conversion of slaves such as Phillis Coggswell in 1764, another enslaved girl named Phillis landed in Boston after her forced migration from Africa. This latter Phillis who landed in Boston was also given her master's surname, Wheatley. And as Phillis Coggswell underwent conversion and displayed the influence of Puritan religious ideology on her own religious beliefs, so too would Phillis Wheatley undergo baptism in a Puritan church and demonstrate the influence of Puritan rhetoric. Unlike Phillis Coggswell, however, Phillis Wheatley became widely known on both sides of the Atlantic, due largely to her publication of a book of poems in 1773 and correspondence with individuals such as Samuel Hopkins and the Earl of Dartmouth. Wheatley received her freedom shortly after publishing her book of poetry in 1773, and she later wrote against slavery in a published letter and other poems. She was joined in her efforts to produce antislavery literature by another former slave, Caesar Sarter, an anonymous essayist known only as "A Son of Africa," and Lemuel Haynes, a former indentured servant who became the first black Congregational minister in the United States.

The ideas contained in these individuals' poetry and antislavery essays represent the maturing of the religious ideology that blacks in Massachusetts had been inundated with since the early eighteenth century. Whereas Flora and Phillis Coggswell's conversion

narratives evince the influence of Puritanism but do not discuss other societal matters, the writings of blacks such as Wheatley and Sarter applied the ideas of Puritan ideology to a political critique against the institution of slavery and racial inequality. In mixing their religion and politics these black writers continued a long-standing tradition among white Puritans of explaining the secular world in religious terms.

Religion was not the only method these black writers used to make their case against slavery, however. While it is difficult to separate the secular from the religious in Phillis Wheatley's work, there are a number of elements in her poetry that speak to both the natural rights and republican ideologies so popular during her day. So too with "A Son of Africa" and Lemuel Haynes, both of whom used the very arguments white revolutionaries employed in the struggle for independence for the purposes of abolition. In addition to their connection with specific trends of thought in eighteenth century America, these writers helped undermine justifications for slavery by their very acts of producing literature and entering the public sphere of rational, critical debate.¹ By employing the common literary conventions of their day and speaking to the most important secular and religious ideologies, individual black writers in the era of the American Revolution laid the groundwork for blacks to be seen by some as equal human beings, an important occurrence in a time when blacks' humanity was very much in question and whites were wrestling with the problem of slavery. Thus, their work was central in both undermining slavery and racial inequality, and in supporting

¹ For an analysis of Wheatley's role in the public sphere and the impact this had on abolitionism see Walt Nott, "From 'Uncultivated Barbarian' to 'Poetical Genius': The Public Presence of Phillis Wheatley" *MELUS* 18(1993): 21-32.

the more organized abolitionist movement that arose among Massachusetts blacks at the same time that they began writing.²

Phillis Wheatley

In 1777 the Scottish philosopher David Hume's *Essays, Moral and Political* was posthumously published. In one of the essays in this collection Hume wrote "I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences."³ Writing just four years earlier, Richard Nisbet, a West-Indian living in Philadelphia, published a defense of slavery where he similarly articulated an ideology of white superiority. Speaking of blacks he wrote "it is impossible to determine, with accuracy, whether their intellects or ours are superior, as individuals, no doubt, have not the same opportunities of improving as we have: However, on the whole, it seems probable, that they are a much inferior race of men to the whites, in every respect."⁴ Like Hume's essay, Nisbet argued that blacks were inferior because "they are, in their own country, said to be utterly unacquainted with arts, letters, manufactures, and everything which constitutes civilized life."⁵ Nisbet expounded on Hume's reasoning, however, further postulating that blacks were inferior to whites because of their supposed propensity for constant warfare and their lack of belief in a supreme being. Although Hume

² For the rise of an organized abolitionist movement among African Americans in revolutionary Massachusetts see Chapter 4.

³ David Hume, "Of National Characters," in Eugene F. Miller, ed. *Essays, Moral and Political* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 208.

⁴ Richard Nisbet, *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1773), 21.

⁵ Ibid, 22.

was opposed to the institution of slavery, between them these two writers articulated the primary arguments that would be used to defend slavery and cast aspersions on Africans during the era of the Enlightenment, namely that black people were superstitious, had produced no literature or art, and had not made any significant contributions to scientific knowledge. It was in order to refute ideas like these and defend both their humanity and right to equality that writers such as Phillis Wheatley took up the pen.⁶

Phillis Wheatley was born in West Africa in 1753, probably between the present-day countries of Ghana and Gambia. When she was about seven or eight years old she was captured and brought to America aboard the slave ship *Phillis*. This ship made at least four trips to the coast of Africa between 1760 and 1764, docking three times in Massachusetts and once in South Carolina. Wheatley was among the seventy-five slaves on this ship when it landed in Boston in 1761, and it was there that John Wheatley, a prominent businessman, purchased her.⁷ She was eight years of age. Wheatley's life was not the typical slave experience, even for an urban slave, as her owners recognized her precociousness and encouraged her education by giving her few household chores to perform. She turned out to be a prodigy, acquiring a mastery of the English language in a little over a year and, according to her master, learning to read "the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings."⁸ Wheatley was baptized in the Old South Church in 1771. Her piety combined with her learning helped endear her to some of the more important religious and literary figures of her day, including Mather Byles, Charles Chauncy, and Samuel Cooper, the minister who

⁶ Ibid; For Hume's opposition to slavery see the editor's note in "Of National Characters," 208.

⁷ "The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces>.

⁸ Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings*. ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xiii.

baptized her while visiting from his own congregation. These connections would prove important in helping her get published and in shaping her religious and political ideology.⁹

Wheatley's mistress, Susannah Wheatley, was an intensely pious individual and helped introduce Phillis to an evangelical circle that spanned the Atlantic world, including such prominent individuals as George Whitefield and Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon. It was this latter connection that helped launch Phillis into international fame when she penned a poem honoring George Whitefield, a poem that features two distinctly Puritan ideas, those of predestination and uncertainty over salvation. In September 1770 the Wheatleys hosted Whitefield in their home, and Phillis was probably among the thousands to hear him preach in the Old South Church on 3 September.¹⁰

Within weeks Whitefield had died in Newburyport, a town about fifty miles north of Boston, and Wheatley soon penned an elegy entitled "An Elegaic Poem, On the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the late Reverend, and Pious George Whitefield." In one version of the poem Wheatley has Whitefield speaking to Americans and Africans, saying to the latter: "Take HIM ye *Africans*, he longs for you;/Impartial SAVIOUR, is his title due."¹¹ By arguing that both blacks and whites were eligible for salvation Wheatley spoke to the quintessentially Puritan idea of predestination. In this worldview God had ordained who would be saved and damned from the beginning of

⁹ Margaretta Matilda Odell, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave* (Boston: George W. Light, 1834), 9-11; For Wheatley's August 1771 baptism see Old South Church Records, Microfilm Reel 4, Congregational Library, Boston; For her connection to some of the most prominent religious figures in revolutionary New England see James A. Levernier, "Phillis Wheatley and the New England Clergy" *Early American Literature* 26(1991): 21-38.

¹⁰ James A. Levernier, "Phillis Wheatley and the New England Clergy," 31.

¹¹ Phillis Wheatley, "An Elegaic Poem, On the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the late Reverend, and Pious George Whitefield," in *Complete Writings*, 114.

time, and individuals, while they could look to their lives for signs of their salvation, could never actually know if they were saved. The corollary to this view was that if one could never know that they themselves were of the Elect, neither could they say with confidence that someone else was saved or not, and so no orthodox Puritan could say that blacks were ineligible for salvation. Thus, Wheatley's argument for the impartiality of God's grace spoke to orthodox Puritan theology at a time when the proliferation of both religious ideas and sects was undermining orthodoxy in the colony.¹²

Advertisements for this poem and reviews of Wheatley's work ran in many newspapers throughout New England, helping to introduce her work to a wide readership and undermine proslavery arguments about black mental inferiority. The *Massachusetts Spy* advertised it as the production of "Phillis, a servant girl but seventeen years of age...She has been but nine years in this country from Africa."¹³ The *New Hampshire Gazette* printed an extract of the poem and praised its quality, noting that "this excellent Piece ought to be preserved for two good Reasons, first in Remembrance of the great and good Man, Mr. Whitefield, and second on Account of its being wrote by a Native of Africa, and yet would have done Honor to a Pope or Shakespeare."¹⁴ Both of these ads highlight the exotic quality of the author, having come from Africa and in the colonies but a few short years. Wheatley would capitalize on this recognition, as her future publications would contain numerous

¹² For the orthodox Puritan position on salvation see Bernard Rosenthal, "Puritan Conscience and New England Slavery" *The New England Quarterly* 46(1973): 63-64; For the growth of Christianity before and after the American Revolution that challenged many of the ideas of orthodox Puritans throughout America see Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹³ *The Massachusetts Spy, or, Thomas's Boston Journal* (Boston, MA), 11 October 1770, 3.

¹⁴ *New Hampshire Gazette and Historical Chronicle* (Portsmouth, NH), 19 October 1770, 3.

references to the continent and her status as an African. The ads also demonstrate the favorable reception of her work, an important component of her fight against the institution of slavery.

Wheatley's poem honoring Whitefield, along with her mistress's evangelical connections, helped make her work known to an important patron, Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon.¹⁵ Hastings supported the work of various black Atlantic figures, including James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and John Marrant. The former author published a slave narrative in 1772 that contains a scene that has been seminal to the interpretation of African American literature since the 1980s and can help illuminate the importance of Wheatley's work in challenging notions of African inhumanity. Gronniosaw's narrative primarily covers his spiritual journey, from a young man in Africa with an idea of a supreme being, to his enslavement and eventual conversion under the auspices of his master, who was himself an evangelical preacher. At one point in the narrative, however, Gronniosaw writes that his first master

used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading I follow'd him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open'd it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou'd say something to me; but I was very sorry and greatly disappointed, when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis'd me because I was black.¹⁶

¹⁵ For a study of Hastings life and philanthropic work see Boyd Stanley Schlenther, *Queen of the Methodists: The Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth-Century Crisis of Faith and Society* (Bath: Durham Academic Press, 1997).

¹⁶ James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As related by Himself* in Vincent Carretta, ed. *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the 18th Century* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 38.

Here Gronniosaw recounts his alienation from western culture, and thereby civilization, because of his inability to read, which is itself predicated upon his blackness. He later overcomes this alienation by becoming literate, accepting Christianity, and producing works which authors such as David Hume and Richard Nisbet argued blacks had never done and were therefore inferior to whites. Thus, for black Atlantic authors such as Gronniosaw and Wheatley, reading and writing became the means by which they could prove their ability to reason and their humanity, undermining arguments for slavery in the process.¹⁷

Just one year after Gronniosaw published his narrative, Wheatley journeyed to England to regain her health and oversee the publication of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, a book which established her fame as a literary figure and contributed to the growing critique against slavery in the Atlantic world. In what is perhaps the most well-known poem from this book, Wheatley wrote “’Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there’s a God, that there’s a *Saviour* too./Once I redemption neither sought nor knew/Some view our sable race with scornful eye,/ ‘Their colour is a diabolic die.’/ Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,/ May be refin’d, and join th’angelic train” [emphasis in original].¹⁸ In the first half of this poem Wheatley displayed the influence of Puritan religious ideology on her own thought, specifically the theological ideas that Samuel Hopkins articulated in his work *The Nature of True Holiness*.

¹⁷ The interpretation in this paragraph draws from the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. See esp. his *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the ‘Racial’ Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 21-26 and *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127-137.

¹⁸ Phillis Wheatley, “On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA,” in *Complete Writings*, 13.

Hopkins was the leading proponent of the New Divinity, a theological school of puritan ministers influenced by the ideas of Jonathan Edwards, the celebrated theologian and revivalist from Northampton, Massachusetts. According to religious historian Joseph Conforti, “the New Divinity represented not only the major theological legacy of the Awakening but also the first American school of Calvinism.”¹⁹ Hopkins had studied under Edwards in the 1740s and preached in Wheatley’s home congregation, the Old South Church, in 1768. In his doctrine of disinterested benevolence Hopkins required from individuals complete self-denial, to the point of “being willing to be damned for the glory of God and the good of the universe,” according to Conforti.²⁰ This doctrine had important implications for individuals, but also articulated an answer to the problem of evil, positing that God allows suffering to promote greater good. It was this latter idea that Wheatley spoke to in the first half of her poem, while directly attacking ideas of racial inequality in the second half by arguing again that blacks were just as eligible for salvation as whites and thus should not be seen as inferior.

In addition to Wheatley’s work speaking to the ideas of predestination and disinterested benevolence, her poetry and a published letter evinced the influence of puritan covenant theology. This school of thought came into being during the seventeenth century when leaders such as John Winthrop sought to explain the relationship of New England with God. For most Puritans of that era “a good covenanted society prospers in the world,” according to religious historian Perry Miller, while “a bad one gets what it deserves.”²¹

¹⁹ Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry, and Reform in New England Between the Great Awakenings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1981), 3.

²⁰ Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement*, 5-6.

²¹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939), 482.

Comparing themselves to the ancient Israelites, early New Englanders believed that God inflicted property loss, Indian wars, fires, and storms on a sinful nation in proportion to its crimes. These afflictions would be felt even more by regions such as New England, where it was believed God had established a special relationship with the inhabitants, helping them in their quest to purify the Church of England.²²

In her poem “On the Death of General Wooster” Wheatley employs covenant theology to argue against slavery, asking “how, presumptuous shall we hope to find/Divine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind--/While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace/And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?”²³ Throughout the work she praised the martial valor of General Wooster and looking forward to a Patriot victory in the war to advance the cause of freedom. In these few lines, however, she argued that America will not be successful in the war if it continues to enslave blacks because this practice is immoral and a breach of New England’s covenant with God.

To help forward the cause of abolition Wheatley published a letter to Native American minister Samson Occom that also argued that slavery would hinder the American war effort. Here she wrote that the love of freedom implanted by God lives in the hearts of blacks, and is

impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance...God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honor upon all whose Avarice compels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of the Fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to Convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite.²⁴

²² See Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 46.

²³ Wheatley, “On the Death of General Wooster,” *Complete Writings*, 93.

²⁴ “Phillis Wheatley to Samson Occom, 11 February 1774,” *Complete Writings*, 153.

In writing that God would “get him honor,” Wheatley contended that if American colonists continued their hypocritical practice of holding slaves, God would take revenge upon them, an interpretation supported by her next sentence, where she said she does not desire God’s getting “him honor” to hurt the colonists, but to teach them a lesson. By writing that God would have revenge upon the American colonists for the sin of slavery, Wheatley displayed the influence of Puritan covenant theology on her work and helped contribute to the broadening of that theology, which for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seemed compatible with the institution of slavery.²⁵

Wheatley’s application of Puritan covenant theology relates to the influence of republicanism on her work, and the contribution of her work to republican ideology. Whereas a number of ministers used the crisis with Great Britain to argue that the colonists must practice virtue, secular political thinkers also stressed the importance of virtue in building a republic.²⁶ Indeed for many Americans the very meaning of the Revolution was the new, republican world they would create for themselves. Secular thinkers easily adapted the ministerial focus on virtue, leading to the emergence of the Puritan Ethic, a secularized version of Puritan morality.²⁷ Tied in with ideas from classical Greece and Rome, the secular

²⁵ One definition of “honor” in the Oxford English Dictionary is “a fine sense of and strict allegiance to what is due or right,” which indicates that Wheatley argued that God would get the colonists to strictly adhere to what is right by discontinuing the institution of slavery and the slave trade. See *The Oxford English Dictionary, Volume VII: Hat-Intervacuum* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 357.

²⁶ In the years leading up to the American Revolution ministers began to argue that virtue and abstaining from sin was necessary for salvation, but also for success in the struggle against Great Britain. See Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 457-8.

²⁷ Edmund S. Morgan, “The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 24(1967): 3-43.

thinkers of the revolutionary era argued that virtue consisted in the core values of industry, frugality, simplicity, temperance, and above all, a willingness to sacrifice for the common good. Wheatley's work speaks to many of these core themes.²⁸

Perhaps the most obvious way that Wheatley's poetry displays the influence of republican ideology is her constant use of classical motifs. Wheatley's classicism was certainly influenced by her literary predecessors Alexander Pope and John Milton. It was also very much a product of her time. Many American political writers of the 1760s and 1770s took classical names and used classical quotes, as Wheatley does throughout much of her poetry. This usage demonstrated these writers' erudition and also "helped to shape their values and ideals of behavior," according to historian Gordon Wood.²⁹ Looking back on the great republics of antiquity, and especially the causes of these republics' downfall, writers such as John Dickinson and Thomas Jefferson stressed the importance of virtue for success in building a contemporary republic.³⁰

Wheatley has one poem dedicated specifically to virtue in her 1773 *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. She begins the poem, entitled "On Virtue," by noting that she constantly strives to comprehend what it means to be virtuous. "O Thou bright jewel in my aim I strive/To comprehend thee," she wrote. Just a few lines later she asked virtue to "attend me...thro' my youthful years!/O leave me not to the false joys of time!"³¹ By

²⁸ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 47-53.

²⁹ Ibid, 49.

³⁰ John C. Shields discusses her use of classicism in an article, but connects it only to her reading of classical authors, and not the prevalence of classicism in secular political discourse. See his "Phillis Wheatley's Use of Classicism" *American Literature* 52(1990): 97-111.

³¹ Wheatley, "On Virtue," *Complete Writings*, 11.

indicating her desire to be able to practice virtue at all times Wheatley demonstrated the influence of secular conceptions of virtue on her thought, consisting as they did of temperance and industry. In one of the more famous articulations of virtue as comprised of temperance and industry, Benjamin Franklin noted in *Poor Richards Almanac* that although the government may tax people too much, “Idleness taxes many of us much more, if we reckon all that is spent in absolute Sloth, or doing of nothing.”³² Like Wheatley aimed to do, Franklin counseled his readers to use their leisure as “time for doing something useful.”³³ Her poem “On Recollection” spoke to this theme when she wrote “O Virtue, smiling in immortal green,/Do thou exert thy pow’r, and change the scene;/Be thine employ to guide my future days,/And mine to pay the tribute of my praise.”³⁴ Here Wheatley again posited a desire to be industriousness in following the path of righteousness, one of the key components of secular conceptions of virtue.

Wheatley’s work also spoke to the most important aspect of republican virtue for the American revolutionaries, namely the willingness to sacrifice individual interests to the common good. In the letter to Mary Wooster accompanying her poem on the general she wrote that “it was with the most sensible regret that I heard of his fall in battle, but the pain of so afflicting a dispensation of Providence must be greatly alleviated to you and all his friends in the consideration that he fell a martyr in the Cause of Freedom.”³⁵ According to Wheatley, Wooster should not be mourned but valorized, which is exactly what she

³² Benjamin Franklin, “Father Abraham’s Speech from Poor Richards Almanac, 1757,” in Michael P. Johnson, ed. *Reading the American Past, Selected Historical Documents: Volume I, to 1877* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 80.

³³ Ibid, 81.

³⁴ Wheatley, “On Recollection,” *Complete Writings*, 35.

³⁵ Wheatley, “On the Death of General Wooster,” 92.

proceeded to do in the poem, because he gave up his individual interests in the pursuit of freedom for his country.

This theme of sacrifice similarly appears in her poem to the students at Cambridge. She told the students that “to you ‘tis giv’n to scan the heights/Above, to transverse the ethereal space,/And mark the systems of revolving worlds.”³⁶ Because these future leaders have been so privileged, they must “Let sin, that baneful evil to the soul, By you be shunn’d, nor once remit your guard;/Suppress the deadly serpent in its egg./Ye blooming plants of human race divine.”³⁷ Here Wheatley argued that these students must sacrifice any individual desires they may have to pursue sinful ventures and focus on developing virtue so that they may better lead, an argument influenced in part by the secular ideology of republicanism.

Wheatley’s connection with George Washington also displayed the influence of republicanism on her worldview. According to Gordon Wood, George Washington fit the classical ideal perfectly, as he was restrained, temperate, dignified, and independent. By 1775 Washington was also known for his martial valor, one of the qualities that could make a nation great, according to republican political theory.³⁸ In her 1775 poem to Washington, Wheatley praised him for displaying this valor, writing “thee, first in place and honours,--we demand/The grace and glory of thy martial band./Fam’d for thy valour, for thy virtues more,/Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!”³⁹ By connecting herself to Washington and everything he represented, Wheatley once again displayed the impact of republican ideology on her own political thought.

³⁶ Wheatley, “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England,” *Complete Writings*, 11-12.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

³⁸ Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 50-52.

³⁹ Wheatley, “To His Excellency General Washington,” *Complete Writings*, 89.

Although Wheatley's brand of republicanism may seem distinctly religious, we must keep in mind that many secular political thinkers borrowed their own discourse from that of Puritan ministers, hence the secularization entailed in the Puritan ethic. Critics of Wheatley can never divorce her work from its religious context, but it is wrong to assume that religious figures were the only ideological influences to whom she looked. Her poems honoring important secular figures such as Washington and Wooster attest to the important role that these individuals' actions played in the development of her worldview, and this worldview and the work she produced were central to the emerging abolitionist movement among blacks in Massachusetts. By employing puritan and republican motifs Wheatley helped to undermine the racial theories of men such as David Hume and Richard Nisbet. Wheatley's use of and contribution to puritan theology and republican political philosophy were part of a larger effort to show that blacks were equal to whites and that slavery was immoral.

Phillis Wheatley was so well known, and enough people found her poetry impressive, that even Thomas Jefferson contended with her work when writing about the character of black people. In Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1782, he wrote of blacks: "it appears to me that in memory they are equal to whites; in reason, much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid: and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous."⁴⁰ Jefferson went on to critique Wheatley's work, saying "among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry...Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism."⁴¹

⁴⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782) in *Thomas Jefferson: Basic Writings* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky), 145.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 146.

Jefferson's harsh critiques of Wheatley here and other blacks elsewhere reveal his belief that the two races could not live together in the same society. Since colonizing them outside of the country never became practicable, he would always support keeping them enslaved until a better solution could be found.⁴²

Despite Jefferson's critique of Wheatley, his writing about her demonstrates that he was familiar with her work and felt it necessary to take the time to denigrate her. This points to the popularity of Wheatley in the colonies and throughout the world, as Jefferson originally wrote the *Notes* for circulation among intellectuals in France.⁴³ His essay indicates there were people who believed Wheatley's poetry was evidence of black genius that could flourish under the right circumstances, and as a slaveholder, this would have been threatening to Jefferson. Thus, he felt it necessary to imply that the "compositions published under her name" may not have been written by her at all. This idea was shared by many at the time Wheatley first published her book, making it necessary for her to prove her ability to produce her own works before a self-styled committee of experts in Boston.

Wheatley felt it was necessary to defend her work before this committee prior to publishing her book because, like Jefferson later would, many questioned her ability to produce the poems in her manuscript. The panel included her master, James Bowdoin, John Hancock, Cotton Mather's son Samuel Mather, also a Puritan minister, and his cousin Mather Byles. Wheatley passed the test given her by these gentlemen, among others, and she included an attestation in her original book of poetry, which reads in part, "We whose Names

⁴² For a discussion of Jefferson and other southerners' view on abolition in the early republic see Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 218-222.

⁴³ Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South, A Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 47.

are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following pages, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl...She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.”⁴⁴ Wheatley’s book and passing this test successfully convinced some of these Founding Fathers that blacks had the ability to produce literature of a high quality.

George Washington was similarly impressed by the power of Wheatley’s intellect. In his reply to Wheatley’s October 1775 poem addressed to him, Washington wrote that the poem’s “style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your poetical talents; in honor of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the poem.”⁴⁵ He then said if Wheatley came to Cambridge he would ““be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses, and to whom nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensation.””⁴⁶ Washington’s opinion is a far cry from Thomas Jefferson’s argument that Wheatley was not even a poet, and further demonstrates the power of her poetry to influence some people’s minds concerning the mental capacity of an African American. While Washington was not driven to active support of the abolitionist movement during his lifetime, he did free all of his slaves upon his death.⁴⁷

In addition to her effect on the Founding Fathers, Wheatley exerted an important influence on white abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic. In his 1773 pamphlet *An*

⁴⁴ “To the Publick,” *Complete Writings*, 8; For her trial, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), 5-16.

⁴⁵ George Washington to Phillis Wheatley, 28 February 1776, *ibid*, 37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 38.

⁴⁷ Don Higginbotham, *George Washington: Uniting a Nation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 78.

Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America Upon Slave-Keeping, Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush wrote “there is now in the town of Boston a Free Negro Girl, about 18 years of age, who has been but nine years in the country, whose singular genius and accomplishments, are such as not only do honor to her sex, but to human nature. Several of her poems have been printed, and read with pleasure by the public.”⁴⁸ Here Rush espoused a form of environmentalism similar to that of Cotton Mather’s defense of blacks’ capacity for reason, whereby all people, given the opportunity, could exercise rational faculties. In a similar vein British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, in his *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, reproduced some of Wheatley’s work as evidence that blacks could write just as well as whites, observing that “if the authoress was designed for slavery, (as the argument must confess) the greater part of the inhabitants of Britain must lose their claim to freedom.”⁴⁹ The argument he referred to was the same one Hume, Nisbet, Jefferson and other writers employed concerning blacks’ mental capacity rendering them fit only for slavery. Clarkson’s reply to this argument moved beyond simply contending for blacks’ mental equality, saying Wheatley’s work demonstrated evidence of some blacks’ mental superiority to whites.⁵⁰

Wheatley’s influence on white abolitionists went beyond simply proving that blacks were equal to whites, however; her work also shaped the very arguments that white

⁴⁸ Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America Upon Slave-Keeping* (New York: Hodge and Shober, 1773), 4.

⁴⁹ Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1785; Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Co., 1969), 112.

⁵⁰ During the revolutionary era both black and white abolitionists started positing environmentalist theories of racial “sameness.” See Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 281-294.

abolitionists themselves employed to critique the institution of slavery. Among these individuals was Samuel Hopkins, whom she corresponded with and heard preach in Boston and while visiting Newport, Rhode Island. She also had a close friend in Hopkins' church, a black woman named Obour Tanner, with whom she corresponded regularly. After returning from her trip to England Wheatley wrote Hopkins, telling him she was sending seventeen of her books for him to sell, and two more for her friend Obour. She also mentioned her happiness at the educational promise of two free black men about whom Hopkins had written her. He was training these two men, John Quamine and Bristol Yamma, for missionary work in Africa, and regularly kept Wheatley updated on their progress. In a later letter, Wheatley told Hopkins she had printed three hundred more books, and would again like his assistance in selling them.⁵¹

Since the two corresponded and Hopkins sold Wheatley's books for her, it is quite likely that Hopkins read her work and incorporated her arguments for abolition into his own. If slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington took the time to read Wheatley, an abolitionist who had her work in his possession could have been expected to do no less. In reading Wheatley's poems, Hopkins would have digested her arguments for the spiritual equality of blacks, and the notion that although God brought blacks out of Africa, and through this method Christianized them, whites were still hypocritical for holding their fellow men in chains. His first antislavery publication, written in 1776, three years after Wheatley published her poems, indicated the influence of this train of thought. He rejected the notion that slavery was a positive means of bringing blacks to Christianity, saying it was "a very great wonder and owing to an extraordinary divine interposition...that any of them

⁵¹ Phillis Wheatley to Samuel Hopkins, 9 February 1774 and 6 May 1774, *Complete Writings*, 151-2, 157-8.

should think favorably of Christianity and embrace it.”⁵² Even if blacks did embrace Christianity, however, Hopkins argued that Christ commanded Christians “to go and preach the gospel to all nations, to carry the gospel to them, not to go and with violence bring them from their native country.”⁵³

Hopkins’ antislavery argument, crafted three years after the publication of Wheatley’s poems, adopted some of the same themes she highlighted. Her poem “On Being Brought From Africa to America” argued that although slavery brought the gospel to her, racism and bondage were nonetheless sins because they made Christians treat their fellow men as less than human. At the time Hopkins published his first essay in 1776, he had probably also read Wheatley’s published letter to Samson Occom in 1774, in which she argued that God would have revenge against Americans if they continued in their sinful ways. Hopkins employed this same argument in a 1776 antislavery sermon, noting that “tis impossible for God to save America this Day without a reformation. But as our hands are full of Blood his holiness and Justice oblige him to destroy us unless we wash ourselves by reformation.”⁵⁴ In a second antislavery tract, published in 1793, he similarly asked “have we not all reason to fear that the vengeance of heaven will fall upon us, as a people, in ways perhaps which are not now thought of, unless we repent and reform?”⁵⁵ Whereas Puritan ministers such as Hopkins had often spoken of God’s covenant with New England, and the consequences that would ensue

⁵² Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans* in Roger Bruns, ed. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother: The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America 1688-1788* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1977), 403.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Jonathan D. Sassi, ‘*This Whole country have their hands full of Blood this day*’: *Transcription and Introduction of an Antislavery Sermon Manuscript Attributed to the Reverend Samuel Hopkins* Reprinted from the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 112(2004), 81.

⁵⁵ Samuel Hopkins, *A Discourse Upon the Slave-Trade, and the Slavery of the Africans* (Providence: J. Carter, 1793), 18.

were this covenant broken, African American writers such as Wheatley influenced their broadening theological perspective to include remaining free of slavery as an essential term of this covenant.

Along with her influence on white abolitionists, Wheatley's work was read by other black writers throughout the colonies who were concerned with the fate of slaves and the question of abolition. Among these readers of her work was Jupiter Hammon, himself an enslaved poet from New York. In 1760 Hammon, then a forty-nine year old slave residing in Long Island, inaugurated the tradition of African American literature by publishing his poem "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries." The primary theme in this poem is prayer, with Hammon arguing that by calling to Christ all people, white or black, could achieve salvation. His biographer Sondra O'Neale notes that like Wheatley, most of his work is infused with Calvinist principles; however in this poem he espoused a form of Arminianism—the belief that individuals can have an effect on their own salvation.⁵⁶ Also like Wheatley, Hammon's messages to slaves and attacks on the institution were coded in biblical language, language with which his contemporaries would have been familiar, but for which present-day scholars have dismissed him as an unimportant figure in the abolitionist movement. For instance, the first stanza in the above poem reads "Salvation comes by Jesus Christ alone,/The only Son of God;/Redemption now to every one,/That loves his holy word."⁵⁷ While he did not directly say anything about slavery in this excerpt, the word "redemption" would have had a double meaning for his readers, alluding to being

⁵⁶ Sondra A. O'Neale, *Jupiter Hammon and the Biblical Beginnings of African American Literature* (Metuchen and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993), 43.

⁵⁷ Jupiter Hammon, "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries," in Sondra A. O'Neale, *Jupiter Hammon and the Biblical Beginnings of African American Literature*, 59.

freed from sin, but also possibly being freed from slavery, as the ancient Israelites of the Bible had often referred to God as their redeemer.⁵⁸

Hammon's next poem was written specifically for Phillis Wheatley, showing his familiarity with her work and his belief in the importance of her endeavors. Hammon wrote to Wheatley in 1778, according to O'Neale, because "as far as he knew, Wheatley was the only one who could perpetuate the witness of Black American Christian intellect."⁵⁹ He began the work by noting, like Wheatley herself did, that she should "adore/The wisdom of thy God,/In bringing thee from distant shore,/To learn his holy word."⁶⁰ In the Calvinist, predestinarian perspective that Hammon shared with Wheatley, her forced migration and separation from her family was a means for God to introduce her to the gospel and let her be an example of what other Africans could achieve. "That thou a pattern still might be," he wrote, "To youth of Boston town,/The blessed Jesus set thee free,/From every sinful wound."⁶¹ Hammon posited here that if Wheatley focused on the teachings of Christ she would have an opportunity to exercise leadership and set an example for the youth of Boston.

The remainder of this poem, and indeed much of Hammon's canon, dealt specifically with seeking salvation but did not directly attack slavery, like Wheatley was able to do in some of her writings after being freed, a fact which has led scholars to denigrate his importance in the history of abolitionism. Scholars such as J. Saunders Reddings and Benjamin Mays argued that Hammon was happier enslaved in America than being free in Africa, and that his work showed no real concern with the plight of slaves in America. As she

⁵⁸ See Note 2 in *Ibid*, 63.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 73.

⁶⁰ Jupiter Hammon, "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley," *Ibid*, 75.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 76.

has done with the work of Phillis Wheatley, however, Sondra O’Neale has elucidated the religious and linguistic context of mid- to late-eighteenth century America to show that his work was indeed very much concerned with the plight of slaves in this life, not just heaven, and that like Wheatley his very act of producing literature was in itself an argument against slavery.⁶²

Similar to the initial interpretations of the work of Hammon, some of the first critics of Phillis Wheatley’s poetry claimed that she was irrelevant in the fight against slavery. Vernon Loggins, for instance, argued that her work “dwelt at length on the common notions of her day regarding liberty, but she neglected almost entirely her own state of slavery and the miserable oppression of thousands of her race.”⁶³ Similarly, Rosey E. Poole claimed that if Wheatley “had had the strength to give all that was really hers, and not that which others had given her, she might have become a really important figure.”⁶⁴ Poole argued that Wheatley was content to assimilate into white society rather than attempt to advance the cause of blacks.

While contemporary literary critics such as Sondra O’Neale have turned this interpretation on its head, recognizing that much of Wheatley’s poetry contained implicit attacks on the institution of slavery, historians have been slower to recognize Wheatley’s importance to the early abolitionist movement. She has gone largely unmentioned by scholars of the antislavery movement in the North. In his work on race in the American North, historian John Wood Sweet wrote that Wheatley’s writings focused “more on solace

⁶² O’Neale, *ibid*, 1-34.

⁶³ Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1964), 24.

⁶⁴ Rosey E. Poole, *Beyond the Blues: New Poems by American Negroes* (Lympne and Kent, OH: Hand and Flower Press, 1962), 14.

and comfort rather than outrage and resistance” and were thus more otherworldly than challenges to enslavement.⁶⁵ And while historians such as Gary Nash have noted the significance of Wheatley’s antislavery message, most still treat her work in a cursory manner.⁶⁶ These dismissals or cursory treatments may be because many of her arguments against slavery were shrouded in biblical language and were not as forceful as some, however as Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues the very act of writing “for the slave constituted the act of creating a public, historical self, not only the self of the individual author but also the self, as it were, of the race.”⁶⁷ By creating this public self African Americans such as Wheatley helped white people see them as human beings worthy of helping, in the case of abolitionists, or giving equal rights to, in the case of supporters of slavery.

Caesar Sarter

Caesar Sarter is a figure who has received even less attention from historians of abolition than Wheatley, yet like Wheatley, his ideas would influence at least two generations of abolitionist thinkers. Just six months after Wheatley’s letter to Occom appeared in colonial newspapers, Sarter published an antislavery essay in *The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet*, a paper located in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Newburyport was a relatively new town of 3,600 people, located about forty miles north of Boston. Ten years before its split from Newbury, Massachusetts in 1764, there were fifty slaves in the town,

⁶⁵ John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 126; Sondra A. O’Neale, “Challenge to Wheatley’s Critics: ‘There Was No Other Game in Town,’” *The Journal of Negro Education* 54(1985): 500-511.

⁶⁶ Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Viking Press, 2005), 137-139.

⁶⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 108.

however census records do not indicate how many blacks were in Newburyport when Sarter first published this essay. Given that Newburyport is located on the coast, Sarter may have been a maritime worker, perhaps working as a sailor, carpenter, or rope maker, or he could have been a skilled worker in any number of trades in which black people worked, such as blacksmithing or cutting hair.⁶⁸ Like Wheatley, Sarter had been captured in Africa and forcefully migrated to Massachusetts, where he spent twenty years as a slave and still had eleven relatives in bondage, according to his essay.

This essay that Sarter wrote in 1774 is his only known publication and has not received any scholarly treatment in the history of abolitionism in Massachusetts; however it demonstrates both the influence of Puritanism and the political context of the American Revolution on black antislavery thought. Sarter began the piece by referencing this context, noting that “as this is a time of great anxiety and distress among you, on the account of the infringement, not only of your Charter rights; but of the natural rights and privileges of freeborn men,” the colonists should know well that liberty is the greatest gift a person can enjoy.⁶⁹ As political writers in revolutionary Massachusetts such as John Adams often referenced the settling of the colony and the fact that early Puritans came to Massachusetts to enjoy liberty, so too did Sarter connect blacks’ struggles for liberty with the early Puritans,

⁶⁸ For census figures see “Number of Negro Slaves in the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay,” in Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 2nd ser., 3 (Boston: John Eliot, 1815), 95-7 and *Vital Records of Newburyport, Massachusetts: To the End of the Year 1849, Volume I-Births* (Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1911), 3; Sarter’s essay first appeared as “Address, To Those who are Advocates for holding the Africans in Slavery,” *The Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet* (Newburyport, MA), 17 August 1774, 1 and is reprinted as “Essay on Slavery” in Bruns, ed. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 337-340. In this chapter I will cite the Bruns edition.

⁶⁹ Sarter, “Essay on Slavery,” 338.

arguing, incorrectly it turned out, that these settlers had “an utmost abhorrence of that Curse of Curses, Slavery.”⁷⁰

Sarter then asked his readers to imagine they were themselves enslaved, a rhetorical move that allowed him to highlight the horrors of slavery and appeal to the benevolence of his readers. “Suppose you were trepanned away,” he wrote, “the husband from the dear wife of his bosom—the wife from her affectionate husband—children from their fond parents—or parents from their tender and beloved offspring.”⁷¹ Sarter then recounted the indignities that accompanied the working of the slave trade, with Africans being “exposed to sale, with as little respect to decency as though you were a brute.” If you chose to shed a tear over the loss of your loved ones, he told his reader, “you must be plied with that conclusive argument, that cat-o’ nine tails, to reduce you to what your inhuman masters would call Reason.”⁷² This argument had the dual effect of allowing his reader to imagine themselves in a slave’s place while also critiquing the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, a type of reason that Sarter wanted nothing to do with.

In addition to his appeal to the heritage of New Englanders and their benevolent nature, Sarter spoke to Puritan covenant theology in this essay. If his readers can imagine what these slaves go through, he asked how supporters of slavery or slaveholders could hope to escape divine judgment,

Why, in the name of Heaven, will you suffer such a gross violation of that rule by which your conduct must be tried, in that day, in which you must be held accountable

⁷⁰ Ibid; John Adams, “A Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law,” in John Patrick Diggins, ed., *The Portable John Adams* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004)

⁷¹ Sarter, “Essay on Slavery,” 338.

⁷² Both quotations in Ibid, 338-339.

for all your actions, to, that impartial Judge, who hears the groans of the oppressed and who will sooner or later, avenge them of their oppressors!⁷³

While Wheatley's letter to Ocom earlier in the same year subtly said God would "get him honor" upon the colonists for slavery, Sarter had no compunction with saying outright that God would avenge blacks for the wrongs perpetrated upon them. He then built his argument for the irrationality of slavery among people who sought freedom for themselves: "Would you desire the preservation of your own liberty?" he asked the colonists. "As the first step let the oppressed Africans be liberated; then, and not till then, may you with confidence and consistency of conduct, look to Heaven for a blessing on your endeavors."⁷⁴ Like Wheatley, Sarter argued that God would not assist the colonists in their struggle against Britain unless they stopped enslaving blacks and participating in the slave trade. He, like Wheatley, broadened Puritan covenant theology to speak to the problem of slavery.

Along with his specifically Puritan critique of the institution of slavery, Sarter employed more general Christian themes in his work. "I need not tell you, who are acquainted with the scriptures, that this kind of oppression, is discountenanced by them," he wrote. These scriptures include Exodus 20:16, which mandates death for those who steal human beings. And if colonists were really interested in spreading the gospel, the slave trade was not the way to go about it because, according to Sarter, in America, Africans were likely "to become ten fold more the children of satan, then we should probably, have been in our native country."⁷⁵ Finally, he noted "if you are still determined to harden your hearts, and turn a deaf ear to our complaints, and the calls of God, in your present Calamities; only be

⁷³ Ibid, 339.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Both quotations are in *ibid*.

pleased to recollect the miserable end of Pharoah [*sic*], in Consequences of his refusal to set those at Liberty, whom he had unjustly reduced to cruel servitude.”⁷⁶

Closely related to Sarter’s argument about Christianizing Africa was his direct rebuttal of arguments advanced by proslavery thinkers such as Nisbet. In reply to those who argued that Africans would be happier in America, he wrote that “though many think we are happier here than there, and will not allow us the privilege of judging for ourselves, they are certainly in error.”⁷⁷ Blacks greater happiness in Africa stems from their being brought “from a land of innocence—from a land that flows, as it were, with Milk and Honey.”⁷⁸ The idea that Africa was a land replete with natural resources characterized the writings of numerous abolitionists throughout the Atlantic world, including figures such as Olaudah Equiano and Anthony Benezet.⁷⁹ Lastly, to counter Nisbet’s claims that Africans were uncivilized because they were constantly at warfare, Sarter responded that “though ’tis true, that some of our wars proceed from petty discords among ourselves, it is as true, that the greater part of them and those the most bloody, are occasioned, in consequence of the Slave trade.”⁸⁰

Sarter’s essay is significant to the history of abolitionism because he articulated some of the main streams of thought that would characterize black abolitionist discourse until the Civil War. He connected the struggle of black people to America’s European settlers and the long-standing spirit of liberty in the colonies, while appealing to the emotions of his readers

⁷⁶ Ibid, 340.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 339.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (Philadelphia, 1771), 1-23; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself* ed. Robert J. Allison (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1995), 193-194.

⁸⁰ Sarter, “Essay on Slavery,” 339.

by expounding on the horrors of slavery. Sarter also worked to tie slavery to the ethical and religious values Americans held dear, a connection that abolitionists were just beginning to draw out during the revolutionary period. And he also articulated the belief that African Americans were akin to the ancient Israelites in the trials they were undergoing in the New World, an argument which many Puritans had made before him about white New Englanders.

By tying in African American history with that of ancient Israel and speaking to the covenant that white New Englanders believed they had with God, Sarter's essay also initiated the tradition of the black jeremiad. For white Puritans the jeremiad was a means of joining social critique to spiritual renewal, and was a ritual whose roots stretched back to the period that began even before Puritans arrived in the New World. In his 1630 shipboard *Arbella* sermon, John Winthrop warned his listeners that "if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken...we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going."⁸¹ Winthrop's statement is indicative of the intimate fusion of religion and politics in the eyes of early Puritans, as he felt that being true to God was essential for the colony's success politically. This fusion continued with the warnings of ministers such as Cotton Mather, Increase Mather, and Solomon Stoddard to abstain from sins ranging from drunkenness to sleeping at sermons.⁸² For white Puritan ministers the jeremiad articulated a worldview whereby God was intimately involved in earthly affairs, an outlook that would

⁸¹ John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity* in Michael P. Johnson, ed. *Reading the American Past: Selected Historical Documents, Volume I: To 1877* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 59.

⁸² For examples of these ministers' application of the jeremiad see Chapter 2.

have accorded well with traditional African cosmology, as scholars have noted a similar lack of distinction between sacred and secular realms in African thought. Although Sarter has gone unnoticed by scholars of the “black jeremiad,” by claiming that God, the “impartial judge,” hears the groans of the oppressed slaves and will “sooner or later avenge them of their oppressors,” Sarter placed himself squarely within the Puritan tradition of calling for spiritual renewal and a return to America’s original promise of being a city on a hill.⁸³

“A Son of Africa”

Like Caesar Sarter, the anonymous black author of an antislavery essay published in the *Massachusetts Spy* has gone unnoticed by most historians of abolition, although his work similarly outlines some of the major arguments black and white abolitionists would employ until the Civil War. Unlike Sarter, however, “A Son of Africa” gave his readers no biographical information, thus it is unclear whether he had ever been enslaved, although his pen-name indicates the possibility that he was likewise born in Africa and forcefully migrated to the colonies. Publishing his essay exactly one day before Phillis Wheatley’s letter to Samson Occom appeared in colonial newspapers, “A Son of Africa” began his piece by similarly referencing the colonists struggle against Britain, writing “I rejoice to see that there

⁸³ For the jeremiad as it applies to white Puritans see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), xi; Historian David Howard-Pitney’s study of the black jeremiad begins with an analysis of the ideology of Frederick Douglass. See *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Wilson Jeremiah Moses does place early black abolitionists such as Richard Allen and Prince Hall within this tradition of black protest, but does not discuss Sarter’s essay. See his *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), Ch.3; For a discussion of African cosmologies see Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 27, 38; Joseph E. Holloway, ed. *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), xiv; For an eighteenth century African perspective on this worldview see Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself* ed. Robert J. Allison (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1995), 41.

is in this and the neighbouring [*sic*] provinces such a spirit for liberty, for life without it is of little worth.”⁸⁴ The idea that liberty was of fundamental importance to leading a happy life was one that infused the ideas of many white revolutionaries, and one that black abolitionists ranging from Wheatley to Sarter to black petitioners in Massachusetts would consistently employ as part of their rhetorical strategies.

After discussing the colonists’ struggle with Great Britain, the author used an argument similar to the one Wheatley would use the very next day and the jeremiad Sarter employed just months later. Speaking of the efforts to resist Parliamentary taxation, “A Son of Africa” asked “Pray, Sir, what can you impute it to? Are the Britains hearts harder than yours? Are not your hearts also hard, when you hold them in slavery who are entitled to liberty, by the law of nature, equal as yourselves? If it be so, pray, Sir, pull the beam out of thine eye, that you may see clearly to pull the mote out of thy brother’s eye.”⁸⁵ Like Sarter’s later essay, this author compared the actions of white colonists to Pharoah, the biblical ruler who “hardened his heart” against God’s wishes and refused to let the Israelites go free.⁸⁶ And in an indirect way he also spoke to the Puritan covenant theology that said God would punish America for breaking his laws. Until the colonists recognized their own sinful nature and freed their slaves at home, according to “A Son of Africa,” they could hope for no success in their struggle with the metropolis. By arguing that God would only help the colonists if they freed the slaves and likening Africans to the ancient Israelites, “A Son of Africa” articulated

⁸⁴ “A Son of Africa,” “Essay on Slavery,” *The Massachusetts Spy, or Thomas’s Boston Journal* (Boston, MA), 10 February 1774, 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ See Exodus 8:32 and 9:35, KJV.

two of the central themes of black abolitionist discourse during the revolutionary, early national and antebellum periods of American history.

As Wheatley did in her poems “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and the elegy to George Whitefield, “A Son of Africa” spoke to the idea that blacks and whites were all descended from the same God and deserved equal treatment. “We all came from one common father,” he noted, “and HE by the law of nature gave every thing that was made, equally alike, to every man, richly to enjoy.”⁸⁷ These arguments served to counter those being advanced by some who claimed that not only were Africans inferior to whites, but might be an entirely different species all together, and thus not deserving of the “rights of man.” The anonymous author of *Personal Slavery Established*, for example, a pamphlet printed in Philadelphia in 1773, wrote of blacks that “it is very evident that notwithstanding the accounts of fabulous voyagers, the Negroes on the western coast of Affrica [*sic*] are the most stupid, beastly race of animals in human shape, of any in the whole world.”⁸⁸ According to this author, Africans were not actually human beings, but rather animals that look like humans. The author went on to classify Africans with “Ourang Outangs,” “Apes,” “Monkeys,” and “Baboons” rather than with human beings.⁸⁹ By appealing to a common descent from God, “A Son of Africa” and other black abolitionist writers could refute these supposedly scientific ideas about race while employing a discourse similar to the ones white revolutionaries used in their claims that God had given all people certain natural rights.

⁸⁷ “A Son of Africa,” “Essay on Slavery,” 3.

⁸⁸ Author Unknown, *Personal Slavery Established* (Philadelphia, 1773), 18.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 19.

Along with his argument that whites and blacks were descended from the same God, “A Son of Africa” ridiculed the notion that the slave trade was meant to Christianize Africans. “You say we bring them from their own country to make Christians of them,” he wrote. “I should rejoice if there was as much pains taken with the Africans as there is with the Indians, by sending missionaries among them, and Christianizing them in their own countries.”⁹⁰ His argument here is similar to the one that white abolitionist Samuel Hopkins would make in his 1776 antislavery essay, where he said the Bible orders Christians to go forth and spread the gospel, rather than stealing people and bringing them to a foreign land. While “A Son of Africa” did not claim that slavery is not an effectual means of Christianizing Africans, as Hopkins and Caesar Sarter would do, he did argue that for slave traders “Christianity is made a cloak to fill their coffers and to screen their villany.”⁹¹

The author ended his essay by appealing to the law and reason, evincing the influence of the Enlightenment and the revolutionary political context on his antislavery thought. He argued that the colonists should not boast of their own particular liberty and property rights “when we are all upon an equal footing by nature, for I am convinced that no man has a right to enjoy another man’s liberty and property, when it is unlawful to hold that property.”⁹² Slavery was unlawful according to the laws of God, but also those of Great Britain, according to the author, as there was no positive law for slavery in either the metropolis or the colony of Massachusetts. He further noted that “I thought men were to be governed by law and reason, but where no law is, the law of reason determines in such cases.”⁹³ Here he

⁹⁰ “A Son of Africa,” “Essay on Slavery,” 3.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

spoke to the quintessentially Enlightenment idea that reason should govern relations between human beings, and between human beings and the state, and subtly chastised the colonists for their failure to live up to the very ideals they professed.

As in the case of Phillis Wheatley and Caesar Sarter, “A Son of Africa” articulated some of the most important ideas prevalent throughout abolitionist discourse in his own period and during the nineteenth century. His work shared with these two authors a sophisticated understanding of the Scriptures and an ability to use them for the purposes of abolition. He similarly spoke to some of the distinctly Puritan themes characteristic of black abolitionist rhetoric in Massachusetts, themes that blacks were introduced to by the very people enslaving them. It may be the case that Sarter read “A Son of Africa’s” work before publishing his own essay, however this connection is not clear. What is clear is that the ideas contained in this essay would recur throughout the writings of both black and white abolitionists in the years to come and would help to undermine claims that blacks were inferior to whites by presenting an example of a pious, learned African inserting himself into the public sphere.

Lemuel Haynes

Unlike the previous three authors in this chapter, Lemuel Haynes’ poetry and antislavery essay were not published in his own lifetime, yet an examination of his work can further elucidate the ideological influence of Puritanism and Enlightenment thought on African Americans in Massachusetts. And while his first three writings were not published during his lifetime, Haynes did publish sermons and works of theology that contributed to

environmentalist theories of racial equality by showing what Africans could achieve given the proper opportunities.⁹⁴

Lemuel Haynes was born in 1753, the illegitimate child of a white mother and a black father. He was an indentured servant on a farm in Granville, Massachusetts until 1774, when like many other young men of his generation he joined the militia and marched to Lexington, later serving with the Continental army in Roxbury, MA and Ticonderoga. Haynes was self-educated, often reading whatever he could get his hands on after working on the farm, and his education led him to dabble first in poetry, then to compose an antislavery essay, and later on to write and give sermons. He received theological training after his participation in the war ended in 1776, and went on to become the first ordained black minister in America, and the first to preside over a primarily-white congregation.⁹⁵

Haynes' first foray into the world of letters came in January 1774, when he wrote "A Poem, Occasioned by the Sudden and Surprising Death of Mr. Asa Burt." Like many of the works in Wheatley's book of poetry, this piece by Haynes was meant to console the family of a man who died too soon, at just thirty-seven years old. Also like Wheatley, Haynes began this work with a classical reference. "Awake my drousy [*sic*] Muse within, attend with awe profound."⁹⁶ This usage connected his work to the literary conventions of the day, much of which employed classical tropes, especially references to the muses. From there Haynes went

⁹⁴ According to his biographer, while Haynes' antislavery essay was not published "it should not be considered private. His manuscripts were preserved by white people with whom he studied, to whom he preached, and from whom came information about his life... It seems likely that some of these contemporaries and their successors read his essays, poems, and sermons;" John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.

⁹⁵ Richard Newman, ed. *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774-1833* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1990), xix-xxv.

⁹⁶ Lemuel Haynes, "A Poem, Occasioned by the Sudden Death of Mr. Asa Burt" in Newman, ed. *Black Preacher to White America*, 3.

on to offer consolation to the family, assuring them that their father was resting safely in Heaven. Like Wheatley's poetry, Haynes' similarly evinced the influence of Puritanism as he told the family that "at first Affliction may seem hard,/And penetrate severe,/Yet they will profit afterward,/To them that faithful are./Justice is God's own Attribute,/With Wisdom 'tis subjoin'd;/Why should a mortal Worm dispute/And call a God unkind?"⁹⁷ The family must accept God's will and keep faith in Him because God is absolutely sovereign, according to Haynes, and whatever He allows to happen must be for a greater good that humans cannot understand. While Haynes did not publish this essay, he did circulate it to this family, at least, and others probably saw it, providing them with an example of a learned and pious black man, an individual whose life and intellect countered those proslavery theorists who argued Africans were inferior in every respect to whites.

Lemuel Haynes's second poem dealt not with the tragedy of an untimely death, but with the tragedy "perpetrated on the 19th of April 1775 by a Number of the British Troops under the Command of Thomas Gage." Haynes titled this piece "The Battle of Lexington" and similarly began with a reference to the muses, asking that "some Seraph now my Breast inspire." Haynes referred to the British in this poem as "Tyrants fill'd with horrid Rage" who came to Lexington to "slay the innocent." After recounting the British march on both Lexington and Concord and the initial attempts to peacefully resist, Haynes noted that the colonists had to retaliate as their freedom was under attack. It is here that he demonstrated the powerful rhetorical hold that the ideology of the American Revolution would have on his own thought, when he wrote that "For Liberty, each Freeman Strives/As it's a Gift of

⁹⁷ Ibid, 6-7.

God/And for it willing yield their Lives/And Seal it with their Blood.”⁹⁸ This idea that liberty was a gift from God infused the writings of other black abolitionists such as Sarter and “A Son of Africa,” people who used this idea to promote their cause and to critique the declarations of those white revolutionaries who claimed they loved liberty and also held slaves.

In this poem Haynes spoke to the Puritan covenant theology prevalent in the work of Wheatley and Sarter. He asked his reader to “Stop and see the Pow’r of God/Who lifts his Banner high/Jehovah now extends his Rod/And makes our Foes to fly.” The reason that Britain is on the wrong side of God’s will in this endeavor, according to Haynes was that the country has become “Infamous in our Eye/Nearly allied to antient Rome/That Seat of Popery.”⁹⁹ Haynes then called for the British to withdraw their troops from America and noted that the colonists would still be loyal to the king if he followed the law and did not tax them without representation. He ended the piece by speculating on the cause of the colonists’ troubles. “Sin is the Cause of all our Woe/That sweet deluding ill/And till we let this darling go/There’s greater Trouble still.”¹⁰⁰ While he did not explicitly refer to slavery as one of these “sins” causing the colonists’ problems with the mother country, it is likely that the institution was one of the sins to which he was referring, especially as his later writings referred to slavery as a sin and, when he wrote this poem in 1775, he was stationed at the same camp in Roxbury that abolitionist minister Levi Hart was. Hart’s writings also dealt

⁹⁸ Lemuel Haynes, “The Battle of Lexington,” in Newman, ed. *Black Preacher to White America*, 12.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 15.

with the sinfulness of slavery.¹⁰¹ Thus, Haynes's poem is another example of the important impact that Puritan ideas had on African American political thought and the ways in which blacks extended the scope of Puritan theology to include a critique of the institution of slavery.

After writing these two essays and finishing his service in the Continental army, Haynes returned home to Granville, Massachusetts and penned an antislavery sermon that was among the first to use the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence. Haynes prefaced his essay with the first sentence of the second paragraph of the Declaration, which posits the idea that all men have natural, unalienable rights, and he gave his reason for writing the piece. "As Tyrony had its Origin from the infernal regions, so it is the Deuty, and honner [*sic*] of Every son of freedom to repel her first motions. But while we are Engaged in the important struggle, it cannot be tho't impertinent for us to turn one Eye into our own Breast, for a little moment, and See, whether thro' some inadvertency, or a self-contracted Spirit, we Do not find the monster Lurking in our own Bosom"¹⁰² The monster of course was the institution of slavery, but Haynes was somewhat reserved in his attack on colonists for the presence of the institution, arguing that the sinful nature prevalent in all men is what likely influenced them to buy and sell slaves.

Haynes then discussed the nature of liberty, drawing both from the political context of Massachusetts and his knowledge of the Bible. Liberty is an innate principle, according to Haynes, thus if a man infringes upon another man's liberty he must expect to meet resistance, as the laws of nature call for all men to defend their liberty. Here Haynes argued in no

¹⁰¹ Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican*, 92; for an antislavery essay by Levi Hart see his "Liberty Described and Recommended," in Bruns, ed. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 340-348.

¹⁰² Lemuel Haynes, "Liberty Further Extended," in Newman, ed. *Black Preacher to White America*, 17.

uncertain terms that like the white revolutionaries, it is in the very nature of black people to fight for their liberty and they would do so if whites continued to deprive them of that most precious gift. Haynes also argued that “liberty is a Jewel which was handed Down to man from the cabinet of heaven...as it proceed from the Supreme Legislature of the univers [sic], so it is he which hath a sole right to take away.”¹⁰³ Here Haynes once again drew from his Calvinist background to make his antislavery critique, arguing for the absolute sovereignty of God in this matter of liberty and noting that any man’s attempt to take it away is acting “out of his own domain.”¹⁰⁴

Like Wheatley, Sarter, and “A Son of Africa” did in their antislavery writings, Haynes spoke to the notion of the equality of all men before God. He quoted the famous verse Acts 17:26 and posited that “as all are of one Species, so there are the same Laws, and aspiring principles placed in all nations.”¹⁰⁵ Since this is the case, if liberty is precious to the white man it must be so to the black man, according to Haynes, and there is nothing in the Bible which can possibly justify the slavery of Africans. While God may have distinguished some human beings in point of ability, he wrote, God has not distinguished between human beings in terms of natural rights, thus making slavery unjust and unlawful.

Haynes also discussed the slave trade itself in an attempt to appeal to the emotions of his readers and warn them of the consequences of their actions. He noted that those who engaged in the slave trade instigated wars among the Africans in order to procure captives. On the ships themselves, according to Haynes, “there are generally many hundred slaves put

¹⁰³ Ibid, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 19; Acts 17:26 reads God “hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth,” KJV.

on board a vessel, and they are Shackled together, two by two, worse than Criminals going to the place of Execution...and their sufferings are so great, as I have Been Credibly informed, that it often Carries off one third of them on their passage.”¹⁰⁶ In addition to this high death rate, many slaves chose to end their own lives due to the anguish they suffered. He then turned to some of the same themes discussed in Sarter’s essay, asking “What must be the plaintive noats [*sic*] that the tend[er] parents must assume for the Loss of their Exiled Child? Or the husband for his Departed wife? And how Do the crys of their Departed friends echo from the watry Deep!”¹⁰⁷ For these crimes Haynes argued that a just God must have vengeance on the colonists and slave traders. He did not mention the revolutionary context as Wheatley and Sarter do, but did ask “what will you Do in that Day when God shall make inquisition for Blood...Believe it, Sirs, there shall not a Drop of Blood, which you have Spilt unjustly, Be Lost in forgetfulness.”¹⁰⁸ By expounding on the horrors accompanying the slave trade for the African people on the continent and those forcefully migrated to the colonies, Haynes helped to cement this rhetorical strategy as an effective one that abolitionists would use for years to come. He also placed himself within the ideological position staked out by writers such as Wheatley and Sarter, namely that slavery was a sin for which God would have His vengeance, either in this life or the next.

Haynes ended the essay by consciously refuting some of the most prevalent proslavery arguments of the period. To the argument that blacks are descended from Canaan, the biblical character whom Noah cursed because his father Ham saw Noah naked, Haynes

¹⁰⁶ Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended,” 21.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 22-23.

responded that the curse did not outlast Christ's atonement on the cross. And to the ubiquitous claim that Africans are better off in slavery because they were brought out of a heathenish land he replied, as Samuel Hopkins would that same year, that men are not to do evil so that good may come about. He further argued, like "A Son of Africa" did, that "those Slavemercchants that trade upon the coasts of Africa do not aim at the Spiritual good of their Slaves."¹⁰⁹ Instead they were merely concerned with profiting off their fellow men and living lives of luxury, both of which could be dangerous for a people trying to cultivate republican virtue. As his final admonition to the colonists, Haynes tied in the practice of slaveholding with America's efforts against Great Britain, telling them "if you have any Love to yourselves, or any Love to this Land, if you have any Love to your fellow-men, Break these intollerable [*sic*] yooks...for god will not hold you guiltless."¹¹⁰

While these poems and essay were not published during Haynes' lifetime, they are important for the study of black abolitionism in Massachusetts because they demonstrate the degree to which Puritanism in particular, and Christianity in general, informed African American political thought in the colony. Haynes would not have kept the ideas contained in these works to himself during the revolutionary era, and we know that he later published works and spoke about the institution of slavery from the pulpit on many occasions. After his service in the war Haynes studied theology and was ordained as a Congregational minister, taking up the pastورش of a Congregational church in Rutland, VT in 1788, where he worked until 1818. From there Haynes would use the ideas and rhetoric shaped by his experience in Massachusetts, and possible reading of the other authors in this chapter, to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 26; For Hopkins argument that men must not do evil that good may come about see his "Dialogue on Slavery," in Bruns, ed. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 403-404.

¹¹⁰ Haynes, "Liberty Further Extended," 29-30.

continue to critique the institution of slavery, arguing that both Christianity and republicanism were inconsistent with holding human beings in bondage.¹¹¹

Conclusion

The writings of Phillis Wheatley, Caesar Sarter, “A Son of Africa,” and Lemuel Haynes demonstrate the continuing influence of Puritan theology on African American religious and political thought. This influence had its roots in colonial Massachusetts and the evangelism to slaves that ministers such as Cotton Mather had pursued since the early eighteenth century, and combined with the Enlightenment ideologies of republicanism and natural rights to constitute a powerful critique of the institution of slavery. In a time such as the Enlightenment when the power of reason to influence society was almost unquestioned, these authors believed that inserting their voices into the public sphere of rational, critical debate would help abolish slavery. While the institution was not abolished in Massachusetts during the 1770s, their arguments did influence those of white abolitionists, and the organized black abolitionist movement that arose at the same time these four began writing would employ many of the same critiques of the institution in their own efforts. Furthermore, by articulating the idea that slavery was a sin for which God would have His vengeance on America, postulating the horrors that accompanied the slave trade and slavery, and arguing that whites and blacks were descended from the same heavenly father and deserved the same natural rights, these four writers outlined the most important arguments that black and white abolitionists would use for years to come.

¹¹¹ Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican*, 3-7, 165.

CHAPTER 3-“WE EXPECT GREAT THINGS”: BLACK PETITIONING AND ORGANIZED ABOLITIONISM IN REVOLUTIONARY MASSACHUSETTS, 1762-1780

Introduction

At the same time that individual black writers such as Wheatley, Sarter, and “A Son of Africa” publicly critiqued the institution of slavery, an organized abolitionist movement arose among African Americans in Massachusetts that helped further undermine support for slavery in the colony. Most students and scholars of early American history are familiar with Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation, where in November 1775 the royal governor of Virginia offered freedom to slaves and servants who would fight for the Crown. The significance of this event cannot be overstated, as it led to the exodus of thousands of slaves to British lines, and steeled the resolve of southerners who had been on the fence about whether to take up arms against the mother country. Less familiar to many is an offer Massachusetts’ slaves made to royal governor Thomas Gage to fight for the British in exchange for freedom. According to Abigail Adams, in September of 1774 there had “been in Town a conspiracy of the Negroes. At present it is kept pretty private and was discovered by one who endeavoured [*sic*] to diswaid them from it—he being threatend with his life.” Adams wrote that the group of slaves carried out their conspiracy by getting an “Irishman to draw up a petition to the Govener telling him they would fight for him provided he would arm them and engage to liberate them if he conquerd.” Thomas Gage decided not to act on the blacks’ petition to fight

for him, yet the whole affair made Abigail Adams “wish there was not a Slave in the province.”¹

This petition and four others that Massachusetts slaves submitted to the legislature and royal governor during the 1770s was part of a concerted effort by America’s first antislavery committee to abolish the institution of slavery. While many historians claim that the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, organized in 1775, was the nation’s first antislavery organization, a committee of slaves in Massachusetts began its efforts on behalf of the cause in January 1773. Not much is known about the functioning of this committee, however it is clear that it was an organized group dedicated to achieving the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. Members established contacts with white political and religious figures that supported their cause and they were able to disseminate their ideology through the expanding medium of print, with the petitions showing up in both newspapers and other abolitionist tracts. An examination of the records of governmental bodies such as the Massachusetts House of Representatives as well as the ideology expressed in other black petitions throughout New England demonstrates that blacks in Massachusetts were able to motivate people in power to support their cause and influence the ideas of other antislavery activists.

Organized black abolitionism during the revolutionary period was preceded by both individual acts of resistance from slaves and attacks on slavery and the slave trade by whites during the 1760s. In 1762 Jenny Slew of Ipswich initiated the first freedom suit in Massachusetts in more than half a century, while just two years later James Otis fired the first

¹ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 September 1774, “Adams Family Papers,” Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; For Dunmore’s Proclamation see “Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation Freeing Virginia’s Slaves,” in Paul D. Escott et al., ed. *Major Problems in the History of the American South, Volume I: The Old South* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 105-106; See also Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), Ch. 2.

antislavery salvo to come from a prominent white citizen before the 1760s. Resistance to slavery by blacks and the development of a white abolitionist critique against slavery was a dialectical process whereby attacks by one group helped fuel and provide support for attacks by the other, and both provided the context in which an organized movement among blacks developed and flourished during the 1770s.

This organized movement displayed the continuing importance of Puritan religious ideology on black religious and political thought, while also drawing strength from secular ideologies of natural rights and individual liberty. Like their Puritan forbears, Congregational ministers during the revolutionary period stressed the importance of virtue among the colonists in times of crisis and continued to emphasize evangelism to slaves, both of which had the effect of giving slaves and free blacks the very arguments necessary to support their antislavery critique. Blacks were similarly able to capitalize on the secular political discourse and methods that white revolutionaries employed in their struggle against Britain to initiate an organized movement against slavery. By doing so, African Americans in Massachusetts joined the chorus of voices throughout the Atlantic world clamoring for recognition of the rights of man and the equality of all peoples during the Age of Revolution.

Slave resistance and organized abolitionism during the colonial and revolutionary periods were central in shaping public opinion on the institution of slavery in Massachusetts and helping to bring about abolition. Slavery in the state was abolished by a court decision in 1783, a decision in one of many freedom suits from the 1760s reflecting the opinion of Massachusetts ordinary citizens and leaders alike that slavery was no longer consistent with the idea that all men were created free. By organizing themselves and motivating white activists, with whom they worked closely, African Americans in Massachusetts initiated

processes that would have a profound impact on abolitionism in their own state and the nation at large.

On 5 March 1762 Jenny Slew of Ipswich, Massachusetts, the slave of John Whipple, sued her master for her freedom, claiming that because her mother was white, Whipple had illegally held her in slavery and she should be immediately freed. After repeated continuations Slew's case was heard in September 1765 before the Inferior Court of Common Pleas in Newburyport. This court rejected Slew's claim to freedom, but she immediately appealed and won her case before the Superior Court of Judicature at Salem in 1766 on the grounds that her mother was white. Slew was awarded four pounds damages and court costs and gained her freedom.² According to John Adams, who was present when the judges decided in favor of Slew, Justice Oliver declared that "this is a contest between liberty and property—both of great consequence, but liberty the most important of the two."³ In the midst of an increasing emphasis on property rights among American colonists, and Bostonians in particular, Slew's case convinced the judges that the right to liberty for a slave was more important than the master's right to property.⁴

Slew probably drew attention from her contemporaries because freedom suits had not occurred in Massachusetts since the time of Adam Saffin's in 1700. The case also would have interested those who were used to seeing men, not black women, participate in court. In

² *Slew V. Whipple, 1766* in Bruns, ed., *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 105-6.

³ L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel, eds. *Legal Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 54.

⁴ For the growing importance of property rights before the American Revolution see T. H. Breen, *The Lockean Moment: The Language of Rights on the Eve of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

the docket books of the Essex County Court of Common Pleas, the overwhelming majority of lawsuits were initiated by white men against other white men. Slew's suit was one example of how slave resistance could help erode public support for the institution of slavery in Massachusetts by showing masters that owning slaves could be even more unprofitable than it had already become after the Seven Year's War. Lorenzo Greene has noted that in the wake of an economic depression following this conflict, many masters in Massachusetts had little work for slaves to perform, leading to increased sales of blacks out of the colony. With the possibility of losing money invested in a slave by court action, many masters would have thought twice about purchasing one in an already inhospitable clime for owning slaves.⁵

Rising discontent with the institution of slavery among white colonists in Massachusetts during the 1760s is clear in the growing public opposition to slavery voiced by individuals such as James Otis. Otis was the scion of an old Massachusetts family. His father, James Otis, Sr., was the speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives in the early 1760s, and Otis, Jr. was himself a member of that body. Both father and son led the popular resistance in Boston to the Stamp Act and other Parliamentary taxes in the mid-1760s. In his 1764 tract *Rights of the British Colonies*, Otis deplored the practice of holding slaves because, he claimed, liberty is a gift from God that no man can take away. He further argued that slavery was a throwback to the days of barbarism and ignorance prevalent in the dark ages. While many of his contemporaries would have claimed blacks were inferior to whites and deserved to be enslaved, Otis asked rhetorically "does it follow that 'tis right to enslave a man because he is black? Will short curled hair like wool instead of Christian hair, as 'tis

⁵ For the dearth of female plaintiffs or defendants in lawsuits, see *Essex Court of Common Pleas, Docket Book 1765-1770*, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Philips Library, Salem; Lorenzo Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England* (1942; New York: Atheneum, 1971), 122.

called by those whose hearts are as hard as the nether millstone, help the argument?”⁶ Otis believed that the colonists were being hypocritical in calling for their own natural rights while denying them to slaves and that slavery as an institution was harmful to white colonists on multiple fronts. These included stymieing the pace of Enlightenment and being able to value their own liberty.

Another white abolitionist to publicly voice his opposition to slavery during the 1760s was Nathaniel Appleton, son of a Puritan minister by the same name. Appleton’s 1767 pamphlet *Considerations on Slavery* is significant both for the information it provides about the institution in Massachusetts and the arguments set forth, arguments that would serve as the crux for both white and black abolitionist discourse for years to come. Among the first arguments that Appleton made against the slave trade was that it was “contrary to humanity, Christianity, the interest of the province, and of private families.”⁷ As Samuel Sewall had argued at the turn of the century, Appleton believed Massachusetts would be stronger economically and militarily by importing white servants instead of slaves, who once freed, would help settle the province and defend it from enemies in a way that blacks could not because whites barred them from military service.

White servants would also be less likely to engage in rebellion as black slaves had throughout the Atlantic World, according to Appleton, providing another reason why slaves should be freed and the slave trade abolished. “It must be constantly expected that a slave will improve every opportunity to throw off his burthen, and imposition,” Appleton wrote.

⁶ James Otis, *Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* in Roger Bruns, ed. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother: The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America, 1688-1788* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1977), 104; For Otis’s background see Robert Middlekauf, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (1982; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 86-91.

⁷ Nathaniel Appleton, *Considerations on Slavery* in Bruns, ed., *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 128.

“New-York, & most of the Southern colonies, and West-Indies, have experienced something of that, which is enough to make all those that set a just value upon domestic security, to tremble.”⁸ Here he may have been referring to the New York slave conspiracy of 1741 where it was thought that slaves and some white allies tried to take over the city. There was also a large uprising in Jamaica in 1760 known as Tacky’s Revolt that Appleton and other whites would have read of in colonial newspapers. This latter uprising resulted in the deaths of sixty whites and an estimated three hundred to four hundred slaves and took over a year for authorities to quash. Although there were no more than five thousand slaves in Massachusetts at the time, less than two percent of the population, there was a higher concentration in Boston of about six percent, leading Appleton to think that slaves in the colony would grow weary of their treatment and follow the example of their brethren throughout the British Empire.⁹

Along with these practical considerations Appleton stressed the moral question of slavery and its effects on both black and white people in Africa and Massachusetts. As far as blacks were concerned, the slave trade was destroying African life by promoting warfare and was harmful to African Americans in Massachusetts because it denied them the right to marry without fear of being sold, while also promoting the sale of older slaves because of a lack of work for them to perform. Foreshadowing arguments Thomas Jefferson would famously make in the 1780s, Appleton wrote that slavery was harmful to whites because it

⁸ Ibid, 134.

⁹ For demographic data on slaves in Massachusetts see Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 337 and John Daniels, *In Freedom’s Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), 457; For the New York slave conspiracy see Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); For Tacky’s Revolt in Jamaica see Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), 125-138.

introduced haughtiness and cruelty into children in their treatment of slaves, character traits which then could carry over into other relationships. Speaking to the rising opposition of white colonists to the policies of Parliament, Appleton ended his appeal by noting “it has always appeared very strange to me, how people can be so sensibly affected with what has but a remote tendency to deprive them of their smallest right or privilege, and yet remain so insensible of the deplorable state of so many of our species that live among us.”¹⁰

Like Otis’s remarks three years earlier, Nathaniel Appleton’s pamphlet drew strength from the increasing emphasis on natural rights being voiced by white colonists throughout British North America and helped forward abolitionist sentiment in Massachusetts. On 4 March 1767, for instance, a bill for preventing the importation of slaves was read a first time in the House of Representatives.¹¹ On 13 March 1767 the bill was amended to “A Bill to prevent the unwarrantable and unusual Practice or Custom of enslaving Mankind in this Province, and the importation of Slaves into the same.” This amendment is significant because previous action by colonial leaders had targeted only the slave trade, and not slavery itself. The move reflects a growing discontent with the institution of slavery among the people of Massachusetts and some of their leaders. The amended bill was read a third time but did not pass, perhaps because legislators felt the governor would not approve of any restriction on slavery itself. Instead the House brought a new bill that attacked only the slave trade, laying a prohibitive duty on all slave imports, but the Council passed a different version and the two houses could not agree, killing the legislation. While the efforts of those

¹⁰ For quotation see *ibid*, 135; Appleton’s views on slavery’s effects on Africans, African Americans, and whites are on pages 131-134.

¹¹ Bills were read 3 times in both the House of Representatives and the Council. If the bill passed each reading, it would then be engrossed and go to the governor for approval. See *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1767* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1974), 387.

opposed to the slave trade and slavery were unsuccessful in this instance, they reveal the changing attitudes in the province toward slavery and helped spur continued efforts by individual blacks to seek their freedom, legally and otherwise.¹²

One such individual was Arthur, enslaved to Richard Godfrey of Taunton, Massachusetts. Arthur was born in Taunton in 1747. He lived with the Godfreys for fourteen years, and they treated him kindly, according to a broadside published about his life, teaching him how to read and write. Despite any kind treatment, however, Arthur remained unhappy as a slave and ran away, which he said “was the beginning of my many notorious Crimes, of which I have been guilty.”¹³ He travelled South to Sandwich, Massachusetts, where he got caught stealing, then went back to his master for three years, shipping out to sea for his owner during that time. After returning to the province in 1764 Arthur spent the next four years traveling throughout the colony, stealing horses and other items, getting drunk, and absenting himself from his masters’ service at pleasure. Arthur’s actions indicate his desire to control his own life, however he never left the colony to seek freedom elsewhere, probably because of the relationships he had developed with individuals within Massachusetts, including a Native American woman he mentioned visiting several times throughout the narrative. Because of his many indiscretions Arthur was sold once, and on his way to be sold again when he stole the horse of Nathaniel Jennison, who was helping to transport him out of the colony. Jennison was doing this because a woman named Deborah Metcalfe had accused Arthur of raping her, however she was willing to forego court action if Arthur left the colony.

¹² For records of the two bills see *ibid*, 353-358, 387-393, 408-411, 420.

¹³ *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man* (Boston: 1768). Arthur’s narrative was originally printed as a broadside and is reprinted in Michael P. Johnson, ed. *Reading the American Past, Selected Historical Documents: Volume I, to 1877* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 76-79.

Arthur may have gotten away with all these crimes had he not gone back to his masters' house and gotten drunk after stealing Jennison's horse. The authorities found him the next day and incarcerated him until his trial and execution for the rape.¹⁴

Other slaves in the province employed the approach that Jenny Slew used and took recourse to the judicial system to gain their freedom. In May 1768 an enslaved woman named Margaret petitioned the Middlesex County Inferior Court of Common Pleas for a writ of replevin, or the recovery of personal chattel, arguing that William Muzzy of Lexington had unjustly detained her in slavery. Margaret won her freedom in 1770. One year later an enslaved man named Caesar successfully sued his master in the Essex County Inferior Court of Common Pleas, arguing both a specific point of law (his master promised to free him in a contract) and that slavery was contrary to reason and the laws of God. While both of these cases only involved individuals and did not lead to a general emancipation of slavery, they illustrate the effect to which revolutionary political ideology and challenges to slavery by whites were shaping African Americans' responses to slavery in the colony. They are also significant because each successful lawsuit became a building block in bringing about abolition within the state. By showing whites that their property in slaves was becoming increasingly tenuous, freedom suits during the 1760s and early 1770s reflected and contributed to the growing distaste with slavery among Massachusetts' white residents.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For the case of Margaret v. Muzzy see L. Kinvin Wroth and Hillier B. Zobel, eds., *Legal Papers of John Adams, Volume 2: Cases 31-62* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 58-59; For Caesar v. Taylor see *ibid.*, 59-60.

In addition to challenges to slavery by these individuals, groups of slaves began gathering together more often, preparing, perhaps, for the abolitionist campaign they would launch in the winter of 1773. On 7 June 1771 white members of the Old South Church in Boston convened to discuss such meetings by blacks. The committee reported: "Whereas Danger is apprehended from the Slaves that are frequently left in the meeting house after the public worship is over- Voted that the sexton make diligent search on the Lord's day Evening...to see if any slaves are left in the house."¹⁶ The slaves found lingering in the church were to be taken back to the Sexton's house, where their owners could pay a fine to retrieve them.

From the church records it is not clear what danger the committee apprehended from the slaves' meeting, but knowing that they themselves used meetinghouses for political purposes may have alerted whites to blacks' potential to do the same thing. Some may have felt meeting in churches was an opportunity for blacks to plan a revolt or rebellion of some kind. Just three years earlier Massachusetts leaders dealt with a potential rebellion instigated by a British soldier. According to Boston Selectman Joshua Henshaw, a Captain William of the British army got drunk one night and as he was walking the streets of Boston encountered a number of blacks. The Captain asked the blacks, whom he presumed to be slaves, if their masters were Liberty Boys, those engaged in resistance to the taxation policies of the British Parliament. The blacks gave the captain different answers, and he replied that if their masters were Liberty Boys they should go home, cut their masters' throats, and come back to him for protection. The captain also told them he would make them soldiers, which may be where some of the blacks who petitioned General Gage six years later got the idea in the first place.

¹⁶ Old South Church and Congregation Records (vol.1, 1768-1802), Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

Captain William was arrested for attempting to stir up a slave rebellion. What made a rebellion seem plausible to the Massachusetts authorities were the same factors convincing Nathaniel Appleton that the slave trade was detrimental to the security of white colonists, namely the occurrence of slave rebellions throughout the colonies and the larger Atlantic world.¹⁷

Whites may have also feared these meetings by slaves because of the potential for slaves to turn the message of Christianity into a liberation theology. During the Great Awakening slaves such as Flora of Ipswich had capitalized on the religious enthusiasm of the period to challenge the authority of ministers and lay claim to equality in religious affairs. After the Great Awakening slaves and free blacks continued to join and participate in churches where they would have further opportunity to internalize both the discourse of Puritanism, as well as ideas about individual liberty and the duty of resistance to tyranny. From 1744 to 1770 at least twenty-seven blacks were baptized in the Old South Church, individuals who came of age during the time of the American Revolution and the antislavery movement in Massachusetts. In Boston's First Congregational Church only seven blacks were baptized from 1741 to 1774, however over a similar period at Trinity Church forty-six blacks were baptized, while thirty-five received the sacrament at Brattle Street Church from 1745-1770.¹⁸

¹⁷ Joshua Henshaw to Col. William Henshaw, 2 November 1768, "Hugh Hall Papers," Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Speaking of slavery and colonial resistance in Jamaica and Barbados, John Adams remarked that "we sometimes read of Insurrections among their Negroes." See *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, Volume I: Diary, 1755-1770* L. H. Butterfield et al eds., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 285.

¹⁸ Old South Church Records, Microfilm Reel 4, Congregational Library, Boston; Richard D. Pierce, ed. "The Records of the First Church in Boston, 1630-1868," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Vol. 40* (Boston: The Society, 1961), 370-425; Andrew Oliver and James Bishop Peabody, eds., "The Records of Trinity Church, Boston: 1728-1830," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Volume 46*

The increasing presence of blacks within white churches in Boston represented a threat to slavery because as opposition to Britain mounted from white colonists, messages of resistance to British tyranny and opposition to slavery resounded from pulpits across the province. In an oration delivered at the Second Baptist Church of Boston, for example, John Allen declared that “if there be any vein, any nerve, any soul, any life, or spirit of Liberty in the Sons of America, shew your love for it; guard your freedom, prevent your chains; stand up as one man for your Liberty; for none but those, who set a just value upon this blessing are worthy to enjoy it.”¹⁹ It is highly likely that any slaves present in the church that day, or those who later read the printed edition of the pamphlet would have applied Allen’s principles to their own situation. Allen also displayed his friendship to the cause of abolition in the sermon, saying that “for mankind to be distressed and kept in Slavery by Christians, by those who love the Gospel of Christ; for such to buy their Brethren (for of one blood he has made all nations) and bind them to be Slaves to them and their heirs for life. Be astonished, ye Christians, at this!”²⁰ Nathaniel Niles, Calvinist minister of the North Church in Newburyport similarly asked from his pulpit “God gave us liberty, and we have enslaved our fellow-men. May we not fear that the law of retaliation is about to be executed on us?”²¹ During the revolutionary period churches increasingly became politicized spaces where blacks could imbibe messages of freedom and the equality of man under God.

(Boston: The Society, 1982), 524-559; *The Manifesto Church: Records of the Church in Brattle Square Boston, With Lists of communicants, Baptisms, Marriages, and Funerals: 1699-1872* (Boston: The Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), 100-187.

¹⁹ John Allen, *On the Beauties of Liberty* in Bruns, ed. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 260.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nathaniel Niles, *Two Discourses* in Bruns, ed., *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 321.

The religious basis of organized black abolitionism is clear from the very beginning of the first petition Massachusetts blacks submitted to Governor Hutchinson and the legislature on 6 January 1773 asking for the freedom of slaves. The sole signer of the petition was a slave named Felix, probably the same Felix Holbrook who signed a later petition. Although he was the sole signer, the wording of the petition makes it clear that Felix was not writing for himself alone, but for all slaves in the province, and this petition gives an important window into the ideology and worldview of these enslaved blacks in revolutionary Massachusetts. Felix and the other enslaved people he was working with started their petition by telling the magistrates “we desire to bless God, who loves Mankind, who sent his Son to die for their Salvation, and who is no respecter of persons.”²² These words put forth the biblical basis of black protest against the institution of slavery, and was a shrewd use of the same language white colonists and ministers employed in their arguments for colonial freedom from British tyranny. They were also making their case for racial equality by saying that God does not judge people based on outward appearances, but what is in their hearts. This tactic is one that blacks such as Flora had employed during the Great Awakening in an effort to challenge the authority of ministers, one that individual black writers such as Wheatley would use in her book of poems published five months later, and one that the black petitioners were employing to undermine the power of slaveholders.

Religious ideas played a prominent role in the slaves’ remaining arguments in this petition, especially the question of how slavery affects virtue. They remarked that many slaves in the province are “virtuous and religious, although their condition is in itself so

²² “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 6 January 1773,” in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, Volume I: From the Colonial Times Through the Civil War* (1951; New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1990), 6.

unfriendly to Religion, and every moral Virtue except Patience.”²³ By stating that slavery is destructive to the virtue of those in bondage, the petitioners used an idea common in the political discourse of the time. While white colonists were not themselves enslaved, many political tracts discussed Parliamentary taxation as a form of slavery, and ministers throughout the colony remarked on the destructiveness of any form of slavery to the virtue of a people. This idea was one Jonathan Edwards articulated in his work, where he defined liberty as freedom to act morally without any constraints. The Calvinist ministry during the Revolution used this idea of Edwards to argue that men must have natural liberty if they were to be able to do the will of God, and the petitioners’ rhetoric indicates that they too felt liberty was necessary for virtue. By pointing this out they could gain allies among the ministerial class that were making similar claims.²⁴

Felix and the other petitioners further displayed the influence of Puritan discourse on their own religious and political thought by saying that they would attempt to practice virtue to the best of their ability. “We have no Property! We have no Wives! No Children! We have no City! No Country,” they wrote. “But we have a Father in Heaven, and we are determined, as far as his Grace shall enable us, and as far as our degraded contemptuous Life will admit, to keep all his Commandments.”²⁵ Here they showed the colonists the true extent of slavery and its impact in robbing them of a normal family life and attitudes of patriotism. But by saying they would keep God’s commandments if his grace allowed them to, they employed a

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For Edwards’ ideas on virtue and liberty see Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 457-8; For the importance of virtue in revolutionary political discourse see Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 91-124.

²⁵ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 6 January 1773,” 6.

distinctly Calvinist approach, one that attributed any change of heart in a sinner to God's irresistible grace, and not the efforts of people. Further, in the double entendre referencing their "degraded contemptuous Life" the slaves again pointed out their poor temporal situation, but also alluded to the Christian belief in original sin, an allusion which may similarly have appealed to ministers and the religiously inclined whites who were themselves starting to question and speak against the institution of slavery.

Despite their claim that they had no city or country, the slaves put forth patriotic arguments to support their cause against slavery among those to whom religious appeals would have little effect. They wrote that while some blacks are "vicious," these are under the same laws as all other British subjects, and "there are many others of a quite different Character, and who, if made free, would soon be able as well as willing to bear a Part in the Public Charges."²⁶ Here the petitioners appealed to both the sentiment and pocketbooks of colonial leaders. They argued that freeing the slaves would have produced many individuals loyal to the colonists, individuals who were virtuous and would contribute to God's looking favorably on their country. At the same time, by saying those freed would bear their part in the public charges they made a case for increased tax revenue resulting from slaves who are freed and can someday buy property, in addition to those who would rely on other freed blacks instead of the poorhouse in old age.

Another appeal that Felix employed reveals the petitioners' awareness of trans-Atlantic antislavery politics, an important tool as abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic were stepping up their efforts to achieve abolition in the early 1770s. After their claim that God is no respecter of persons they noted that God "hath lately put it into the Hearts of

²⁶ Ibid.

Multitudes on both sides of the Water, to bear our Burthens, some of whom are Men of great Note and Influence; who have pleaded our Cause with Arguments which we hope will have their weight with this Honorable Court.”²⁷ Here they referred to the general antislavery sentiment arising in the Atlantic World, but probably also had in mind the specific case of James Somerset.

Somerset was a slave who had lived in Boston from 1765 to 1769, thus some of the petitioners may have known him. Motivated by a desire for freedom that all slaves likely shared, but probably emboldened by the many acts of resistance and the growing emphasis on natural rights in Boston, Somerset ran away from Charles Steuart, his master, shortly after being taken to England. Steuart caught Somerset and detained him with the intention of shipping him to the West Indies. Granville Sharpe took on his case and secured legal assistance. In the ensuing decision that Lord Chief Justice Mansfield delivered on 22 June 1772, Somerset was freed because, as Mansfield argued, slavery was of such an odious nature that it could only be supported by positive law, of which there was none within England. Somerset did not return to Boston, however if any of the petitioners had known him they may have heard of the decision from Somerset by letter; if not, they probably learned of the news from colonial papers, which carried accounts of the trial and notices of the decision. While the decision did not actually free all slaves in England, the petitioners may have perceived the decision as such and used that information to bolster their own arguments against slavery.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Steven M. Wise, *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial That Led to the End of Human Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005), 129-133, 186; For discussion of the Somerset case in a local paper see *The Boston News-Letter*, 15 October 1772, Page Supplement 1.

The petitioners were able to distribute their entreaty and its arguments against slavery in a few different media to reach as wide an audience as possible. They got the author of *The Appendix*, an antislavery tract, to insert the entire text of their petition into his essay for publication. The anonymous author of *The Appendix* assisted the slaves in giving circulation to their work while building off the arguments they began in their piece. Where the slaves said they hoped the arguments that other abolitionists were advancing would have an effect on the provincial leaders, the author of this tract argued that slavery is contrary to the charter of Massachusetts, in effect saying there is no positive law for slavery and the practice should end. His argument here spoke again to the ambiguity of the *Body of Liberties* toward the institution of slavery, which has a clause that started out saying there should be no slaves in the colony then proceeded to list exceptions to the rule. The “lover of constitutional liberty,” as the author called himself, said of the slaves’ efforts: “Great Success is expected from this Petition, since Those, who are the Guardians of our Rights, are led and influenced by the true Principles of Liberty.”²⁹ If it was not successful however, he counseled the blacks to seek other methods of redress, especially suing their masters.

In addition to placing their work in this antislavery tract the petitioners managed to get it noticed in another antislavery essay, this time in the *Massachusetts Spy*. The anonymous author of the essay addressed the Massachusetts General Court: “having seen a petition that is intended to be laid before you in the name of many slaves living in Boston and other towns of this province, praying that you would be pleased to take their unhappy state and condition under consideration.”³⁰ This essayist also argued against slavery on the

²⁹ Lover of Constitutional Liberty, *The Appendix: Or, Some Observations on the Expediency of the Petition of the Africans...* (Boston: E. Russell, 1773), 4-5.

³⁰ A Customer, “Essay on Slavery,” *Massachusetts Spy*, 28 January 1773, 3.

grounds that it violated the charter, which guaranteed liberty to all subjects within the realm of Britain. Although the petition did not appear verbatim in this essay as in the first tract, it is clear that the slaves' activism was working to convince abolitionists to support their cause and to do so publicly.

Felix and his fellow slaves were successful in airing their cause in multiple venues, yet the January 1773 petition did not lead to any legislative action. Thus in April they submitted another petition arguing for the abolition of slavery and urging the legislature to do so as soon as possible. Instead of beginning this entreaty with a blessing to God, the petitioners mentioned the many efforts made "by the legislative of this province in their last sessions to free themselves from slavery."³¹ Pointing out the inconsistency of fighting for freedom while keeping slaves, they wrote, "we expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope Sir, that you will have the same grand object, we mean civil and religious liberty, in view in your next session."³²

The slaves' recognition of the legislature's fight for civil and religious liberty highlights another source of black antislavery thought, namely the battle for religious freedom waged by sects such as the Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists throughout Massachusetts. In his tract *Freedom from Civil and Ecclesiastical Tyranny*, Presbyterian minister Jonathan Parsons of Newburyport noted another inconsistency in the political rhetoric of Massachusetts' leaders, arguing for civil freedom while clinging to a religious

³¹ "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773," in Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History*, 7.

³² Ibid.

establishment. Isaac Backus, a Baptist minister, was similarly active during this period in publishing calls for religious freedom. While in this instance the slaves used the struggle for religious freedom as a way to bolster their claim, they did not abandon the religious basis of their call for equal treatment, pointing out that they were similar to the colonists in that “the divine spirit of freedom, seems to fire every humane breast.”³³ They left it up to the imagination of the petition’s recipients to discern what would happen if this divine spirit was ignored.³⁴

Like the previous petition, the slaves tried to appeal to ideas of patriotism to aid their cause. They said that while they could demand reparations for services rendered, they would not do so, but would like to receive the same considerations that other countries give their slaves. “Even the Spaniards,” they wrote, “who have not those sublime ideas of freedom that English men have, are conscious that they have no right to all the services of their fellow-men, we mean the Africans...therefore they allow them one day in a week to work for themselves.”³⁵ Referring to the Spanish practice of *coartación*, whereby slaves who earned enough money could purchase their freedom, the petitioners wisely made the enemies of the English seem more humane, thereby appealing to their sense of cultural superiority, prevalent especially among Congregationalists opposed to Roman Catholicism.

Along with their appeals to religion and patriotism, the petitioners tried to allay whites’ fears about living in a multi-racial society where blacks were not controlled by slavery. They claimed that they were “willing to submit to such regulations and laws, as may

³³ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773,” 7.

³⁴ For tracts contributing to the cause of religious freedom see Jonathan Parsons, *Freedom from Civil and Ecclesiastical Slavery* (Newburyport, MA: 1774); Isaac Backus, *An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty, Against the Oppressions of the Present Day* (Boston: John Boyle, 1773).

³⁵ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773,” 7.

be made relative to us, until we leave the province.”³⁶ This argument was necessary because of the ubiquitous claims by proslavery advocates and abolitionists alike that blacks could only be contained under slavery, and if freed they would disregard the law.³⁷ In addition to obeying the law while in the province, the slaves assured the magistrates that they had no intention of staying, writing that they wanted to leave “as soon as we can, from our joint labours procure money to transport ourselves to some part of the Coast of Africa, where we propose a settlement.”³⁸ Anticipating white abolitionists’ desire for colonization, the petitioners tried to appeal to the racial sensibilities of those who deemed Africans inferior, and also to the purse strings of those who opposed abolition for the effect it would have on the poor rolls and town budgets.

Like the petition from January, these slaves were able to publicize their ideas in multiple venues, helping to influence those in power and the larger public. In the second edition of his tract *On the Beauties of Liberty*, John Allen wrote that because the slaves could not get their April 1773 petition published in the newspaper, he “shall comply with the request of an advocate for a multitude of these distressed People, who are unjustly held in Bondage by those who profess to act on principles of Liberty and Religion, by inserting the following piece.”³⁹ The piece he inserted was the full text of the April petition, an inclusion which was significant because Allen’s pamphlet was one of the most popular during the

³⁶ Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773,” 8.

³⁷ Remember that even Samuel Sewall’s abolitionist tract argued that blacks often desire their freedom, yet can seldom use it well. See Chapter 2, 28.

³⁸ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773,” 8.

³⁹ Allen, *On the Beauties of Liberty*, 261.

revolutionary era and would assist the blacks greatly in spreading their antislavery message to a wider readership.

The Massachusetts House of Representatives similarly aired the grievances of the slaves and came closer than they ever had to abolishing the trade. While the petitioners' tone remained deferential throughout the piece, they did say to the legislature "we cannot but expect your house will again take our deplorable case into consideration, and give us that ample relief which, as men, we have a natural right to."⁴⁰ The members of the House of Representatives ordered that a committee be formed to consider the matter and appointed John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and Robert Treat Paine to do so.⁴¹ Three days later the committee reported that the petition should be tabled until the next session. At the start of the next session, in January 1774, the slaves' petition was again read, along with another memorial from them, and both the House and Council passed a bill in March 1774 to prevent the importation of slaves. The bill would have become law had Governor Thomas Hutchinson signed it, but instead he dissolved the General Court on 9 March 1774, the day after receiving the bill from the legislature, because armed hostilities between the English and the colonists had recently arisen. This bill came closer to becoming law than the previous one introduced in 1767, which had been read three times but did not pass, probably owing in no small part to the increased activism of blacks in the intervening years.⁴²

⁴⁰ "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773," 8.

⁴¹ *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1773-1774* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1981), 85.

⁴² Ibid, 104, 221-237; For Hutchinson dissolving the General Court see "Samuel Dexter to Jeremy Belknap, 26 February 1795," Belknap Papers, Part II in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Vol. III* 5th series (Boston: The Society, 1877), 388; See also Douglas Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56.

Although the slaves' petition was yet again unsuccessful in achieving their ultimate goal, they did establish the type of organization that would prove central to the fight against slavery until the Civil War, namely antislavery committees. While the first petition mentioned that it came from many slaves, the April petition noted specifically that it was "in behalf of our fellow slaves in this province, and by order of their Committee."⁴³ Four individuals signed this petition, Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Chester Joie, and Felix Holbrook. Of these four nothing is known besides their status as slaves in the province and political activists in the abolitionist movement. Two years before the formation of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the group that many historians have called the first antislavery committee, Massachusetts blacks had already established an organization replete with a strategy for achieving abolition and contacts throughout the state to help disseminate their ideas.

Shortly before the legislature took action on the slaves' last petition a number of Bostonians destroyed tea belonging to the East India Company, resulting in the Coercive Acts and a change in leadership, which the slaves believed might be more receptive to their needs. The Crown replaced Governor Hutchinson with General Gage and the committee immediately petitioned him and the legislature once more, hoping that where they had failed to convince Hutchinson they might be able to convince Gage to support abolition.

From the April 1773 petition to the May 1774 one, the tone of the petitioners changed markedly, switching from a humble entreaty to more forceful assertions of their rights. They began by stating that "your Petitioners apprehend we have in common with all other men a

⁴³ "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 20 April 1773," 8.

naturel right to our freedoms without being depriv'd of them by our fellow men.” Boldly asserting their equality with whites and a claim to freedom, the committee went on, arguing that “we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever.”⁴⁴ Here they displayed an impressive knowledge of the Lockean ideas of natural rights and how individuals in society give up some of those rights by compact to secure protection. These ideas were common in both the pulpit and political arena and articulating them would have surely caught the attention of those who used the same discourse to argue against British taxation.

The petitioners also continued to employ the religious rhetoric common in the previous petitions, although they did so more often in this one. They twice referenced the hypocrisy of Christians owning slaves, noting in the first line that they have been “held in a state of Slavery within the bowels of a free and christian Country,” while remarking later that they were “Brought hither to be made slaves for Life in a Christian land.”⁴⁵ Whereas earlier they had remarked that many blacks were virtuous, in this petition they said that many of them are sincere members of the Church of Christ. Because of this membership, they felt a duty to bear the burdens of other Christians, including their own masters, but they could not do so in a state of slavery. Nor can their masters do the same for them; “How can the master be said to Beare my borden,” they asked, “when he Beares me down with the Have chanes of slavery and operson against my will”?⁴⁶ Their rhetoric here was infused with Biblical metaphors and aimed to make the slaves seem more virtuous and Christian than their own

⁴⁴ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to Thomas Gage, 25 May 1774,” in Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History*, 8-9.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 8-9.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 9.

masters. Along with these entreaties the slaves argued that in general, bondage rendered them “incapable of shewing our obedience to Almighty God.”⁴⁷ Being a part of white’s churches throughout Massachusetts, the slaves recognized that appealing to religion and virtue would be sure fire ways to get their arguments heard and possibly acted upon.

Closely tied to religious ideas in revolutionary Massachusetts were ideologies of gender, and enslaved people similarly appealed to those to achieve their goal. In the petition they asked if they continue to be enslaved, how “can the wife submit themselves to there husbands in all things How can the child obey thear parents in all things”?⁴⁸ Voicing a desire for normative patriarchal relationships, the slaves claimed that these are impossible under slavery since masters have the power to sell children at will and separate wives and husbands whenever they choose. By appealing to the normative gender ideologies of white colonists, the slaves employed a tactic that other marginalized groups of the period used to gain respectability. When the Baptists started becoming more prominent during the Great Awakening in Massachusetts, their worship services were seen by many as distinctly feminine because of the emotionalism and sensuality. Baptists also allowed women to participate in services to a far greater degree than was acceptable in Congregational churches. These practices changed in the late-eighteenth century, however. To gain respectability the Baptists started participating more in politics, seen as a strictly masculine domain, and discouraged the type of worship and female participation prevalent during the 1740s and 1750s. The Baptists’ efforts were successful in gaining respect and toleration, and by

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 9.

claiming that they also wanted to live by the same patriarchal ideals, the slaves hoped to gain respect and freedom.⁴⁹

This petition also demonstrated the slaves' desire for immediate emancipation, as opposed to the gradual abolition most scholars have seen as a staple of early abolitionism. They asked Gage and the legislature to "cause an act of the legislative to be passed that we may obtain our Natural right our freedoms and our children be set at liberty at the years of twenty one."⁵⁰ From this line it is clear that they wanted freedom for themselves without qualification, having already suffered under slavery for many years. They did propose freedom for their children at twenty-one years of age, which may seem like a gradual emancipation plan but given the context, was more likely a request for apprenticeships. According to historian Gary Nash, "binding out poor children was a common expedient on both sides of the Atlantic for keeping down the costs of poor relief and inculcating the offspring of the laboring poor with the requisite habits of industry and morality."⁵¹ The petitioners were probably aware that they could not educate their children as well as they would have liked, thus their call seems calculated to give their children training in a useful trade, while securing their own freedom immediately. Furthermore, most gradual abolition plans passed during the revolutionary and early national periods actually freed no slaves, thus the petitioners plans differed markedly from those that scholars have seen as the staple of

⁴⁹ Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 3-7; for an example outside of New England of religious accommodation to gender ideology see Janet Moore Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian: White Evangelical Masculinity in Revolutionary Virginia" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52(2000): 393-416.

⁵⁰ "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to Thomas Gage, 25 May 1774," 9.

⁵¹ Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 77.

eighteenth century abolitionism.⁵² While a number of scholars have commented on the acquiescence in gradual abolition as an argument for the non-radicalism of early black and white abolitionists, with some even saying that the early antislavery movement was a failure, a close examination of the wording of this appeal reveals a desire among this antislavery committee for immediate release from bondage.⁵³

Like his predecessor, Thomas Gage did not act on the slaves' initial petition for freedom, leading to their September 1774 petition in which they offered Gage military service in exchange for freedom, but other slaves in the province continued to try to effect abolition through the legal system. On 14 June 1775, the Worcester Committee of Correspondence passed a resolution against slavery after blacks protested being held in bondage. The resolution, which appeared in the *Massachusetts Spy* one week later, said that "the Negroes in the counties of Bristol and Worcester, the 24th of March last, petitioned the Committees of Correspondence...to assist them in obtaining their freedom."⁵⁴ It is unclear whether this petition was delivered orally or in writing, but it did prompt the Committee of Correspondence to make it known publicly that they "abhor the enslaving of any of the

⁵² Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and 'Race' in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 68-73.

⁵³ See Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 8-14; Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 2; Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 2-6.

⁵⁴ *The Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester, MA), 21 June 1775, 2; Committees of Correspondence were organizations initially set up to coordinate boycotts and responses to Parliamentary measures, but after the Coercive Acts of 1774 some of them became in effect extra-legal governmental bodies at the local level. See Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

human race, particularly the Negroes of this country.”⁵⁵ The Committee promised, in addition, to make any endeavors they could in bringing about the freedom of slaves in Massachusetts. Like their Boston counterparts, the slaves and free blacks in these two counties organized to help achieve their goals and were successful in getting whites to support their cause publicly.

As the slaves in Worcester and Bristol counties waged their struggle for freedom, a former slave in Boston named Prince Hall began his thirty-year tenure as Massachusetts’ most eminent African American abolitionist. Hall was born in Barbados on 12 September 1748. Having been relocated to Boston by his master, Hall educated himself and became a lay minister to an informal worship group in Cambridge, a position which made him influential in Boston’s black community. He also worked as a leather dresser and caterer and was widely known among whites and blacks as an honest, hard-working leader. Hall purchased his freedom in 1770. Among his most significant accomplishments was his organization of the African Masonic Lodge in 1775. This Lodge was the first formal all-black institution in America and organizing it cemented Hall as the recognized leader of the black community in Boston.⁵⁶

In January 1777 Hall led a petition drive to the legislature where he argued against slavery on many of the same grounds as previous petitions while employing a more radical tone. Seamlessly interweaving Christian rhetoric with secular ideologies of natural rights, Hall wrote “your Petitioners apprehend that they have in Common with all other men a

⁵⁵ *The Massachusetts Spy* (Worcester, MA), 21 June 1775, 2.

⁵⁶ For Hall’s professions see Charles H. Wesley, *Prince Hall: Life and Legacy* (Washington, D.C.: The United Supreme Council, 1977), 83 and James Oliver Horton, “Generations of Protest: Black Families and Social Reform in Ante-Bellum Boston,” *The New England Quarterly* 49 (1976):243-245.

Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed on all mankind.”⁵⁷ Here Hall repeated the earlier claims of both individual black abolitionist writers and the black antislavery committee to an equality that stemmed from nature and God alike. The petition further stated that “A Life of Slavery Like that of your petitioners Deprived of Every social privilege of Every thing Requisite to Render Life Tolerable is far worse than Nonexistence.”⁵⁸ Echoing Patrick Henry’s famous line “Give me liberty or give me death,” the petitioners’ rhetoric can certainly be read as a veiled threat of rebellion. They suggested that if forced to suffer under the harsh yoke of slavery much longer, slaves in Massachusetts might be willing to risk forfeiting their lives to gain their freedom, as thousands of slaves in the southern states were doing at that time and as groups of slaves in Boston had offered to do three years before this plea for freedom.⁵⁹ In his work on the resistance of subordinate groups, James Scott argues that “the collective insistence, through petitioning, on the ‘rights’ to which subordinate groups feel entitled carries an understood ‘or else’ with the precise consequences of a refusal left to the imagination” of the reader.⁶⁰ In this instance, the “or else” was probably slave rebellion or aiding the British army, demonstrating the evolution of black antislavery politics and black abolitionists’ ability to adapt their methods to a changing political climate.

⁵⁷ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 13 January 1777,” in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 111-133; Sylvia Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁶⁰ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 95.

Hall and the other 1777 petitioners displayed a familiarity with the political rhetoric of both white colonists and black abolitionists. “[In imitat]ion of the Lawdable Example of the Good People of these States,” they wrote, “your petitioners have Long and Patiently waited the Evnt of petition after petition By them presented to the Legislative Body of this state.”⁶¹ Again their rhetoric here marked a radical departure from the tone of earlier petitions, as they propounded another veiled threat to the colonists, implying that their response to repeated injustice and tyranny might be the same as the revolutionaries’. They ended by asking for a restoration “to the Enjoyments of that which is the Naturel Right of all men,” demanding immediate emancipation for themselves and for their children to receive their freedom at twenty-one years old.⁶²

As in the April 1773 petition, Hall and the other blacks’ latest entreaty pushed the legislature into action. On 18 March 1777 the Massachusetts legislature received “A petition of Lancaster Hill, and a number of other negroes, praying the Court to take into consideration their state of bondage, and pass an act whereby they may be restored to the enjoyment of that freedom which is the natural right of all men. Read and committed to Judge Sergeant, Mr. Dalton, Mr. Appleton, Col. Brooks, and Mr. Story.” In a little more than three months the House of Representatives responded by drawing up “A bill intituled an Act for preventing the Practice of holding Persons in Slavery.”⁶³ While many white abolitionists of the time were calling solely for an end to the slave trade, the petitioners were able to convince legislators to attack the institution of slavery itself. The House read the bill twice but tabled it until it

⁶¹ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 13 January 1777,” 10.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1776-1777* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1986), 274; *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1777* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1987), 25.

consulted with the Continental Congress. This action effectively killed the legislation as the Continental Congress was comprised of a number of supporters of slavery.

This latter appeal was also unsuccessful in effecting legislative change, yet it is clear that the actions of Boston's slave and free black communities were influencing the debate on slavery within the colony, and their ideas and tactics subsequently impacted those of black abolitionists outside Massachusetts. Just two years after Massachusetts' blacks' last petition, slaves in Connecticut and New Hampshire petitioned their respective legislatures for freedom, often employing the same arguments that Boston blacks had used. In 1777 Hall had written that Massachusetts slaves were "Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power from their Derest friends and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents;" just two years later Connecticut slaves similarly appealed to the sentiment of legislators by noting that "many of your Petitioners, were (as they verily believe) most unjustly torn, from the Bosom of their dear Parents, and Friends."⁶⁴ And just as Massachusetts blacks had wove Enlightenment ideas of natural rights with Christian notions of equality under God, Connecticut blacks wrote "we are Convinced of our Right (by the Laws of Nature and by the whole Tenor of the Christian Religion, so far as we have been taught) to be free."⁶⁵

The petition of New Hampshire slaves to their legislature in 1779 also evinced an influence of earlier black petitions and their arguments against holding people enslaved. They argued that "the God of nature gave them life and freedom, upon the terms of the most perfect equality with other men."⁶⁶ They noted that freedom was a gift from God and one that

⁶⁴ "Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 13 January 1777," 10; "The Petition of the Negroes in the Towns of Stratford and Fairfield, May 1779," in Aptheker, ed. *A Documentary History*, 10.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁶⁶ "Petition of New Hampshire Slaves, 12 November 1779," in Bruns, ed. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 452.

all men have a duty to fight for. In addition to these appeals, the New Hampshire slaves tried to appeal to the sentiments of their readers, writing that “often is the parent’s cheek wet for the loss of a child, torn by the cruel hand of violence from her arching bosom; Thus, often and in vain is the infant’s sigh for the nurturing care of its bereaved parent.”⁶⁷

Blacks in Connecticut and New Hampshire could have learned about the earlier petitions by Boston’s blacks in a variety of ways. As noted earlier, the petitions of Massachusetts blacks appeared in newspapers and other abolitionist tracts, something that was likely to have drawn the attention of slaves in other locales. The *Essex Journal*, where Caesar Sarter published his antislavery piece, was located in Newburyport, MA, a town just twenty miles from Portsmouth, NH, where the slaves who submitted their 1779 petition resided. Popular pamphlets discussing the principles of freedom, such as John Allen’s widely circulated *Oration on the Beauties of Liberty*, similarly provided slaves in other areas a chance to imbibe the ideas, tactics, and boldness to air their own grievances. Other slaves were probably influenced by personal contacts. Prince Whipple for instance, a soldier and one of the signers of the 1779 New Hampshire petition, spent time in Massachusetts during the revolutionary war and may have met black abolitionists such as Prince Hall, who was himself a soldier during the war.⁶⁸

Slaves from Connecticut also served in the militia and participated in the Boston campaign, giving them opportunities to learn of black abolitionists’ efforts in the fight for freedom. Peter Lewis of Stratford, Connecticut, the town where the 1779 petition originated, served time in the military outside of Boston in 1775. Nero Hawley and Cesar Edwards, two

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ For Whipple’s presence in Massachusetts during the war see Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-1800* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1973), 46.

other slaves from Stratford, Connecticut, also saw action in Massachusetts during the war. These men all gained their freedom by serving in the military and may have either established contacts with black abolitionists in the Boston area, or heard of their efforts from local blacks. However it happened, it remains clear that the pioneering efforts of black abolitionists in Massachusetts were central in shaping public opinion and debate on slavery within their state and impacting the ideas of abolitionists in other colonies.⁶⁹

As blacks in Massachusetts and throughout New England began gaining their freedom, they extended the debate over slavery to the arena of racial equality. The proposed 1778 Massachusetts constitution would have excluded blacks, Indians, and mulattoes in the state from voting, and some towns in the province rejected it for this reason. While the later 1780 constitution did not exclude blacks from voting, local custom did in many places, including Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Two brothers, Paul and John Cuffe had refused to pay taxes there from 1777 to 1780 because of this exclusion from the political process, and they, along with five others petitioned the General Court for relief.⁷⁰

Paul and John Cuffe were the freeborn children of Ruth and Cuffe Slocum. Ruth was a freeborn woman of Indian descent, while Cuffe Slocum was a native born African sold into Massachusetts slavery in 1728. Slocum bought his freedom in 1745 and was able to purchase a 120 acre farm in Westport, Massachusetts in 1766. Paul and John inherited the family farm on the death of their father in 1772 and shouldered the responsibility of caring for their mother and three younger sisters. In 1775, at the age of sixteen Paul Cuffe went to sea and traveled aboard whaling ships to the Gulf of Mexico and the West Indies. While on his third

⁶⁹ David O. White, *Connecticut's Black Soldiers, 1775-1783* (Chester, CT: Pequot Press, 1973), 19-27.

⁷⁰ Lamont D. Thomas, *Rise to be a People: A Biography of Paul Cuffe* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 4-11.

voyage in 1776 Paul's ship was captured by the British and he was briefly imprisoned in New York before returning to Westport. He sailed to the Caribbean again in 1778 and the following year decided to go into business with his brother, building a small boat to carry on trade with the islands just off the Massachusetts and Rhode Island borders. These many experiences proved formative to Paul's growing political consciousness, allowing him to witness the treatment of blacks throughout the western hemisphere and to become conversant with the discourses of natural rights and the duty of resisting tyranny. His familiarity with these discourses is evident in the petition he and six others submitted in February 1780.⁷¹

Paul and the other petitioners—John Cuffe, Adventum Child, Samuell May, Pero Howland, Pero Russell, and Pero Eggshell—started by noting their Africanness and the legacy of slavery. “That we being chiefly of the African extract,” they wrote, “and by reason of long bondage and hard slavery we have been deprived of enjoying the profit of our labour or the advantage of inheriting estates from our parents as our neighbours the white people do having some of us not long enjoyed our own freedom.”⁷² Although Paul and John were not themselves under the disadvantages noted, having been born free and inherited a farm, they still felt the pinch of taxation and resented being taxed “contrary to the invariable custom and practice of the country,” that is without the benefits of representation. They argued that the taxes were actually harmful to the common good because they would reduce blacks in that locale to paupery, making the town responsible for their welfare. From the petition it is

⁷¹ Sheldon H. Harris, *Paul Cuffe: Black America and the African Return* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 16-19.

⁷² “Petition of Paul Cuffe and Other Blacks, February 10, 1780” in Bruns, ed., *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 454.

difficult to tell whether they objected solely to the tax or to being taxed without representation, but chances are they disliked both.⁷³

The petitioners also pointed out the many services that blacks had rendered to whites in the state, both while enslaved and after being freed. After noting again that they could not vote in town meeting nor have a voice in choosing representatives they wrote “we take it as a heard ship that poor old negroes should be rated which have been in bondage some thirty, some forty and some fifty years and now just got their liberty some by going into the service and some by going to sea.” Employing some of the same religious discourse common to earlier petitions in Massachusetts, they asked the General Court to “grant [them] relief from taxation while under our present cirsumstances [*sic*].” This discourse included praying, in the petition, for God to influence those in power to be merciful to the poor and give unto those who ask of them.⁷⁴

While this petition was not an abolitionist one per se, in that it did not ask for the abolition of slavery, it was a part of the burgeoning antislavery movement among blacks in Massachusetts. This movement’s primary focus would be on getting both slavery and the slave trade abolished, but equally important to many black activists was the struggle for racial equality and economic opportunity. John and Paul Cuffe continued to wage their struggle for both when the General Court did not act on their petition. In early 1781 the brothers challenged the Dartmouth town meeting to explicitly deny them the franchise, and while they did not win this battle they did have their taxes reduced from one hundred fifty-four pounds to eight pounds, twelve shillings and charges against them for evading taxes dropped. This struggle is significant as it came at a time when the Cuffes were just starting

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Both quotes are in Ibid, 455.

their business and could use the extra capital. It is also important in the history of abolitionism, showing as it does that for blacks in Massachusetts the struggle for racial equality and economic opportunity could not be divorced from the fight against slavery.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The efforts of African Americans in Massachusetts to abolish slavery during the revolutionary period represent nothing less than the beginning of organized abolitionist activity in America. Two years before white Philadelphians formed the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and twelve years before the formation of the New York Manumission Society, Massachusetts blacks had established an antislavery committee that worked to influence public policy through petitioning the legislature and encouraging the production of antislavery literature by white abolitionists. While a gradual abolitionist sentiment did dominate the abolitionist activity of members of these more formal antislavery organizations, the members of the black antislavery committee in Massachusetts called only for an immediate end to slavery, placing their tactics squarely within the “radical” antislavery tradition that scholars have attributed primarily to abolitionists working in the 1830s and beyond. This fact shows us that when we shift the perspective to the efforts of African Americans in this early period of antislavery activity we are left with a much fuller picture of the origins, ideologies, and tactics employed in the northern antislavery movement.

⁷⁵ Thomas, *Rise to be a People*, 10-11.

CHAPTER 4: ABOLITION IN MASSACHUSETTS AND THE GROWTH OF THE NORTHERN ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT, 1781-1825

Introduction

In the same year that Paul Cuffe and his fellow activists presented their petition for relief from taxes to the Massachusetts General Court, the people of the Bay State ratified what is today the oldest functioning constitution in American history. Drafted by John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Bowdoin, the latter two of whom actively assisted the 1773 black petitioners in getting their voices heard in the legislature, the Massachusetts constitution went into effect on 25 October 1780. The Massachusetts constitution, with its three equal branches of government, bicameral legislature, and strong executive, is widely known for having influenced the general frame of the United States constitution, but to some contemporaries it was also widely known for having led to the downfall of slavery in the state. Lawyers, jurists, slaveholders and African Americans alike interpreted the first article, which reads “All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness” as having effectively abolished the institution of slavery.¹ Based on their interpretation of this document, and the impetus for freedom that had driven dozens of enslaved blacks prior to 1780 to sue their masters, two

¹ “Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts” <http://www.mass.gov/legis/const.htm> Accessed on 10 March 2010

slaves initiated cases in 1781 that led to the formal abolition of slavery in 1783 by court decision.²

With slavery abolished in the state black activists turned their attention to three important causes—abolishing the slave trade in Massachusetts, continuing the struggle for racial equality, and building their community. Prince Hall, founder of the African Masonic Lodge and leader of the 1777 petition drive to the Massachusetts legislature, was at the forefront of all three. He led the petition drive to the legislature in 1788 that prompted state leaders to debate and eventually abolish the slave trade in Massachusetts. He also published tracts aimed at building race-consciousness among blacks in the state and took the lead in forwarding black education. Hall was joined in his efforts by leaders such as John Marrant, Scipio Dalton, Thomas Paul, Prince Saunders, and Paul Cuffe.

To advance the struggle against racial inequality and help build a strong community these men organized new institutions in the state, such as the African Society, the African Baptist Church, and the African School, that played an important role in broadening their local struggle against slavery and the slave trade into a national and international one. In the years of the early republic new strategies for achieving abolition emerged among Massachusetts' black activists, including an early form of the politics of respectability and a black emigration movement, that were vital to antislavery activity and black politics in general thru the Civil War era and beyond.

While many historians have argued that the years between 1808 and 1831 represent a lull in American antislavery activity, an examination of black activism in Massachusetts

² For the creation of the MA Constitution see Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 434-6; For a contemporary interpretation of Article 1 see "James Sullivan to Jeremy Belknap," 9 April 1795 in *Belknap Papers, Part II* in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* Vol. 3 5th Series (Boston: The Society, 1877), 403.

demonstrates that abolitionists during this period built on the foundation they established in the eighteenth century to broaden the scope and power of the antislavery movement. Instead of a lull in abolitionist activity, the early nineteenth century saw a strengthening and radicalization of American abolition, which paved the way for the work of activists such as William Lloyd Garrison and David Walker in the late-1820s.

Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Massachusetts

While there had already been a number of freedom suits in Massachusetts prior to 1781, these cases were too specialized to secure a general emancipation in the state because they often involved a specific promise of freedom to a slave. It was not until the suits of Quok Walker and Elizabeth Freeman that the constitutionality of slavery entered the debate because prior to this point there had been no constitution to which lawyers could refer. Once the 1780 constitution had been ratified the courts became the place where slavery was seemingly most vulnerable. Earlier John Adams remarked that he never knew a jury to keep a man or woman enslaved upon appeal. Blacks faced better odds of gaining their freedom through the court system because they had to convince fewer people that they deserved freedom than they did in the legislature. Also, courts were comprised of local juries, and as was the case with juries throughout the state and in institutions such as the Worcester Committee of Correspondence, local whites could be more receptive to the arguments of slaves than those in the state government, especially in areas where slavery did not figure prominently in the economy, such as western Massachusetts.

Elizabeth Freeman's case started in western Massachusetts, going before the Berkshire Court of Common Pleas at Great Barrington in August 1781. Freeman was about thirty-six years old and the slave of John Ashley, a judge who was the largest land and slave holder in Berkshire County. Ashley had been an important proponent of resistance to Parliament in the 1760s and a leading Patriot during the 1770s, when he played a prominent role in drafting the Sheffield resolves of 1773, a document that articulated the rights of man and the aim of government. Much of Ashley's political activism took place in his own home, where Elizabeth would have picked up on the rhetoric of the American Revolution. While this rhetoric may have excited a desire for freedom in Elizabeth Freeman, it was not until February 1781 that she decided to pursue it in earnest. That month Hannah Ashley, John's wife and Elizabeth's mistress, grabbed a kitchen shovel in a rage and attempted to hit Elizabeth's sister with it. Freeman, also known to contemporaries as Mumbet, intercepted the blow and received a nasty scar on her arm. Shortly thereafter Mumbet decided to seek legal counsel from a neighbor and pursue her freedom.³

The neighbor was Theodore Sedgwick, who had graduated from Yale College in 1765 and later studied law under Mark Hopkins, the younger brother of Calvinist minister Samuel Hopkins. Sedgwick soon settled in Great Barrington, Massachusetts and became a friend and mentee of John Ashley, whom he helped draft the 1773 Sheffield Resolves. Along with Theodore Sedgwick, Tapping Reeve joined Freeman's legal team. Reeve was an early women's rights advocate, according to Mumbet's biographer, and "he would later become famous for his Law of Barron and Femme, which became a critical contribution to helping

³ Richard E. Welch, Jr. "Mumbet and Judge Sedgwick: A Footnote to the Early History of Massachusetts Justice" *Boston Bar Journal* 8(1964): 13-14; Ben Z. Rose, *Mother of Freedom: Mum Bett and the Roots of Abolition* (Waverly, MA: Treeline Press, 2009), 4, 32-39.

women achieve legal status before the law.”⁴ Perhaps because of Reeve’s experience dealing with issues of gender and the law, he and Sedgwick decided to add a man to the suit as a co-plaintiff, which Freeman did by filing suit with another of Ashley’s slaves, a man named Brom.⁵

The first step that Sedgwick and Reeve took in the case was to ask for a writ of replevin, “a form of action which lies to regain the possession of personal chattels which have been taken from the plaintiff unlawfully.”⁶ Unlike most legal actions of this kind, the personal chattels which the plaintiffs hoped to regain were their own bodies. Freeman and Brom argued that they were illegally held in slavery, and requested the court to give them control over their own lives and labor, employing a similar argument as the 1774 petitioners, who had written that they “are a freeborn Pepl and have never forfeited this Blessing by any compact or agreement whatever.”⁷

Along with requesting the writ of replevin, Sedgwick argued that it was illegal for slaves to be held in Massachusetts for three primary reasons. First, he claimed that Massachusetts had never specifically sanctioned the institution, showing the influence of the 1772 Somerset decision, which was decided on the question of whether or not there was any positive law for slavery in England. Second, Sedgwick claimed that the laws which protected slavery were based on a legislative error, namely a misinterpretation of the 1641 *Body of*

⁴ Ibid, 64.

⁵ Ibid, 36-39, 64-65.

⁶ John Bouvier, *Bouvier’s Law Dictionary and Concise Encyclopedia* 8th ed. III (Kansas City, Mo: Vernon Law Book Company, 1914), 2890.

⁷ “Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 25 May 1774,” Aptheker, ed. 8-9.

Liberties. And lastly, he argued that even if slavery had legally existed in Massachusetts, the first article of the 1780 constitution had outlawed the institution.⁸

It is not clear whether Freeman's case was decided on these constitutional arguments or on a more specific point of law. It is likely that it was the constitutional arguments that prevailed, however, because unlike earlier slaves who sued their masters, Mumbet had no legal claim to freedom, such as a promise of manumission. The court decided to issue the writ of replevin, and when Ashley refused to honor it, declared that "the said Brom and Bett are not and were not at the time of the purchase of the original Writ the legal Negro Servants of him the said John Ashley."⁹ Both Mumbet and Brom received their freedom and the court fined John Ashley thirty shillings.¹⁰

After winning her freedom Mumbet went to work for the Sedgwicks, who moved to Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1786. That year she helped protect the Sedgwick home from mobs who were part of Shays's Rebellion, and by 1803 was able to purchase five acres of land for herself in Stockbridge. She ceased working for the Sedgwicks in 1808 and by the time of her death in 1829 had accumulated nineteen acres of land, a considerable amount for a former slave at the time. Her character, work ethic, and demeanor impressed most of those who knew her and became in themselves a practical refutation against ideas of racial inequality. Just four years after helping Freeman secure her freedom, Theodore Sedgwick joined the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. And in 1831 Sedgwick, who by this time had

⁸ Welch, Jr. "Mumbet and Judge Sedgwick," 14.

⁹ "Brom and Bett vs. J. Ashley, Esq." in James M. Rosenthal, "Free Soil in Berkshire County 1781" *The New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 785.

¹⁰ Ashley immediately appealed the decision, but dropped his appeal in October 1781 and paid his fine. It is not clear why Ashley dropped his appeal, but historian Arthur Zilversmit argues he did so because the Massachusetts Superior Court had ruled slavery unconstitutional just one month before, in the case *Caldwell v. Jennison*, decided in September 1781. See Arthur Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (1968): 617-622.

served Massachusetts as a Representative, Senator, and Supreme Judicial Court justice, wrote of Mumbet “if there could be a practical refutation of the imagined natural superiority of our race to hers, the life and character of this woman would afford that refutation...she had nothing of the submissive or the subdued character, which succumbs to superior force, and is the usual result of the state of slavery.”¹¹ When Mumbet passed away in 1829, she had convinced most who knew her that black people were equal to whites and did not deserve to be enslaved.

Unlike Elizabeth Freeman’s case, Quok Walker’s 1781 freedom suit did involve a promise of manumission, but it ended up being decided on the question of slavery’s constitutionality in Massachusetts. Quok Walker was the son of Mingo and his wife Dinah, all three of whom James Caldwell purchased in 1754, when Quok was just nine months old. In 1763 James Caldwell died, passing along ownership of Quok to his wife Isabell, who later married Nathaniel Jennison. Upon Isabell’s death in 1773 Quok again changed hands and was now the property of Nathaniel Jennison. According to Quok, however, both James Caldwell and Isabell Jennison had promised to free him, promises which Nathaniel Jennison refused to honor. So in April 1781, two months after Mumbet’s kitchen shovel incident, Quok ran away to work for John and Seth Caldwell, the younger brothers of his original owner.¹²

Nathaniel Jennison soon found Walker in his new situation, beat him and took him back to his home. Walker then sued Jennison for assault, in effect claiming the right to be

¹¹ Theodore Sedgwick, *The Practicability of the Abolition of Slavery, A Lecture Delivered at the Lyceum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, February, 1831* (New York: Jay Seymour, 1831), 16; Rose, *Mother of Freedom*, 75-106.

¹² Robert M. Spector, “The Quock Walker Cases (1781-83)—Slavery, its Abolition, and Negro Citizenship in Early Massachusetts” *The Journal of Negro History* 53(1968): 12-13.

secure in his own person, while Jennison sued John and Seth Caldwell for 1,000 pounds, claiming that the brothers enticed his slave away. Walker won his case against Jennison, while Jennison won his case against Caldwell, both in the same court. These decisions were clearly contradictory, but came about because of their timing. In the latter case, Jennison produced a bill of sale for Quok, leading to his victory against the Caldwells. But in the former case Quok's attorneys argued for his freedom on both moral grounds and the earlier manumission promise, and as juries throughout the state had done for close to twenty years, they came down on the side of liberty and declared Walker a free man in June 1781.¹³

After these two decisions both Jennison and the Caldwells appealed their losses; however Jennison's appeal of the fine for assault and the decision to free Walker was dismissed because his lawyer did not file the correct paperwork. In September 1781, the case *Caldwell v. Jennison* came up and the court overturned the earlier decision, which held John and Seth Caldwell liable for damages to Jennison. So, after all of the legal wrangling, Quok Walker won his freedom by successfully suing Nathaniel Jennison for assault. The court had initially made a contradictory ruling when it said John and Seth Caldwell were liable to Jennison for the loss of Walker's employment, but the court's overturning this decision supported the decision that granted Walker his freedom.¹⁴

Historians have debated whether or not the 1781 cases were the ones that ended slavery in the state. According to Arthur Zilversmit, the resolution of these cases decided the legality of slavery in Massachusetts because John Ashley dropped his appeal against Mumbet and Brom one month after hearing the results of the Jennison case, presumably reasoning that since slavery had been declared unconstitutional in the Worcester court, he would lose his

¹³ Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts," 614-617, 622-624.

¹⁴ Ibid.

case. While this may be a plausible interpretation, there is no evidence demonstrating that Ashley was aware of the Worcester cases or dropped his appeal for any other reason than being tired of fighting to retain slaves who might just run away when the opportunity arose. Other historians argue it was not until 1783 that slavery was abolished in the state. This was the year that Nathaniel Jennison went to court for his criminal trial for assaulting Walker. Were Jennison to win the case then slavery's legality would presumably be upheld.¹⁵

The case appeared before the Supreme Judicial Court at Worcester in April 1783, with Robert Treat Paine serving as the prosecutor and William Cushing as Chief Justice. Paine had earlier served on committees in the General Court that considered the January and April 1773 black petitions and had expressed antislavery sentiments in writing. Paine did not argue the case on constitutional grounds, but on the grounds that Walker had been promised his freedom and should not have been subject to assault. William Cushing, however, in his charge to the jury stated that "Our Constitution of Government, by which the people of this Commonwealth have solemnly bound themselves, sets out with declaring that all men are born free and equal-and that every subject is entitled to liberty and property-and in short is totally repugnant to the idea of being born slaves. This being the case, I think the idea of slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct and the Constitution; and there can be no such thing as perpetual servitude of a rational creature."¹⁶

Here Cushing interpreted the first article of the 1780 Massachusetts constitution as having abolished slavery in the state. He also significantly broadened the scope of the case by

¹⁵ Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts," 622-624; See also William O'Brien, "Did the Jennison Case Outlaw Slavery in Massachusetts?" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 17 (1960): 219-241 and Emily Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts" *The New England Quarterly* 75(2002): 24-51.

¹⁶ William Cushing, "Commonwealth v. Jennison, Chief Justice Cushing to the Jury, 1783," in Bruns, ed. *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*, 475.

addressing the institution of slavery as a whole rather than just the enslavement of Quock Walker, an approach which Lord Chief Justice Mansfield had refused to do in the 1772 Somerset decision. While blacks had appealed to the legislature time and again for relief from bondage, their efforts finally paid off in pushing the judicial branch to take an activist stance and assert itself as an interpreter of the law, leading to the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.¹⁷

Although their actions probably freed only a couple thousand slaves as opposed to the millions who would be freed with the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, getting slavery abolished was still a highly significant event in Massachusetts' history and the history of abolitionism. Since the state was now a "free soil" one, blacks from other locales would migrate there in larger numbers and contribute to black institutional and communal life, a situation that would later help spur the rise of a national antislavery movement, centered in Massachusetts, during the 1820s.

With the abolition of slavery achieved black activists turned their attention to achieving equality before the law and securing the abolition of the international slave trade. In October 1787 Prince Hall and "a great number of blacks" once again petitioned the Massachusetts General Court, this time to secure equal access to educational facilities for blacks. Noting that they paid their taxes like other citizens, the petitioners remarked, "we are of the humble opinion that we have the right to enjoy the privileges of free men. But that we do not will appear in many instances, and we beg leave to mention one out of many, and that is of the education of our children which now receive no benefit from the free schools in the

¹⁷ Spector, "The Quock Walker Cases," 16-18; For more on black agency and judicial activism in Massachusetts see Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three," 45-49.

town of Boston.”¹⁸ Hall and his fellow petitioners recognized the importance of education in the new republic and the potential it had for raising themselves to a level of equality with white citizens. Unlike some of the petitions from the 1770s, the General Court took no action on this entreaty, leaving Boston’s black citizens to fend for themselves in educating their youth, a situation which Prince Hall’s son Primus would attempt to remedy during the next decade by opening a school for blacks in his own home.

The legislature did, however, act on the next petition submitted by Hall protesting the kidnapping of three black Masons and calling for the abolition of the slave trade. After the Revolution, merchants in Massachusetts resumed the international slave trade. Even with slavery abolished in the state vessels continued to sail to Africa, sell slaves in the West Indies, and bring back goods such as sugar and molasses in the triangle trade. Some captains, however, did not bother to go to Africa and instead kidnapped blacks in America to sell in the West Indies. This is exactly what occurred in Boston in January 1788, when Captain - Hammond enticed three members of the African Masonic Lodge aboard his ship to sell them as slaves in Martinique.¹⁹ As a response to this act, Prince Hall and twenty members of the African Masonic Lodge presented a petition to the General Court on 27 February 1788. “Your Petitioners are justly alarmed at the enhuman and cruel Treetment that Three of our Brethren free citizens of the Town of Boston lately Received,” they noted.²⁰ While the earlier petition for equal access to schools displays their awareness of exclusion from the body

¹⁸ “Petition of Prince Hall to the General Court of Massachusetts, 17 October 1787,” in Aptheker, ed. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 19.

¹⁹ Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, 9 March 1788, in *Belknap Papers, Part II*, 25.

²⁰ Petition of Massachusetts Blacks to the Legislature, 27 February 1788,” in *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 20.

politic simply because they were black, they continued to assert their citizenship and employ the legal system to gain redress for their grievances.

Hall and his fellow Masons revealed their awareness of kidnapping as an ongoing problem in the commonwealth and appealed to the pocketbooks of their audience to stymie the practice. “We can aseuer your Honners,” they noted, “that maney of our free blacks that have Entred on bord of vessels as seaman and have been sold for Slaves & sum of them we have heard from but no not who carred them away.”²¹ The result of these kidnappings, according to Hall, is that “many of us who are good seamen are obliged to stay at home thru fear and the one help of our time lorter about the streets for want of employ.”²² The petitioners here asserted the importance of seafaring as an occupation for black Bostonians and appeal to the legislature to keep this avenue of employ open, lest the town be forced to support blacks on the poor rolls because they can find no other work.

Although the primary purpose of this petition was to protest and put an end to kidnappings on the American side of the Atlantic, Hall also argued for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in general. “One thing more we would bege leve to Hint, that is that your Petetioners have for sumtime past Beheald whith greef ships cleared out from this Herber for Africa and there they ether steal or case others to steal our Brothers & sisters,” they wrote. Recounting some of the horrors that Africans were subjected to in the Middle Passage, the petitioners appealed to the Christian sensibilities of their audience, remarking that “after haven sported with the Lives and Lebeties fello man and at the same time call themselves

²¹ Ibid, 20.

²² Ibid, 20-21.

Christians: Blush o Hevens at this.”²³ While this petition was a very short one, its powerful language and the fact that members of the African Masonic Lodge initiated it demonstrates the way that this fraternal organization acted as an antislavery society and an organization that could connect the interests of blacks in Boston with those of Africans throughout the Atlantic.

Even before Hall submitted this petition to the legislature he was working to publicize the kidnapping to sympathetic whites in Boston and elsewhere in the country. Historian and Minister Jeremy Belknap noted that “I had some conferences with Prince on the subject” of the petition, and the kidnapping story appeared in newspapers as far as New York, including the 26 February 1788 edition of the *New York Packet*.²⁴ Months after it was submitted Ebenezer Hazard of New York wrote to Belknap and told him that “I now return to you Prince Hall’s petition. It will appear in one of our newspapers on Monday, when a trial will come on between one of our masters of vessels and a member of the society for promoting the manumission of slaves, who accused the former of kidnapping negroes.”²⁵ The full text of Hall’s petition, signed by him, also appeared in the 24 April 1788 edition of the *Massachusetts Spy* in Worcester.²⁶ Hall’s work helped to connect both him and his organization to whites who agreed that the slave trade should be abolished, and helped to show abolitionists as far as New York that the kidnapping of free blacks was a national problem that they needed to address.

²³ Both quotations in *Ibid*, 21.

²⁴ Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, 2 August 1788, in *Belknap Papers, Part II*, 55; *New York Packet*, 26 February 1788, 2.

²⁵ Ebenezer Hazard to Jeremy Belknap, 5 April 1788, in *Belknap Papers, Part II*, 28-29.

²⁶ *Massachusetts Spy*, 24 April 1788, 1-2.

Hall's February 1788 petition and two others submitted to the legislature that same month by Quakers and a group of Boston ministers spurred the General Court into action. On 26 March 1788 the legislature passed "An Act to prevent the Slave-Trade, and for granting Relief to the Families of such unhappy Persons as may be kidnapped or decoyed away from this Commonwealth." The law recognized Hall's complaint that blacks were continually subject to kidnapping, noting that "by the African trade for slaves, the lives and liberties of many innocent persons have been from time to time sacrificed to the lust of gain." They went on to mandate stiff fines for all those involved in trading slaves to any state in America or any nation, including a fifty pound fine for every African sold as a slave and a two hundred pound fine for every vessel outfitted for the slave trade. And although the legislature's action came as the result of three petitions, and not just Hall's, the petition of the Masons was important in spreading awareness of black kidnappings.²⁷

Hall's petition succeeded in both securing the abolition of the slave trade in Massachusetts and the return of the three members of his Lodge: Wendham, Cato, and Luck. When these three were shipped to Martinique they refused to work as slaves, despite serious floggings, and the media attention prompted Governor John Hancock to write the governor of Martinique to have the three men shipped back to Boston. The governor fulfilled Hancock's request and the Masons were returned to Boston in late July 1788. According to Jeremy Belknap their return "caused a jubilee among the blacks," although the captain of the ship was never apprehended. Prince Hall took them to see Belknap, who had been instrumental in getting them returned and the trade abolished, and for Belknap their appreciation was "much more than a balance for all the curses of the African dealers, distillers, &c., which have been

²⁷ *The Perpetual Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, from the Commencement of the Constitution, in October, 1780, to the Last Wednesday in May, 1789* (Boston: Adams and Nourse, 1789), 235.

liberally bestowed upon the clergy of this town for promoting the late law against their detestable traffick.”²⁸ Belknap’s words indicate the true importance of Hall’s efforts, which combined with those of other abolitionists such as Hall, were able to bring about the abolition of the slave trade.

Black Freemasonry in Massachusetts

Even as they secured the abolition of the slave trade, Boston’s black citizens still had to wage a struggle against racial discrimination. Indeed the very law that abolished the slave trade in the state singled out blacks for “warning out.” The measure noted that

no person being an African or Negroe...or a citizen of some one of the United States; to be evidenced by a certificate from the Secretary of the State of which he shall be a citizen, shall tarry within this Commonwealth, for a longer time than two months, & upon complaint made to any Justice of the Peace within this Commonwealth, that any such person has been within the same longer than two months, the said Justice shall order the said person to depart out of this Commonwealth.²⁹

If any such blacks did stay in Massachusetts for longer than two months they had to leave the state, and any who refused to do so faced jail time with hard labor. Laws such as these reflected the fears of Massachusetts residents and northerners in general that with the end of slavery, blacks would become a burden on both the public rolls and the jail system. To counter this racist ideology and to enjoy the fruits of their hard-won freedom, African Americans in Massachusetts articulated a race-consciousness that would aid in community

²⁸ Jeremy Belknap to Ebenezer Hazard, 2 August 1788, 55.

²⁹ *Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1893), 626.

development and began to espouse an early form of the politics of respectability to convince whites that they were moral human beings who deserved equality.

As in the earlier efforts to attack slavery and the slave trade, the African Masonic Lodge took the lead in articulating the race consciousness and moral code that would assist blacks in their endeavor to gain equality, which for them meant the equal application of the law and freedom from racist violence. Black Freemasonry in the 1780s was formed in the context of the migration to the North from southern states and the West Indies that Massachusetts authorities wanted to prevent and was central to the “creation of institutional conceptions of free black identity and community,” according to historian Chernoh Sesay Jr.³⁰ The Lodge’s formation in the context of increased migration from others parts of the United States, Africa, and the West Indies meant that Masonic leaders such as Hall had to find some way to create a sense of common purpose among blacks if he wanted to unite them to work toward becoming respected citizens.

Hall aimed to do this by publishing his lodge’s annual St. John’s Festival speeches, with John Marrant’s 1789 sermon being the first installment in a series of three speeches that articulated the goal of black Freemasonry and Hall’s vision of uplift for blacks in the United States. John Marrant was born free on 15 June 1755 in New York. He soon removed to Charleston, South Carolina with his family and became a well-known musician in his teens. In 1769 he went to a revival meeting where he heard George Whitefield preach, and after an emotional period in which he felt God would cast him into hell he converted to Christianity. Marrant soon left his home and ended up among the Cherokee Indians, where he eventually began preaching. He continued his ministry work among the Cherokee, Creek, and Catawba

³⁰ Chernoh Momodu Sesay Jr., “Freemasons of Color: Prince Hall, Revolutionary Black Boston, and the Origins of Black Freemasonry, 1770-1807” PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2006, 15.

Indians of South Carolina and then served in the British Navy during the American Revolution, where he traveled around the Atlantic, including a stint in the West Indies. After the war Marrant went to England where he was ordained in the chapel of Phillis Wheatley's patron the Countess of Huntingdon in 1785. Like the minister who helped convert him to Christianity, Marrant was very much a Calvinist who believed that God had an active hand in earthly affairs. On his way to the black Loyalist colony of Nova Scotia, Marrant noticed many passengers swearing and playing cards and remarked that "I spoke to them about their wicked ways; that God's frowns are upon us by reason of their wickedness on board the ship, but it was fruitless."³¹

In many ways Marrant considered himself a prophet who would help rescue fellow blacks from their sins and build a new nation. In December 1785 he preached from Acts 3:22-23, which reads: "For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear the prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people."³² Marrant labored among the black Nova Scotians for three years, but a lack of funding from England forced him to leave and he sailed to Boston, arriving there in February 1789. Samuel Stillman, a white minister in Boston soon introduced him to Prince Hall, and Marrant resided with Hall and joined the

³¹ *A Journal of the Rev. John Marrant* in Joanna Brooks and John Saillant, eds. *"Face Zion Forward": First Writers of the Black Atlantic, 1785-1798* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 98; *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* in *"Face Zion Forward,"* 49-73.

³² Acts 3:22-23, KJV.

African Masonic Lodge, becoming its pastor and giving the St. John's Festival speech that year.³³

The twin goals of Marrant's speech were to help build communal ties among blacks and demonstrate "the anciency of Masonry." Marrant prefaced this speech, which he styled as a sermon, with the biblical text Romans 12:10, which tells Christians to show each other brotherly love. He then told his audience that "being all members of the body of Christ with the Church, we ought to apply the gifts we have received to the advantage of our brethren."³⁴ Far from being an otherworldly religion, Marrant's Christianity called for active benevolence to those less fortunate, as did the New Divinity theology of white abolitionist Samuel Hopkins. Along with calling for his audience to be kindly affectioned toward each other, Marrant blasted white racism, asking "what can these God-provoking wretches think, who despise their fellow men, as tho' they were not of the same species as themselves?"³⁵

To counter the racist ideology so prevalent in his day Marrant linked Masonry with Christianity and Africans, arguing that God made Paradise "border upon Egypt, which is the principal part of the African Ethiopia." Since this is the case he asks "what nation or people dare, without highly displeasing and provoking that God to pour down his judgments upon them.—I say, dare to despise or tyrannize over their lives and liberties, or incroach on their lands, or to inslave their bodies?"³⁶ Here he displayed the Calvinist rhetoric common among earlier black abolitionists such as Caesar Sarter and Phillis Wheatley, rhetoric that would

³³ *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* in "Face Zion Forward," 49-73; *A Journal of the Rev. John Marrant*, 98, 148-149.

³⁴ John Marrant, *A Sermon Preached on the 24th Day of June 1789, Being the Festival of St. John the Baptist* in "Face Zion Forward," 78.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 80.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 81.

have continued to appeal to Congregational ministers. He also demonstrated his sensitivity to those still enslaved, despite the fact that it did not exist where he lived, a sensitivity which would have been conditioned by his earlier residence in Charleston and travels to the West Indies during the Revolution.

After this critique of slavery Marrant directly linked Masonry with Africa. He wrote that Masons were responsible for the construction of Babylon and the ancient Egyptian city of Heliopolis. And he also posited Masonry as a cosmopolitan order, as the Masons who worked on Solomon's Temple "were of different nations and different colours, yet they were in perfect harmony among themselves, and strongly cemented in brotherly love and friendship." At a time when white Masons were prejudiced towards their black brethren, Marrant called for them, and the larger white society, to put aside their prejudices and treat blacks as equals. He ended his sermon by noting that "ancient history will produce some of the Africans who were truly good, wise, and learned men, and as eloquent as any nation whatever, though at present many of them in slavery, which is not a just cause of our being despised."³⁷ Africa had produced men capable attaining the same heights as whites, according to Marrant, and any deficiencies that contemporary critics may point to was a result of their state of bondage, not any innate differences between the races.³⁸

John Marrant's sermon provided the foundation for Prince Hall's vision of Boston's black community while building on the rhetoric of earlier black activists in Massachusetts. According to literary scholar Joanna Brooks, Marrant "restored the abandoned Calvinist

³⁷ Ibid, 86, 89.

³⁸ For African American thinkers who did posit innate differences between the races see Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

concept of the covenant community as a site of regeneration, and he redeveloped this covenant theology for the black Atlantic.”³⁹ While Brooks may have exaggerated the extent to which this concept was abandoned, given blacks’ articulation of covenant theology during the 1770s, her assessment of Marrant’s contribution demonstrates the importance that his ideas played in the development of African American intellectual history. With Marrant’s arguments for benevolence and the “anciency of Masonry” established in his text it was now up to Prince Hall to further articulate his aims for the black community in his two published speeches.

Prince Hall’s 1792 *Charge* was delivered during the festival of St. John the Baptist and was aimed at showing his audience the duties of a Mason. The first such duty for Hall was belief in “one supreme Being, that he is the great architect of the visible world, and that he governs all things here below by his almighty power.”⁴⁰ Like Marrant’s earlier sermon, Hall assumed that his listeners would blend Christianity with the principles of Masonry to guide their lives. After belief in a supreme being, Masons must adhere to the laws of the land in which they dwell, listen to the magistrates, and take no part in any violent conspiracies or rebellions, according to Hall. Indeed during the last important rebellion in Massachusetts, Shay’s Rebellion, Prince Hall had volunteered to raise black troops to help quash it, perhaps as a way to publicly demonstrate the patriotism of African Americans. Along with these latter injunctions, Hall noted that “the next thing is love and benevolence to all the whole

³⁹ Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 89.

⁴⁰ Prince Hall, *A Charge Delivered to the Brethren of the African Lodge on the 25th of June, 1792* in “*Face Zion Forward*,” 192.

family of mankind, as God's make and creation."⁴¹ This meant that Masons must love and assist without regard to color, even if they feel they were wrongfully abused by others.

Hall also appealed to the African heritage and pride of his audience as a means of building a communal consciousness among the Masons in his audience and those blacks who would later read the published tract. He hoped that his audience would follow the example of African church fathers such as Tertullian and Augustine "so far as your abilities will permit in your present situation and the disadvantages you labour under on account of your being deprived of the means of education in your younger days." As he did in his 1787 petition, Hall demonstrated his awareness of the effects of slavery and racism in depriving blacks of an education, but looks "forward to a better day; Hear what the great Architect of the universal world saith, Aethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto me."⁴²

In his second *Charge*, delivered in 1797, Hall similarly referenced the accomplishments of Ethiopians in Christian history. He first noted that the Ethiopian Jethro instructed Moses, known as "the great law giver," on how to properly run the courts and choose candidates for office. In addition to Jethro's role in establishing the Mosaic legal system, Jesus' apostle Philip rode with an Ethiopian eunuch and Solomon conversed with the Queen of Sheba, an Ethiopian, on points of Masonry. For Hall these facts demonstrated that color should not be a factor for Christian fellowship, a point which applied to whites as much as blacks. By recounting for his audience the great achievements of Africans and referencing the biblical verse that would become a staple of black political rhetoric during the nineteenth

⁴¹ Ibid; For Hall's 1786 request to raise black troops see Harry E. Davis, "Documents Relating to Negro Masonry in America" *The Journal of Negro History* 21(1936): 431; For the origins and results of Shay's Rebellion see Leonard L. Richards, *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

⁴² Both quotations are in Hall, *A Charge*, 196.

century and beyond, Psalm 68:31, Hall aimed at building a group identity that could facilitate the transition of Africans from regions throughout the Atlantic into African Americans.⁴³

For Hall the creation of a group identity was necessary because of the racism that blacks in Boston continued to face and the state of millions of Africans still in bondage. Patience for blacks was necessary because “were we not possess’d of a great measure of it you could not bear up under the daily insults you meet with in the streets of Boston; much more on public days of recreation, how are you shamefully abus’d...helpless old women have the clothes torn off their backs, even to the exposing of their nakedness.”⁴⁴ For those who had been enslaved in the West Indies, such as Hall, this treatment of blacks in Boston must have been eerily reminiscent of their days in bondage and it led him to call first for benevolence to all mankind, but particularly those in distress. “Among these numerous sons and daughters of distress,” Hall wrote, “I shall begin with our friends and brethren; and first, let us see them dragg’d from their native country, by the iron hand of tyranny and oppression...to a strange land and a strange people, whose tender mercies are cruel.”⁴⁵

Here Hall recounted some of the horrors of bondage to elicit feelings of benevolence for his readers. He also articulated a vision of blacks as a covenanted community by alluding to the biblical verse Psalm 137:4: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.” Prior to this the psalmist noted that “by the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.”⁴⁶ Clearly thinking of the nation of Israel in this text, Hall

⁴³ Prince Hall, *A Charge Delivered to the African Lodge June 24, 1797* in “*Face Zion Forward*,” 201-203.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 203.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 200.

⁴⁶ Psalm 137: 1, 4, KJV.

likened black people to God's former chosen nation and argued that African Americans are His new one.

Despite the struggles that blacks had endured in this "strange land," Hall believed that a change for the better was soon coming and that blacks must prepare themselves for that day. "My brethren, let us remember what a dark day it was with our African brethren six years ago in the French West-Indies," he wrote. "Nothing but the snap of the whip was heard from morning to evening; hanging, broken on the wheel, burning...but blessed be God, the scene is changed; they now confess that God hath no respect of persons, and therefore receive them as their friends, and treat them as brothers. Thus doth Ethiopia begin to stretch forth her hand, from a sink of slavery to freedom and equality."⁴⁷

By referencing the Haitian Revolution, Hall aimed to inspire hope in his readers by providing an example of what blacks there had achieved. This revolution began in the northern plain of the French colony of Saint Domingue in August 1791 and lasted until 1804, when Haiti declared itself an independent republic. Even before gaining independence however, the rebellious slaves had pushed the French National Convention to abolish slavery in all its territories and spurred a massive out-migration of both whites and blacks to the United States. Many of these people brought stories of the successful revolt that American masters did not want their slaves to learn about. By referencing this revolution Hall spoke to whites' fear of the revolution in Saint Domingue spreading to the United States while assuring blacks that the time of freedom from racism and slavery was soon coming. And to make sure that it did come blacks must exercise their rational faculties regardless of their level of education and get rid of the fear of man. Here he spoke to African Americans, and

⁴⁷ Hall, *A Charge Delivered to the African Lodge June 24, 1797*, 204.

rhetorically at least, to Africans, noting that an essential part of discarding the fear of man was halting the slave trade, as many African people carried it on because they feared Europeans or other African nations.⁴⁸

By using African history and Masonry to express the moral code that blacks should follow, namely belief in God, conformity to His will and the laws of the land, and benevolence to their fellow man, Prince Hall became one of the first articulators of Pan-Africanism and Ethiopianism. According to Chernon Sesay Jr., “Ethiopianism represents one metaphor, among others, for those literary, political, and spiritual traditions begun by Africans and New world blacks who described Africans and their diasporic antecedents not as separate peoples...but as an imagined collective, as a ‘people.’”⁴⁹ While many scholars have looked to the 1820s writing of Alexander Young and David Walker for Ethiopianist ideas, they were present in the writings of both Hall and Marrant thirty years earlier and presaged the development of black nationalist ideologies in the early nineteenth century. And along with articulating Ethiopianism, these texts became central to the creation of a black public sphere, as they were printed for distribution in Boston, Providence and Philadelphia, helping to connect black leaders in these disparate locales.⁵⁰

The growth of black Freemasonry also served to connect African American leaders on the Atlantic seaboard in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. After visiting Boston for Prince Hall’s 1792 *Charge*, black Masons from Providence who found it difficult to attend meetings in Boston wanted to establish a lodge in their own city. Some of these

⁴⁸ Ibid, 205-206; Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2006), 24-29.

⁴⁹ Sesay Jr., “Freemasons of Color,” 173.

⁵⁰ Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus*, 118-119; “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52(2005): 78-82.

Masons had been initiated in foreign lodges and some in Prince Hall's, and in 1797 Hall gave nine of them a charter to begin Hiram Lodge No. 3 in Providence.⁵¹ That same year Peter Mantore, a black Mason in Philadelphia who was initiated into the craft in Europe, requested that Prince Hall charter a lodge in Philadelphia. "In the name of the most holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost," he wrote, "we most respectfully solicit you, Right Worshipful Sir, for a Dispensation for an African Lodge." He further indicated that "the white Masons have refused to grant us a Dispensation, fearing that black men living in Virginia would get to be Masons, too. We would rather be under you, and associated with our brethren in Boston, than to be under those of the Pennsylvania Lodge."⁵²

For black Masons in Philadelphia, racism by whites pushed them to help spread the growth of black institutions, as it had done just three years earlier when Absalom Jones and Richard Allen became the pastors of St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church and Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church respectively. Indeed both Allen and Jones were part of this movement to spread black Masonry to Philadelphia, with Allen serving as the first Treasurer of the lodge and Jones as its first Master. Racism was not the only factor pushing the creation of black institutions such as these, however. Many grew from the simple desire to build strong communities based on solid ethical foundations, a fundamental priority of black Freemasonry.⁵³

⁵¹ Charles H. Wesley, *Prince Hall: Life and Legacy* (Washington, D.C.: The United Supreme Council, 1977), 126.

⁵² Peter Mantore to Prince Hall, 2 March 1797 in Davis, "Documents Relating to Negro Masonry in America," 425.

⁵³ Ibid, 425-426; For the establishment of the first two black churches in Philadelphia see Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008), 53-77.

Prince Hall was happy to comply with Mantore's request. Writing back just three weeks later he stated his awareness that "there are a number of blacks in your city who have received the light of masonry, and I hope they got it in a just and lawful manner. If so, dear brother, we are willing to set you at work under our charter and Lodge No. 459."⁵⁴ Hall revealed his desire to have black Masonry throughout the country legitimized by being established according through the proper Masonic channels. And like his two *Charges*, Hall's language indicated that for many blacks, Masonry was akin to religion. Receiving the "light of masonry" could be compared to receiving the light of Christ, in that both would have allowed black men to build their lives on the strong ethical foundations of belief in God and the craft, as well as benevolence to their fellow man. And some of the most prominent black clerical and lay religious leaders of Boston and Philadelphia were Masons—Prince Hall, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, James Forten, and Thomas Paul, pastor of the African Baptist Church in Boston.

Black Freemasonry was central to the growth of the abolitionist movement in the early republic. It was the work of twenty-one black Masons that helped secure the abolition of the slave trade in Massachusetts in 1788. John Marrant and Prince Hall's publications in the 1780s and 1790s helped to establish a sense of corporate identity among African Americans and articulated the principles upon which they could build viable communities, chief of these being benevolence to their fellow man. But most importantly, black Freemasonry facilitated the growth of communication networks between black abolitionists in Boston, Providence, and Philadelphia. Communication networks are vital to the growth of

⁵⁴ Prince Hall to Peter Mantore, 22 March 1797 in Davis, "Documents Relating to Negro Masonry in America," 426.

any social movement and allowed abolitionists to share strategies, funding, and moral support with one another.

The African Baptist Church and the African Society

In some ways African Lodges could act as churches for their members, yet they were open only to men and thus could not serve the spiritual and political needs of entire communities. This situation led to the establishment of the African Baptist Church in Boston. Since the seventeenth century blacks in Massachusetts had attended, been baptized in, and become members of white churches. They attended the same services as whites, but often desired to learn about Christianity and worship with other blacks. Rising white racism and a desire for self-determination in the early nineteenth century thus facilitated a split from the First and Second Baptist Churches in Boston, with Thomas Paul becoming the pastor of the new black church in 1805.

Paul was born in Exeter, New Hampshire in 1773 and baptized there in 1789. From a young age he wanted to enter the ministry and was ordained in New Hampshire in 1805. Prior to his ordination Paul had joined the First Baptist Church in Boston, and although there were a number of black members in this congregation, they had been holding separate services since 1800. The year that Paul was ordained he joined Scipio Dalton, a member of the African Masonic Lodge and the First Baptist Church, in raising funds for a black congregation. Dalton secured the assistance of Samuel Stillman, pastor of his church, and

members of the Second Baptist Church in building their new meetinghouse, which opened its doors on 8 August 1805 with twenty-four members.⁵⁵

The African Baptist Church was an important component in the antislavery movement and the growth of Boston's black community. Indeed, most black communities' growth was intertwined with abolitionism, as an important part of this movement was improving the condition of free blacks to show whites that there was nothing to fear from freed slaves. Among these whites to whom they would have wanted to display their respectability was Theodore Foster, president of the convention of the disparate abolition societies in America. In his address to "the Free Africans and other free People of color in the United States," Foster recommended a politics of respectability for black people, who should "at all times and upon all occasions... behave yourselves to all persons in a civil and respectful manner... We beseech you to reflect it is by your good conduct alone, that you can refute the objections which have been made against you as rational and moral creatures, and remove many of the difficulties, which have occurred in the general emancipation of such of your brethren as are yet in bondage." Foster published this address in 1796 and also recommended that blacks attend church, refrain from hard alcohol, teach their children useful trades, be diligent in their callings, avoid idle amusements, and pay careful attention to the education of their youth.⁵⁶

Along with serving the spiritual needs of Boston's black residents, the African Baptist Church assisted in bringing this latter recommendation to a reality by housing the African

⁵⁵ George A. Levesque, *Black Boston: African American Life and Culture in Urban America, 1750-1860* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 266-268; John Dowling, "Rev. Thomas Paul and the Colored Baptist Churches" *The Baptist Memorial and Monthly Record* 8(1849): 295.

⁵⁶ Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies Established in Different Parts of the United States, *To the Free Africans and other free People of color in the United States* (Philadelphia: Zachariah Poulson, 1796).

School. Primus Hall, son of Prince Hall and a black Mason in his own right, first obtained a license from the Boston Selectmen to operate a school for blacks in 1798. The school was originally located in his home and supported through subscriptions, but an outbreak of the yellow fever later that year led to its closure. With the help of white ministers such as William Ellery Channing and Jedidiah Morse the school was revived in 1801, but there was no permanent building for it until the African Baptist Church was built in 1805. With this new space Primus Hall helped raise funds to turn the basement into a suitable schoolroom, and it was completed in 1808. Although the school was technically a separate institution that had come under the control of the Boston School Committee by 1819, the church played an important role in its management. In March 1819 the Boston School Committee asked Thomas Paul “to report quarterly to this board the general state of the African school,” demonstrating the interconnection of these two black organizations.⁵⁷

The African School in Boston instructed its youth in grammar, writing, the sciences, and foreign languages, but probably also inculcated abolitionist sentiments in its students. This was the case at the New York Free African School, where a young girl named Matilda Williams “spoke a piece on the slave trade” during an examination of the school in November 1817. African Schools had the potential to challenge gender norms by providing women the opportunity to voice their ideas in public, and they also raised awareness about the institution of slavery among the black youth who would someday become the leaders of their communities. Thus, by housing the school for blacks in Boston, the African Baptist

⁵⁷ *Minutes of the Boston School Committee, 1815-1836*, 22, 401-402, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Boston Public Library.

Church, like the African Masonic Lodge, prepared the generation of antislavery leaders that would come of age in the 1820s.⁵⁸

The creation of the African Baptist Church was partly an outgrowth of a general revival of religion in Boston and helped spread the Second Great Awakening throughout the United States, which in turn became vital to the growth of antislavery sentiment in the North. In early 1803 the First and Second Baptist Churches saw a rapid increase in baptisms and “a very considerable number of young people, who were deeply impressed with a sense of their condition, frequently visited their ministers and others with this inquiry, ‘Sirs, what must we do to be saved?’”⁵⁹ These two congregations invited numerous itinerant ministers to their pulpits, and people from surrounding towns flocked to Boston to take part in the revival. Overcrowding in these churches could easily have led to increased hostility to black members, but it was probably also the case that blacks themselves were among the new converts and desired their own congregation.

After the African Baptist Church of Boston was built, Thomas Paul continued the work of the revival by traveling to New York to help organize the Abyssinian Baptist Church and preached there until they could find their own pastor. He also took an active role in the Boston Baptist Association, which Baptists from New Hampshire and Massachusetts instituted in 1812 to encourage foreign and domestic missionary work. Paul’s church contributed funds for the support of missions and the Baptist Education Society, and on at

⁵⁸ Ibid, 155; Records of the Free African Schools, Vol. 1: Regulations, Bylaws, Reports, 1817-1832, Manuscript Collections, New York Historical Society.

⁵⁹ “A Brief Sketch of the Revival of Religion in Boston” *The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine* (1803-1816), September 1804, 92.

least three different occasions he was appointed to committees to correspond with New Hampshire and Vermont Baptist Associations.⁶⁰

Thomas Paul's missionary work helped him build a network of support among the Baptist clergy, forward his goal of converting blacks throughout the Diaspora to Christianity, and played an important role in the antislavery movement during the early nineteenth century. In 1823 he went to Haiti under the auspices of the Baptist society to do missionary work and upon his return encouraged the migration of American blacks to the young republic. This effort and his work with the Boston Baptist Society helped fan the flames of revival throughout the hemisphere. These revivals had their origin in the late eighteenth century with revivals in Kentucky and soon spread to the east coast. An important result of the Second Great Awakening was the spread of the doctrine of perfectionism, whereby individuals came to believe that if they could accept God and perfect themselves, they could also perfect society. Perfectionism led to the rapid proliferation of reformers involved in the temperance movement and sabbatarianism, among others, but chief among these was the abolitionist movement. By helping to build his own church, which grew from twenty-four members in 1805 to one hundred three members by 1819, and contributing to the growth of churches elsewhere, Thomas Paul and the African Baptist Church became an important part of keeping the antislavery movement alive during a period in which most scholars argue there was a significant lull in abolitionist activity in America.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Dowling, "Rev. Thomas Paul and the Colored Baptist Churches," 297; *Minutes of the Boston Baptist Association...*(Boston: Lincoln & Edmonds, 1812), 8; *Minutes of the Boston Baptist Association...*(Boston: Lincoln & Edmonds, 1816), 6; *Minutes of the Boston Baptist Association...*(Boston: Lincoln & Edmonds, 1818), 11; *Minutes of the Boston Baptist Association...*(Boston: Lincoln & Edmonds, 1819), 11.

⁶¹ Dowling, "Rev. Thomas Paul and the Colored Baptist Churches," 295-296; *Minutes of the Boston Baptist Association...*(Boston: Lincoln & Edmonds, 1819), 6; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 164-202, 302-

Along with the African Baptist Church, the African Society of Boston became an important venue for the spread of the antislavery movement in the early nineteenth century. Organized in Boston in 1796, the African Society was formed primarily to help indigent blacks support themselves in times of sickness, although a widow could receive benefits from the society, provided that she “behaves herself decently, and remains a widow.” Members had to pay dues of a quarter each month and could receive benefits after one year. Those who were sick would be supported and those who died would be buried, “but it must be remembered, that any Member bringing on himself any sickness or disorder by intemperance, shall not be considered as entitled to any benefits or assistance from the Society.”⁶² These strictures were similar to those of African societies elsewhere in the North, as the New York African Society for Mutual Relief similarly stipulated that its membership “shall consist of free persons of moral character” and that any members caught gambling or drinking to excess would be expelled.⁶³

The African Society of Boston and similar northern black institutions aimed to promote the same values of respectability that Theodore Foster recommended that blacks throughout the United States adhere to if they wanted to help those Africans still enslaved. Along with denying benefits to intemperate persons, the Society actively tried to police each others’ morals, acting as a progenitor to the African Baptist Church. The laws noted that “the Members will watch over each other in spiritual concerns; and by advice, exhortation, and

303; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 202-236.

⁶² *Laws of the African Society, Instituted at Boston, Anno Domini 1796* in Dorothy Porter, ed. *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 11.

⁶³ *The Constitution of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief*, Rare Books and Manuscript Collections, Schomburg Center for Black History and Culture.

prayer excite each other to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”⁶⁴ In this respect the African Society of Boston was similar to the Free African Society of Philadelphia that Richard Allen and Absalom Jones formed in 1787, as this latter institution held religious services, policed the morals of its members, and influenced the creation of two separate black churches in 1794. By upholding these emerging bourgeois values the African Society of Boston appealed to whites concerned with the fate of blacks in America while also becoming an important component of the growing black community in Boston.⁶⁵

The African Society of Boston also served as a venue for antislavery publications. In 1808 one of its members published an essay entitled *The Sons of the Africans* that recounted the history of slavery and blasted those who continued to hold their fellow men in bondage. “Freedom, a thing so desirable to most men,” the author wrote, “and so hard to be obtained by many at the present time, will be the theme of our contemplation.”⁶⁶ He argued that it was sin that introduced slavery into the world and caused the biblical Joseph’s brothers to sell him into Egyptian slavery, but that God often raised up men in unlikely ways to accomplish his ends, as was the case with Moses. Moses’ miraculous delivery of the Israelites from bondage “seems to demonstrate a truth like this: that it was displeasing to God to have any of the children of men exercise such a spirit of tyranny as Pharaoh there exhibited.” He noted further that his contemporaries should mark Pharaoh’s fate because “as that oppressor was

⁶⁴ *Laws of the African Society, Instituted at Boston, Anno Domini 1796*, 11.

⁶⁵ For the Free African Society of Philadelphia see Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 109-118.

⁶⁶ A Member of the African Society in Boston, *The Sons of Africans: An Essay on Freedom, with Observations on the Origin of Slavery* (Boston: Printed for the members of the Society, 1808) in Porter, ed. *Early Negro Writing*, 13.

destroyed, so will all others be, and meet with their reward either in this or in the world to come.”⁶⁷

Continuing the tradition of the black jeremiad initiated by authors such as “A Son of Africa” and Caesar Sarter in the 1770s, this member of the African Society argued that God would be on the side of the oppressed in America. By doing so, he also likened blacks to the Israelites of old, a rhetorical move that was gaining increasing currency among black authors of the early nineteenth century. In Absalom Jones’ *Thanksgiving Sermon* preached that same year to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade, for example, he began by recounting the miseries that the Israelites suffered in Egypt and noted that since God redeemed that nation from slavery, he would do so for blacks as well. By likening black people to the ancient Israelites these authors invoked the spirit of a covenanted people and used Exodus as a metaphor for a black nation built on the shared heritage of slavery and exposure to racial discrimination.⁶⁸

Another way that the African Society of Boston contributed to the antislavery movement was through public commemorations of the abolition of the slave trade. Beginning in 1808 blacks in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City gathered together to commemorate abolition in the United States and Great Britain. Those in Boston also commemorated abolition within Massachusetts. These celebrations took place on January 1 in some locales, but were usually held on July 14 in Boston. They consisted of a large meal and a parade through the city streets. The parades generally ended at the African Baptist

⁶⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁸ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6; Absalom Jones, *A Thanksgiving Sermon: Preached January 1, 1808, in St. Thomas’s, or the African Episcopal Church* in Michael Warner, ed. *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1999), 539.

Church, where on at least four occasions a white preacher gave a sermon or discourse to the assembled blacks.

The commemorations of the African Society contributed to the antislavery movement in three primary ways. First, they helped keep the memory of slavery and the slave trade alive for those who no longer suffered under bondage. Second, they forged kinship ties and a communal consciousness as participants exchanged food and toasts. And lastly, they helped forge alliances with white abolitionist ministers and other leaders by presenting images of organized, respectable black citizens. Among these white ministers were Jedidiah Morse, one of the founders of the Andover Newton Theological Seminary, and Paul Dean, who would later join a sub-committee on the African School. These men gave addresses at the abolition commemorations in 1808 and 1819 respectively that argued for the sinfulness of slavery and enjoined blacks to work hard and practice temperance in order to “shew to those around you, that you are worthy to be free.”⁶⁹

By inviting these ministers to take part in their commemorations, African Americans in early nineteenth century Massachusetts helped keep alive the interracial abolitionism that they initiated in the 1770s and contributed to the growing spirit of radicalism that characterized black politics throughout the eastern seaboard in the early republic. An important part of this radicalism involved laying claim to public spaces from which whites attempted to restrict them. In the mid-eighteenth century blacks initiated Negro Election Days and enjoyed use of public spaces for four days to a week beginning on the last Wednesdays in May. While these celebrations did continue thru the nineteenth century,

⁶⁹ Jedidiah Morse, *A Discourse Delivered at the African Meeting-House, in Boston, July 14, 1808, in Grateful Celebration of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (Boston: Lincoln and Edmonds, 1808), 18; Paul Dean, *A Discourse Delivered Before the African Society, at their Meeting-House, in Boston, Mass. On the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Boston: Nathaniel Coverly, 1819); Glaude Jr., *Exodus!*, 91-99.

abolition commemorations began to take their places after 1808 as the primary black holiday and whites began to resent and fight back against blacks' use of public space in Boston. In 1797 Prince Hall indicated that blacks were "shamefully abus'd" in the public streets of Boston, and during their July 14 celebrations some whites began to publicly ridicule blacks' efforts to keep alive the memory of slavery and abolition. In a broadside published in 1816 the author noted that "DE Afrikum Shocietee having done demself de high honour of pointing you one of dere Marshal to fishiate in grand porseshium on Monday next, being de fourtient day of de weak, respectfully beg leave to present you de aaccompanying uniform as de badge which will be worn on dis splendored rocation."⁷⁰ The tract went on to mock the toasts of blacks and attempted to make the whole celebration appear ridiculous. For some whites, these celebrations represented blacks overstepping their proper places.

The broadside's language also subtly recognized the accomplishments of educated, well-traveled blacks such as African School Master Prince Saunders, of whom the author wrote "De great Misser Prince Sarndurs. Wid one foot he wash his hand in de Atlantic, wid de oder he touch he calf a leg in de frog pond...de resplendum of his oloquence shine upon de nation like de full moon in eclipse, onny just he be as much shuperior to dem as two and two make six."⁷¹ While the language of this broadside was meant to ridicule the members of Boston's African Society and discourage future abolition commemorations, they demonstrate the extent to which African Americans were able to educate themselves, lay claim to public spaces, and contribute to the growth of the antislavery movement.

⁷⁰ *Invitation, Addressed to the Marshals of the 'Africum Shocietee,' at the Commemoration of the 'Abolition of the Slave Trade,' July 14th, 1816* (Salem: 1816).

⁷¹ Ibid.

Like the African Masonic Lodge and the African Baptist Church, the African Society of Boston was instrumental in the growth of the black community and the antislavery movement in the early nineteenth century. This organization assisted needy blacks and helped them secure jobs and apprenticeships. It also helped build connections between black and white activists in the city that would be central to the rise of Garrisonian abolition in the 1820s. Most important of all, however, were the ways in which the African Society kept the memory of slavery and the slave trade alive for Boston's black residents and encouraged them to remain active in the cause of those still enslaved.

Paul Cuffe, Prince Saunders, and Black Emigration

Another important strategy for early-nineteenth century black abolitionists was the emigration movement to Africa and Haiti. At a time when slaveholding whites such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson believed that abolition would only occur in America with the colonization of black people outside of the country, black activists began to support the idea in earnest. In addition to abolishing slavery in America, black abolitionists in Massachusetts believed that emigration to Africa could halt the illicit international slave trade that individuals had carried on since 1808 by spurring commerce and manufacturing on the continent. Chief among these early nineteenth century emigrationists was Paul Cuffe.⁷²

From the time of his 1780 foray into the political arena by petitioning the Massachusetts General Court until the early nineteenth century, Paul Cuffe devoted himself

⁷² Drew R. McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers: James Madison & the Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5; David Waldstreicher, ed. *Notes on the State of Virginia by Thomas Jefferson, with Related Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002), 175.

almost exclusively to his trading and business ventures. Shortly after marrying Alice Pequit in 1783 Cuffe went into business with his brother-in-law Michael Wainer, and they traded along the eastern seaboard, including southern ports where slavery was a visible part of the market economy. In 1799 he purchased 140 acres of land in Westport, Massachusetts and opened a school for both black and white children of the village. He then built a second ship in 1806 and started building connections with abolitionists throughout the country. That year he sailed to Wilmington, Delaware and met with John James, a Quaker and the president of the Delaware Abolition Society.⁷³

Cuffe's meeting with Jones made him well-known to Quaker abolitionists in Delaware and Philadelphia, and joining a Quaker meeting in Westport in 1808 similarly helped Cuffe foster connections with Quaker abolitionists throughout the Atlantic. Among these Quaker abolitionists was James Pemberton, an influential member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. After receiving information from abolitionists in London Pemberton wrote a letter to Cuffe informing him "that divers persons of eminent stations and character in that city are so affected with a desire that, the prohibition of the slave trade may be improved for their benefit by promoting the civilization of The people of that country."⁷⁴ In 1808 these abolitionists had formed the African Institution of London to improve the condition of the Sierra Leone colony, which the British government had established in 1787. With the encouragement that his efforts would be supported by his newfound Quaker network, Cuffe began making plans for a voyage to Sierra Leone.⁷⁵

⁷³ Rosalind Cobb Wiggins, ed. *Captain Paul Cuffe's Logs and Letters, 1808-1817: A Black Quaker's "Voice from within the Veil"* (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 2006), 45-57.

⁷⁴ James Pemberton to Paul Cuffe, 8 June 1808 in Wiggins, ed. *Captain Paul Cuffe's Logs and Letters*, 77.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 45-57.

Cuffe's motivation for this voyage was to help black people around the Atlantic advance themselves politically and economically. "As I am of the African race," he noted in a letter to Delaware abolitionists John James and Alexander Wilson, "I feel myself interested for them and if I am favored with a talent I think I am willing that they should be benefitted thereby."⁷⁶ James and Wilson soon wrote to British abolitionist William Dillwyn on Cuffe's behalf and secured the support he would need to undertake his voyage. On 27 December 1810 Cuffe embarked on his trip to Sierra Leone with a crew of nine people and arrived in March 1811. While in the British colony Cuffe met with the governor and local African leaders, conversing with them about his plans to stimulate commerce. In April 1811 he received a six month trading license from the African Institution in London and a request to come to England to meet with the organization's leaders. He sailed from Africa to England in July 1811 and stayed for two months.⁷⁷

In London Cuffe made personal contacts with some of the most prominent abolitionists and planned to establish an organization in Sierra Leone that would foster connections between blacks in Africa and America, as well as with antislavery activists in England. He lodged with William Allen of the African Institution and met leading abolitionists such as William Dillwyn, Zachary Macaulay, William Wilberforce, and Thomas Clarkson. In August he met with the entire African Institution, where the members "Expressed Great Satisfaction in the information I gave them and felt Also that I was Endeavouring to Assist them in maintaining the good cause."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Paul Cuffe to John James and Alexander Wilson, 10 June 1809, *ibid*, 86.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 81-87, 105-133.

⁷⁸ Paul Cuffe to John Cuffe, 12 August 1811, *ibid*, 145.

While earlier black Atlantic abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano had advocated settlement in Africa simply as a colonialist measure for Europeans to profit from trade with the natives, Cuffe went further and argued for African self-determination. He helped forward this cause on his return to Sierra Leone in December 1811 when he met with local leaders and helped organize the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone, a “legitimate trading” group that would promote the production of goods for export to England and the United States and thereby undermine the Atlantic slave trade. Satisfied that his vision of encouraging American blacks to settle in Africa was a viable possibility, Cuffe set sail for the United States in February 1812.⁷⁹

Because of the hostilities between England and America that preceded the War of 1812, Cuffe’s ship was impounded on his return, but this gave him the chance to travel to the Capitol and meet with governmental leaders. He used his Quaker networks to help get his ship back, appealing to Rhode Island abolitionist Moses Brown, who in turn connected him with the attorney general of Rhode Island. Armed with letters of recommendation from both men, Cuffe met with Secretary of State Albert Gallatin and President James Madison. During his meeting with perhaps the two most powerful men in the country, Cuffe discussed his emigration plans and remarked in his journal that Gallatin “observed to me any thing that the government could do to promote to Good Cause that I was Presuing Consisting with the Constitution they would cortenly be alwas Readey to render me their help or any Information that I could give or point out ways that traffick might be Discouraged They were Ever Was ready to Receive such information.”⁸⁰ Cuffe’s efforts were clearly paying off as he was able

⁷⁹ Ibid, 149-175; Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself* ed. Robert J. Allison (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1995), 193-195.

⁸⁰ *Captain Paul Cuffe’s Logs and Letters*, 213.

to discuss illicit slave trading and spread knowledge of his plans among the top government officials in the country to secure their future assistance.

On his way home Cuffe stopped in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City, where he built connections between black and white abolitionists and helped organize institutions to correspond and eventually trade with the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone. In Baltimore he met with Elisha Tyson, a Quaker abolitionist, and Daniel Coker, pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and they had “much agreeable Conversation on the mode to aid Africa.” He then moved on to Philadelphia, where he introduced his friends and business partners John James and Alexander Wilson to Absalom Jones and James Forten. With these latter two Cuffe also met Dr. Benjamin Rush, the president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, and noted that “it was proposed that there Should be a Society gathered for the purpose of aiding assisting and Communicating with the Sierra Leona [*sic*] Friendly Society as Well as With the African Institution in London.”⁸¹ Two days later Cuffe was in New York City, where he arranged a meeting between twenty Quakers and twenty African American leaders and helped form a society similar to the ones in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Through his efforts on this journey, Cuffe was able to foster relationships between white and black abolitionists and helped build three institutions that could forward his goals of encouraging black emigration and African commerce.

Due to the outbreak of the War of 1812 Cuffe was unable to return to Sierra Leone, although he did build awareness and support for his plans through correspondence. Shortly after his return to Westport in May 1812 Cuffe wrote Prince Saunders, J. Roberts, and Perry Lockes, members of the African Society in Boston, to inform them of his plans and tell them

⁸¹ Both quotations are in *ibid*, 214 and 215.

about the organizations he helped build in the three cities. Other correspondents included William Allen, the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone, Thomas Clarkson, Richard Allen, Jedidiah Morse, and Samuel Mills, a student at the Andover Theological Seminary who was interested in his emigration plan and would play an important role in establishing the colony of Liberia. In one letter to William Allen he clearly articulated his abolitionist sentiments, writing that he thought “well of Establishing mercantile intercourse on the Cours of Africa to Replace to the Africans a trade in Lawfull and Leagull terms in lue of the Slave trade for it seems hard to them to be deprived of all opportunity of gitin goods as usuall.”⁸²

When the war between America and England ceased in 1815 Cuffe started to more urgently pursue his plan for bringing settlers to Sierra Leone. He told Peter Williams Jr., secretary of the New York African Institution he helped organize, that “I once more call on thee to arouse the minds of your citizens to that zeal for the good of their countrymen in Africa.”⁸³ He expressed a similar sentiment to Daniel Coker, writing “I now call thy attention to arouse the minds of Citizens of Baltimore of the ancestors of Africans who have to do or may feel their minds Zealously inguaged for the good of their fellow creators in Africa and have a mind to visit or remove to that country to give their names.”⁸⁴ In Cuffe’s mind, tribal and ethnic divisions that may have held sway before slavery were unimportant. All black people in America were the descendants of Africans, and the condition of blacks in Sierra Leone convinced him that Africans and African Americans had shared interests that could be achieved through mutual cooperation. This is why institution-building was so important to him, and why he continued to press for blacks in America to remove to what he saw as their

⁸² Paul Cuffe to William Allen, June 1812 *ibid*, 226; for his other correspondence see *ibid*, 224-285.

⁸³ Paul Cuffe to Peter Williams Jr., 13 March 1815, *ibid*, 321.

⁸⁴ Paul Cuffe to Daniel Coker, 13 March 1815, *ibid*, 322.

native country. His ideology represents a maturing of the Ethiopianism espoused by John Marrant and Prince Hall in the 1790s and can be seen as the beginning of Black Nationalism in America.⁸⁵

Cuffe embarked on his second journey to Sierra Leone in December 1815, but not without some difficulties. For months he heard nothing from the African Institution in London, from whom he hoped to receive financial support and a license to trade in the colony. He took forty black passengers with him on the journey, thirty-two from Boston, two each from Providence and Newport, Rhode Island, and four from Philadelphia. When he arrived in February 1816 he was able to secure land grants for the emigrants, but was unable to unload the majority of the goods he had brought to the colony to help defray the expenses of the trip. Worse yet, he continued to see evidence of the illegal slave trade, as impounded ships were brought to the colony, and the pernicious effects of alcohol on the native population. While he was happy to assist the emigrants in getting to Africa, in many ways the trip was a disaster for him, and he was back in America by May 1816.⁸⁶

After this trip Cuffe continued to correspond with black leaders throughout the eastern seaboard and whites interested in black emigration, but within a year widespread black interest in African emigration waned due to their distrust of white colonizers' motives. White leaders such as Samuel Mills, Jedidiah Morse and Robert Finley wrote Cuffe for information about his voyage and his thoughts about the establishment of a permanent, government funded colony for blacks in Africa. Finley played a key role in creating the American Colonization Society and believed that if a colony were established on the coast of

⁸⁵ For more on Paul Cuffe and black nationalism see Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Colonization and Emigration, 1787-1863* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 53.

⁸⁶ *Captain Paul Cuffe's Logs and Letters*, 399-411.

Africa laws could then be passed “permitting the emancipation of slaves on condition that they shall be colonized.”⁸⁷

Although Finley was an advocate for the abolition of slavery, many of the members who started the American Colonization Society were prominent slaveholders more interested in colonizing free blacks, not freed slaves, which led black leaders such as James Forten and Richard Allen to reconsider their support for African emigration. Forten believed that colonization would strengthen slavery in the United States because “diminished in numbers, the slave population of the southern states, which by its magnitude alarms its proprietors, will be easily secured.”⁸⁸ He noted further in a letter to Cuffe that blacks in Philadelphia believed that colonization was a scam designed to rid the nation of free blacks. “We had a large meeting of males at the Rev. R. Allen’s Church, the other evening,” he wrote. “Three Thousand at least attended, and there was not one sole that was in favor of going to Africa.”⁸⁹

Shortly after this letter in January 1817 Paul Cuffe passed away at his home in Westport, Massachusetts, and while the idea of African emigration in the early nineteenth century effectively died with him, a desire for Haitian emigration began to excite the black populace, with Prince Saunders among its chief proponents. Saunders was born around 1775 in Lebanon, Connecticut and was the teacher of the African School in Colchester, Connecticut by the time he was twenty-one. In 1807 he attended Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, and a year later President John Wheelock recommended him to William Ellery Channing, one of the benefactors of Boston’s African School, as a good candidate for

⁸⁷ Robert Finley, *Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks* (Washington, D. C., 1816), 5.

⁸⁸ James Forten, *To the Humane and Benevolent Inhabitants of the City and County of Philadelphia, 1818* in Porter, ed. *Early Negro Writing*, 267.

⁸⁹ James Forten to Paul Cuffe, 25 January 1817 in *Captain Paul Cuffe’s Logs and Letters*, 502.

improving the condition of free blacks in the city. In November 1808 Saunders became the teacher of the African School in Boston and was soon heavily involved in the life of the community, as he joined both the African Masonic Lodge and the African Society. While in Boston Saunders got engaged to one of Paul Cuffe's daughters, and he, Thomas Paul, and Cuffe, before his death, became the three most forceful advocates of black emigration in Massachusetts. In 1815 Saunders and Thomas Paul sailed to England, where they met William Wilberforce, who then persuaded Saunders to become an advisor to Henri Christophe, the emperor of Haiti. It was this experience that convinced Saunders that Haiti, and not Africa, would be the most ideal place for black Americans to settle.⁹⁰

Saunders sailed for Haiti and met Christophe on 16 February 1816. Christophe was immediately impressed with Saunders' education and manners, and also liked the fact that Saunders had "striking Negro features," as Christophe was engaged in a civil conflict with mulattos in Haiti. Saunders became a courier for Christophe, taking his correspondence to England, with whom Haiti was trying to secure diplomatic recognition. In the late autumn of 1816 Saunders returned to Haiti where he organized several schools in just one month. By mid-1817 Saunders was back in America, this time in Philadelphia, where he became a lay reader at Absalom Jones' St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church. It was here that he first began to write and speak about Haitian emigration, at the same time that support for African emigration was dwindling among blacks and increasing among whites.⁹¹

In a memoir to the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery Saunders articulated his belief that Haitian emigration could help abolish slavery in America.

⁹⁰ Arthur O. White, "Prince Saunders: An Instance of Social Mobility Among Antebellum New England Blacks," *Journal of Negro History* 60(1975): 526-528.

⁹¹ Ibid, 528-530.

He proposed emigration to the republic because he believed that “the period has arrived, when many zealous friends to abolition and emancipation are of the opinion, that it is time for them to act in relation to an asylum for such persons as shall be emancipated from slavery.”⁹² Speaking to whites’ fears about living in a multiracial society, Saunders aimed to strengthen the economy and society of the young republic of Haiti while furthering the goals of American abolitionists. He also believed that abolitionism was evidence of true Christianity. If those who helped the poor could expect God’s favor, than how much more might those expect who “have delivered their fellow beings from the inhuman grasp of the unprincipled kidnapper, or saved them from dragging out a miserable existence.”⁹³

In the spring of 1818 Saunders returned to Boston, where he published a second edition of his *Haytien Papers* to spread knowledge about the country. Originally published in England, the *Haytien Papers* contained over one hundred pages of laws, legal documents, and government papers about the economy, government, and culture of Haiti. Appended to this volume were his “Reflections on the Abolition of the Slave Trade,” and like the yearly commemorations of the African Society he took part in, this essay aimed to spread knowledge about abolition and build support for the continuation of the movement. He noted that the abolition of the slave trade was among the great events of the nineteenth century and attempted to foster a sense of African pride among his readers. “Let us recollect that African blood flows in our veins,” he wrote, “and that we are under the necessity of exerting our utmost efforts to live in the great practice of society; our progress more or less influencing

⁹² Prince Saunders, *A Memoir Presented to the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and Improving the Conditions of the African Race* (Philadelphia: Dennis Heartz, 1818), 13.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 7-8.

the opinions that the Europeans will form of us.”⁹⁴ His philosophy evinced the influence of both black Freemasonry and the African Society in Boston, organizations he belonged to and which believed blacks must lead moral lives in order to help their brethren still in bondage.

Along with Saunders’ efforts to promote Haitian emigration, leaders of the black republic tried to lure American blacks to the island to stimulate the economy and hasten American recognition of their country. During the 1810s both Henri Christophe and Alexander Pétion, leaders of North and South Haiti, actively recruited African Americans to Haiti by offering easy routes to citizenship and rewards of forty dollars to black sailors for every emigrant they secured. Their efforts did not lead to widespread emigration in the 1810s, due in part to the civil conflict that plagued the nation, but in 1822 a new leader, Jean Pierre Boyer unified the country and opened the way for a massive influx of African American emigrants. Like Christophe and Pétion, Boyer believed that black emigration from America would stimulate the economy and improve relations between Haiti and the United States. He accordingly offered to pay emigrants’ travel expenses and supply land and materials. Boyer’s push for black emigration was also an ideological one, as he claimed that all people of African descent would find brotherhood and equality in Haiti.⁹⁵

With the combined efforts of Haitian leaders and Prince Saunders to encourage black American emigration the movement soon gained popularity throughout the eastern seaboard. As noted earlier, Thomas Paul traveled to Haiti as a missionary in 1823, and he published a letter upon his return in Boston’s *Columbian Sentinel* encouraging emigration to Haiti. And

⁹⁴ Prince Saunders, *Haytien Papers* (Boston: Caleb Bingham and Co., 1818), 155.

⁹⁵ Leslie M. Alexander, “‘The Black Republic’: The Influence of the Haitian Revolution on Northern Black Political Consciousness, 1816-1862,” in Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, eds. *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution: Selected Essays and Historical Documents* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 59-60.

while James Forten and Richard Allen had rejected African colonization in 1817, they formed the Haytian Emigration Society of Philadelphia in 1824 to encourage emigration to the black republic. Like thousands of whites during the same period, these black leaders saw Haiti as a frontier outlet that would allow black people to enjoy the fruits of their freedom, an “empire of liberty” analogous to Thomas Jefferson’s conception of the American West.⁹⁶

Their work led to the emigration of between 6,000 and 13,000 blacks to Haiti during the 1820s, however their vision did not pan out as expected. In their eyes too few blacks decided to emigrate and those who did soon returned because of language barriers, religious differences, and the frustrating process of land distribution, which took much longer than emigrants initially anticipated. Despite these drawbacks to Haitian emigrationism, the efforts of black leaders such as Prince Saunders and Thomas Paul of Massachusetts played a central role in connecting black abolitionists throughout the North and making them determined to fight for equal rights in America.⁹⁷

Conclusion

This renewed determination to stay in America and fight for equal rights became a vital component in the struggle against slavery in the 1820s and beyond. Black abolitionists in Massachusetts had initially believed during the early nineteenth century that they could make a life for themselves in the United States, but continual exposure to racism and the strengthening of southern slavery led to a push for African and Haitian emigration. For them

⁹⁶ Thomas Paul, “Letter to the Editor of the Columbian Centinel, 3 July 1824,” in Porter, ed. *Early Negro Writing*, 279-280; Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality*, 78; Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 247-258; For Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” see Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 357-399.

⁹⁷ Sara C. Fanning, “The Roots of Early Black Nationalism: Northern African Americans’ Invocations of Haiti in the Early Nineteenth Century,” in *African Americans and the Haitian Revolution*, 39; For the problems American blacks encountered in Haiti see Alexander, “The Black Republic,” 62-63.

emigration was a strategy that would help them achieve racial justice by joining black nations and would undermine the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in America. Although emigration proved to be unfeasible, participation in the movement by Massachusetts' black abolitionists helped forward nationwide antislavery sentiment among white and black activists and demonstrates the importance of this neglected period of abolitionism in the history of the movement.

CHAPTER 5: THE POLITICS OF SLAVERY AND THE GROWTH OF ABOLITION IN EARLY ANTEBELLUM MASSACHUSETTS

Introduction

The 1820s saw a tremendous growth in the popularity of abolitionism in America and a commitment by many northerners to halt the spread of slavery. This commitment was sometimes based on moral principles and sometimes on political calculations, but was influenced primarily by the alarming spread of slavery to the West after the War of 1812. Developments such as the Missouri Crisis and the Vesey conspiracy helped revitalize the debate over slavery at the national level by the late-1820s, with activists in Massachusetts continuing to push their agendas of abolition and racial equality. Like they had done since the revolutionary era, African Americans in the Bay State called for both immediate emancipation and an end to racial discrimination. To achieve their goals they continued the community building they began in the 1770s, published antislavery tracts and essays in newspapers, petitioned the government for an end to slavery, and built antislavery organizations such as the Massachusetts General Colored Association.

Many historians have argued that this period represents a new era in American abolitionism, its so-called “radical” phase, and there were indeed some radical aspects to the movement in the 1820s and 1830s. First, the number of people involved in antislavery activity was a sharp increase over previous eras. While this number was still only a small percentage of the northern population, there were thousands more activists committed to ending slavery. Second, while abolitionists such as Prince Hall had alluded to the specter of

Saint Domingue as an implicit warning to whites of the consequences of slavery, activists in the 1820s such as David Walker explicitly called for southern slaves to rebel against their masters and free themselves. Lastly, and this was perhaps the most radical transformation in American antislavery, women openly participated in the movement to a greater degree than ever before by publishing tracts, forming antislavery societies, and speaking to promiscuous audiences—those composed of men and women.¹

Aside from these changes, the tactics and strategies of the antislavery movement in Massachusetts and throughout the North remained largely the same as those developed by eighteenth and early nineteenth century black abolitionists in Massachusetts. One important reason for this continuity is that the institutions that earlier abolitionists such as Thomas Paul and Prince Hall built continued to be important centers of abolitionist activity. Activists that emerged in the 1820s, including David Walker, Maria Stewart, and John T. Hilton, joined the Black Masonic lodge of Boston and the African Baptist Church, among other organizations, which connected them to community leaders and strong traditions of political engagement. Perhaps of equal importance were the family ties between earlier abolitionists and those of this later period. While activists such as Scipio Dalton, Thomas Paul, and James Easton were key figures in the abolitionist movement of the early-1800s, their children—Thomas Dalton, Susan Paul and Thomas Paul Jr., and Hosea Easton—became key figures in the movement of the 1820s. Raised in abolitionist households, these individuals carried on the work their

¹ See Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974); Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Herbert Aptheker, *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

parents had begun by employing some of the same strategies that had been successful in abolishing the slave trade in Massachusetts and building an interracial antislavery movement that influenced abolitionists throughout the North and Upper South.

Like their predecessors, antebellum black abolitionists worked tirelessly to keep the issue of slavery at the forefront of the public consciousness at a time when southerners and northerners alike wanted to muffle the issue. Many whites felt that in the wake of the Missouri Crisis, the Vesey Conspiracy, and Nat Turner's Rebellion any discussion of slavery would tear the Union apart, or worse, ignite a massive slave rebellion on the scale of the Haitian Revolution. Black abolitionists in Massachusetts, however, ignored these appeals and continued to agitate the issue of slavery and racial discrimination. Their efforts were successful in rousing antipathy to colonization and pushing white abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, David Lee Child and a host of other activists from advocating gradual abolition to calling for immediate emancipation. Black abolitionists also influenced national politics in this period. Martin Van Buren pushed for a renewed two-party system in part to alleviate the sectional tensions over the issue of slavery, and the Nullification controversy in South Carolina was influenced by the agitation of abolitionists. By drawing from and building upon the tested strategies of their predecessors, African American abolitionists in Massachusetts became key figures in the movement that would abolish slavery within a generation.

The Politics of Slavery after the War of 1812

From an international perspective the opponents of slavery and the slave trade had cause to be pleased in the late-1810s and early 1820s. Both England and the United States

had abolished the international slave trade in 1808, while the Dutch had done so in 1814. In 1817 Spain signed a treaty with Great Britain promising to abolish the slave trade by 1820, while most of Spain's former colonies did likewise in order to secure diplomatic recognition. By the mid-1820s, all the countries of mainland Spanish America had enacted statutes prohibiting slave imports from Africa, and slavery was abolished in Santo Domingo in 1823 when Haiti conquered that half of Hispaniola. That same year British abolitionists formed the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of British Colonial Slavery, which helped revive popular abolitionism in England and give hope to activists throughout the Atlantic World that the institution was slowly eroding.²

While slavery was increasingly being undermined throughout the western hemisphere, however, the institution expanded in the American South during the early nineteenth century. In Andrew Jackson's 1814 Treaty of Fort Jackson the United States acquired fourteen million acres of land from the Creek Indians, spurring a massive migration to the Southwest that was one of the largest in American history. During the 1810s the population of Alabama increased twelve-fold to 128,000, while that of Mississippi doubled to 75,000, with slaves comprising over thirty percent of the population in both states. Overall the number of slaves in the nation increased thirty percent between 1810 and 1820, jumping to 1,538,038 enslaved persons. The first two decades of the nineteenth century also saw an intense cotton boom as a result of the cotton gin and the acquisition of these new lands in the Southwest, with production increasing from 73,000 bales a year to 730,000 bales over this twenty year span. And this increased production more than doubled the value of slaves, with the price of a prime field hand jumping from \$400-500 in 1814 to \$1,000-1,100 in 1819. At

² Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 187-192, 246-248.

the same time the value of land in states such as Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina dropped, making slaves the most valuable asset that planters had.³

Given these figures it is not surprising why southerners erupted with outrage when James Tallmadge proposed restricting slavery from Missouri in 1819. Tallmadge, a New York member of the House of Representatives, introduced his famous amendment barring the further introduction of slavery into Missouri and its gradual abolition on 13 February 1819. During the War of 1812 New England Federalists had likewise called for a restriction on slavery's expansion, but most saw this move as a political power play aimed at recouping their lost position in national politics. Tallmadge, however, introduced his amendment because he "was a devout Christian and a staunch republican who believed that the nation should never appear to endorse impiety or injustice by sanctioning the spread of slavery," according to Seymour Drescher.⁴ This fact was even more disturbing to southerners, who now had to take seriously the antislavery and restrictionist positions of northerners.

There were two major lines of argument during the Missouri Crisis, a controversy that inflamed debates over slavery at the national level from 1819-1821. Individuals such as Thomas Jefferson argued against restricting slavery to Missouri by invoking diffusion—the claim that spreading slavery would hasten its emancipation and make it more tolerable. Advocates of diffusion believed that with a greater proportion of whites to blacks out West, slavery would become milder for blacks because masters would not fear revolts. And as the

³ For the value of land dropping and the increased amount of slaves between 1810 and 1820 see Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 34 and 38; For all other figures see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 125-128.

⁴ Drescher, *Abolition*, 36; Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 4.

slave population continued to spread out over the West and masters each held less slaves, it would be easier for them to make the transition to free labor. Restrictionists such as Tallmadge claimed that diffusion would in fact increase the market value of slaves and enlarge the slave population. Those slaves in states such as Virginia and Maryland would not be freed, as many had been to that point, but would instead be sold to people migrating. For two years this debate raged on and fanned the flames of sectionalism throughout the nation. In August 1819 there were public meetings in almost every major northern town that passed antislavery resolutions and drafted circular letters demanding that slavery be restricted from Missouri. On 3 December 1819 there was a mass meeting in Boston on the Missouri question and “even a crusty conservative such as Harrison Gray Otis felt exhilarated to be campaigning, for a change, on what looked like the winning side of history,” according to Robert Pierce Forbes.⁵ Former Federalists such as Otis felt free to openly oppose slavery because southern Federalism had died after 1800, giving northerners less reason to support slaveholders.⁶

When the legislative impasse was resolved in 1821 by the admission of Missouri as a slave state, Maine as a free one, and a prohibition of slavery north of the 36°30’ line, the politics of slavery had changed drastically in America. According to Matthew Mason the rising antislavery sentiment among northerners convinced a small but important minority of southerners “that strict construction of the Constitution and a firmer commitment to state rights were the only sure safeguards for their increasingly peculiar institution.”⁷

⁵ Forbes, *The Missouri Controversy and Its Aftermath*, 48, quote on 57.

⁶ Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 221, 231.

⁷ Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 158.

This strengthened commitment to state's rights was evident in South Carolina's response to the Denmark Vesey Conspiracy of 1822. According to traditional accounts Denmark Vesey, a free black carpenter residing in Charleston, was reportedly aware of the Missouri debates and originally scheduled a massive slave revolt for Bastille Day. His co-conspirators included a conjurer named Gullah Jack and other craftsmen and sailors from the region. In May 1822 a slave informed his master of the conspiracy, and the authorities apprehended Vesey less than a month later, while arresting 135 people and executing thirty-five of them. While the existence of this conspiracy has recently come under question, South Carolina authorities at the time were invested in making people believe it was real and passed one of the South's Negro Seamen Acts in December 1822, which required the jailing of any black sailors in ports throughout the state. This law was designed to limit contact between free and enslaved blacks, but also violated the constitution by imprisoning citizens of other states. State leaders justified the law as a necessary security measure and resisted attempts by the federal government to supersede it.⁸

In the short term the Missouri Controversy and Vesey Conspiracy muted debates over slavery at the national level and helped strengthen the colonization movement. Politicians were hesitant to agitate the issue of slavery after 1822 for fear that the discussion would tear the Union apart. During the 1820s Martin Van Buren began trying to revive the New York-Virginia coalition that had supported the Jeffersonian Republicans before James Monroe ushered in an era of one-party rule, primarily to avoid the sectionalism and factions that had characterized the Missouri debates. Robert J. Turnbull of South Carolina also worked to mute

⁸ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 160-163; Forbes, *The Missouri Controversy and Its Aftermath*, 155-162; For the argument that the conspiracy was not a real one see Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58(2001): 915-976.

discussion of slavery by the national government, arguing that slavery was the province of the states. Turnbull, an immigrant from East Florida, stated in an 1827 pamphlet that any discussion of slavery's morality by Congress posed a danger to South Carolina's very existence as a state. Along with his entreaty, the American Colonization Society became increasingly popular among whites during the 1820s. Many saw the ACS as a solution to the problem of slave rebellions, and auxiliary branches cropped up throughout the country, with the first Massachusetts branch opening in Boston in 1823.⁹

Freedom's Journal

Blacks throughout the North defied southerners' injunctions not to agitate the issue of slavery. In New York this defiance came in the form of an antislavery newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, that Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm began printing in March 1827. In their opening editorial on 16 March 1827 Cornish and Russwurm wrote that "it is our earnest wish to make our Journal a medium of intercourse between our brethren in the different states of this great confederacy."¹⁰ Cornish was a minister who founded the first black Presbyterian congregation in New York City, while Russwurm was the first black graduate of Bowdoin College in 1826. Both men wanted to provide a voice for African Americans throughout the nation that could create unity and help undermine slavery, but recognized that this burden fell upon blacks themselves. "We wish to plead our own cause," they noted. "Too long have others spoken for us... The civil rights of a people being of the greatest value, it shall ever be

⁹ Ibid, 135-136, 148, 223-224; "Brutus" [Robert J. Turnbull], *The Crisis; or, Essays on the Usurpations of the Federal Government* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1827); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 110.

¹⁰ Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, "To Our Patrons" *Freedom's Journal*, 16 March 1827, 1.

our duty to vindicate our brethren, when oppressed, and to lay the cause before the publick [sic].”¹¹ The paper covered a broad range of topics, including the Haitian Revolution, the effects of racial discrimination and how blacks could counter them, the colonization movement and the place of Africa in world history. But most of all *Freedom’s Journal* served as a venue for blacks throughout the North to air their antislavery arguments, as they recognized that the vice and poverty experienced by northern free blacks was connected to the continuing presence of slavery in the nation and a lack of proper moral instruction. The content of the paper demonstrates the editors’ awareness of abolitionism as a long political struggle dating back to the eighteenth century and served to connect African Americans to the larger black Atlantic.¹²

Freedom’s Journal used the work and memory of eighteenth and early nineteenth century abolitionists from Massachusetts to support the contemporary movement against slavery. Immediately following their opening editorial was a memoir of Paul Cuffe reprinted from the *Liverpool Mercury* of 1812 that detailed Cuffe’s early life and activism in the eighteenth century and his efforts to encourage black settlement to Sierra Leone in the 1810s. Reprinting this memoir gave blacks throughout the nation an example of an active leader who rose from humble origins to prominence as both a businessman and activist. “Born under peculiar disadvantages, deprived of the benefits of early education, and his meridian spent in toil and vicissitudes,” it read in part, “he has struggled under disadvantages which have seldom occurred in the career of any individual. Yet under pressure of these difficulties he seemed to have fostered a disposition of mind which qualify him for any station in life in

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jacqueline Bacon, *Freedom’s Journal: The First African-American Newspaper* (Lanham, England: Lexington Books, 2007), 44-45.

which he may be introduced.”¹³ If this was true of Cuffe, it could also be true for the readers of the paper in the 1820s.

Along with the memoirs of Paul Cuffe, the paper also reprinted some of Phillis Wheatley’s work. In just the second issue of the paper the editors wrote that “any thing relating to Phillis Wheatley, who by her writings has reflected honour upon our name and character, and demonstrated to an unbelieving world that genius dwells not alone in skins of whitish hue, will not surely be deemed uninteresting by the readers of *Freedom’s Journal*.”¹⁴ Following this statement was a brief narrative of Wheatley’s life and extracts of her work, including her poems “On the Death of an Infant” and “Hymn to the Morning.” Showing off the literary prowess of a young enslaved woman served similar functions as the publication of Cuffe’s memoir—encouraging blacks that they could achieve anything and countering the same ideas of black inferiority that Wheatley opposed in her own day. Including Wheatley in the paper also helped keep alive the memory of one of the earliest black voices to oppose slavery and probably introduced many contemporaries to her work that were unaware of her exploits. In this way the paper served as a link between eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionists, demonstrating the continuing influence of the former upon activists throughout the nation in the 1820s and beyond.

David Walker

Freedom’s Journal also printed contemporary antislavery essays and speeches by black abolitionists, with the most prominent Massachusetts contributor being David Walker. Walker was born in Wilmington, North Carolina to a free mother and enslaved father around

¹³ “Memoirs of Capt. Paul Cuffe” *Freedom’s Journal*, 18 April 1827, 1.

¹⁴ *Freedom’s Journal*, 23 March 1827, 6.

1796. He spent some time in Charleston during the early 1820s and may have been present when Denmark Vesey planned his 1822 conspiracy, which was centered in Charleston's AME Church. By 1825 Walker was in Boston, where he joined the African Masonic Lodge and the May Street Methodist Church, an independent black congregation formed in 1818 and headed by Samuel Snowden. In 1826 Walker helped found the Massachusetts General Colored Association, an antislavery organization that gained a national reputation for advocating the immediate emancipation of southern slaves, opposing the colonization movement, and working to create unity among northern free blacks, much like *Freedom's Journal*.¹⁵

Black unity was the key theme of Walker's speech to the Massachusetts General Colored Association, published in *Freedom's Journal* on 19 December 1828. At the semi-annual meeting of the organization Walker, by now one of the most prominent black abolitionists in Boston, said that "the primary object of this institution, is, to unite the colored population, so far, through the United States of America, as may be practicable and expedient; forming societies, opening, extending, and keeping up correspondences, and not withholding any thing which may have the least tendency to meliorate *our* miserable condition."¹⁶ Building upon the work of Massachusetts activists such as Prince Hall and Paul Cuffe to organize African Masonic Lodges and African Institutions throughout the country, Walker called for blacks to build institutions to foster greater connections among free blacks in order to more effectively coordinate strategies and goals. He also argued in this speech that

¹⁵ Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 100; David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and very Expressly, to those of the United States of America* ed. Sean Wilentz (1829; New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), viii-xi.

¹⁶ David Walker, Address, Delivered before the General Colored Association of Boston" *Freedom's Journal*, 19 December 1828, 2.

disunity among blacks is what kept them from “rising to the scale of reasonable and thinking beings,” and it was in keeping blacks ignorant that masters were able to keep them enslaved.¹⁷

Walker’s speech to the Massachusetts General Colored Association also contained hints of arguments he would make in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* less than one year later that drew from the Puritan tradition of the jeremiad. He argued that blacks have an obligation to help their brethren suffering under slavery, but also that God will assist them. “It is indispensably our duty,” he wrote, “to try every scheme that we think will have a tendency to facilitate our salvation, and leave the final result to that God, who holds the destinies of people in the hollow of his hand, and who ever has, and will, repay every nation according to its works.”¹⁸ Here he implied that America has sinned against God for holding blacks in slavery and that the nation will be judged for this crime. This argument of course was one in a long line of jeremiads by Massachusetts’ black activists, ranging from Caesar Sarter to Phillis Wheatley to Prince Hall. And like these earlier activists Walker propounded the notion of blacks as God’s new covenanted nation, writing that “I verily believe that God has something in reserve for us, which, when he shall have poured it upon us, will repay us for all our suffering and miseries.”¹⁹ Walker’s God was one that was intimately involved in earthly affairs and interested in the cause of American blacks, who must also work to help themselves to achieve freedom from slavery and racial discrimination.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

In one of the seminal texts in the history of American abolitionism, Walker's *Appeal*, he built upon the themes he propounded in this earlier speech by calling for black unity and self-help. He began with the premise that American blacks were "the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began" and stated that his purpose was "to awaken in the breast of my afflicted, degraded, and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this Republican Land of Liberty."²⁰ In the first article of the text Walker set about arguing that slaves in America were worse off than those in any country the world has known in order to arouse them to greater exertions on behalf of the antislavery movement. The plight of the ancient Israelites paled in comparison, according to Walker, because slaves such as Joseph had great authority in Egypt, while black men in America could not even serve as constables or on juries. Furthermore, Egyptian slavery was milder because they at least recognized the humanity of their bondsmen, something which masters in the United States denied vociferously.²¹

Walker also argued that blacks' degraded condition in America owed to ignorance and called for black leaders to help educate their brethren. Ignorance caused both violence and disunity in the slave community, and also caused blacks to have an irrational fear of white people, so that eight whites could effectively control fifty blacks. The solution to this problem was self-help and a stronger sense of community among blacks in America—slave and free. "Men of colour, who are also of sense," he wrote, "I call upon you...to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, and to do your utmost to enlighten them—go to

²⁰ *David Walker's Appeal*, 1-2.

²¹ *Ibid*, 7-11.

work and enlighten your brethren!”²² He likewise implored black leaders to “let the aim of your labours among your brethren, and particularly the youths, be the dissemination of education.”²³ As black abolitionists in Massachusetts had thought since the 1780s, Walker believed that increased educational opportunities was one of the best means to fight slavery. And for those blacks in the North who believed they need not interest themselves in the affairs of slaves because they were free, he called on them to travel to the southern states without free papers and see if they do not get jailed or sold as a slave. Walker would have been the first to recognize the disparity of interests among the black communities in America, but also believed that the continued existence of slavery posed a problem that all blacks must work to alleviate.²⁴

Another key theme of the *Appeal* is the pernicious influence of Christianity as practiced by whites. Walker posited that historically Christianity had only hurt blacks, as it was a Catholic priest, Bartolome de las Casas, who was among the first to recommend bringing African slaves to the New World. Instead of being a benevolent religion, Walker argued that “the way in which religion was and is conducted by the Europeans and their descendants, one might believe it was a plan fabricated by themselves and the *devils* to oppress us.”²⁵ Instead of the true Christian religion, he believed that avarice had taken over the country, as evidenced by the fact that there was a growth among anti-Masonic organizations and temperance and sabbatarian societies throughout the North, but still little attention paid to slavery by whites. His arguments here are ones that were shared by many of

²² Ibid, 28.

²³ Ibid, 30.

²⁴ Ibid, 22-28.

²⁵ Ibid, 35.

his contemporaries and also influenced future black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, whose 1852 Fourth of July address articulates some of the same arguments concerning religion that Walker shared in this text.²⁶

Walker saved much of his animus for the American Colonization Society and those who believed blacks were unfit for republican government. Like the black leaders of Philadelphia did in their 1817 meeting at Bethel Church, David Walker argued that colonization is a plan “to get those of the coloured people, who are said to be free, away from among those of our brethren, whom they unjustly hold in bondage, so that they may be enabled to keep them the more secure in ignorance and wretchedness.”²⁷ Both slave masters and free blacks such as Walker recognized the threat posed to the institution by the presence of African Americans who were not enslaved, and he asked for opposition to the plan to strengthen black solidarity. Many colonizationists claimed that their plan was one that would redeem Africa from paganism, so Walker asked whether proponents such as Henry Clay care “a pinch of snuff about Africa—whether it remains a land of Pagans and of blood, or of Christians, so long as he gets enough of her sons and daughters to dig up gold and silver for him?” If blacks were to leave the United States, Walker suggested that they consider migrating to England, whose people were “our greatest earthly friends and benefactors,” or to Haiti.²⁸

In each of the four parts of his *Appeal* Walker offered a scathing indictment of anti-black racism and called for blacks to explicitly refute charges of their inferiority. He had read

²⁶ See Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July” in David W. Blight, ed. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself, with Related Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 164-170.

²⁷ *David Walker’s Appeal*, 47.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 50, 56.

Thomas Jefferson's charges of black inferiority in the *Notes on the State of Virginia* and responded by asking "has Mr. Jefferson declared to the world, that we are inferior to the whites, both in the endowments of our bodies and our minds? It is indeed surprising, that a man of such great learning, combined with such excellent natural parts, should speak so of a set of men in chains."²⁹ Fifty years after penning his *Notes*, Jefferson's ideas about blacks held more sway than in the revolutionary era, and Walker recognized this situation. He called for any of his brethren "who has the spirit of a man" to buy a copy of Jefferson's book and write refutations of its racial ideologies because these ideas continued to garner respect from whites.³⁰

Walker also employed some of the harsh rhetoric prevalent throughout the text in critiquing white's racism and intransigence toward abolitionism. He wrote that "the whites have always been an unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority." This type of rhetoric was sure to alienate many, but for Walker that was exactly the point, as he felt blacks must display courage for the cause of the enslaved even when it would anger others. And turning the tables on the common racial presumptions of the day, Walker, speaking of white people, wondered "whether they are as good by nature as we are or not."³¹ Here Walker placed himself squarely within larger currents of black racist discourse during the nineteenth century, much of which rejected

²⁹ Ibid, 10.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 16, 17.

environmentalism while also positing the innate superiority of blacks, thereby mirroring the racist logic of whites.³²

Like previous black abolitionists in Massachusetts, Walker employed the Puritan tradition of the jeremiad to support his case against slavery and racism. In many ways he saw himself as a prophet like his contemporary Nat Turner, one who would be martyred for the cause. “I write without the fear of man,” he noted. “I am writing for my God, and fear none but himself; they may put me to death if they choose.”³³ Willing to sacrifice his life for the cause of abolition, Walker argued that Americans would sacrifice their prosperity as a nation if they continued holding slaves. “I tell you Americans!” he thundered, “that unless you speedily alter your course, you and your Country are gone...For God Almighty will tear up the very face of the earth.”³⁴ As Thomas Jefferson stated in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Walker believed that a just God could not allow slavery to persist forever. Referring to the Latin American revolutions, he said that the principal reason that Spaniards are now “running about the field of battle cutting each other’s throats” was their involvement with slavery. And in one of his more prescient statements Walker posited that “although the destruction of the oppressors God may not effect by the oppressed, yet the Lord our God will bring other destructions upon them—for not unfrequently will he cause them to rise up one against another, to be split and divided, and to oppress each other, and sometime to open hostilities with sword in hand.”³⁵ Walker continued and strengthened the black jeremiadic tradition that

³² Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 45.

³³ *David Walker’s Appeal*, 54; For Nat Turner’s belief that he was a prophet see Herbert Aptheker, ed. *Nat Turner’s Slave Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966), 136-138.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 39.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

Massachusetts' black abolitionists such as Caesar Sarter and Phillis Wheatley began in the revolutionary era by arguing that a civil war was probable if Americans did not abolish slavery.³⁶

As his last statement suggests, Walker believed that violence in the form of a slave rebellion or war would be necessary to overthrow the institution. Black petitioners in the 1770s and Prince Hall in the 1790s had alluded to the threat posed to whites by American slave rebels and the specter of Saint Domingue respectively, but none were as explicit as Walker in calling for slaves to rebel against their masters. His premise was simple: white people think nothing of murdering blacks to enslave them; "therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed. Now, I ask you, had you not rather be killed than be a slave to a tyrant, who takes the life of your mother, wife, and dear little children?" Drawing off the best of the American revolutionary tradition, Walker told slaves that "it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty."³⁷ He believed that white people would not give blacks respect unless they proved their manhood, and this they could only do by violent resistance to slavery. While his beliefs here were not very influential during the 1830s, as pacifism reigned among black and white abolitionists, in the 1840s and 1850s many black thinkers, including Henry Highland Garnet and Frederick Douglass, accepted the idea that violence would be necessary to abolish slavery.³⁸

³⁶ David Howard-Pitney traces the jeremiad in black discourse from the nineteenth century to Martin Luther King Jr., but begins his analysis with Frederick Douglass. See *The Afro-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

³⁷ *David Walker's Appeal*, 25-26.

³⁸ For the shift in black thought away from pacifism see Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 225-230.

Despite his harsh rhetoric throughout the *Appeal*, Walker believed that blacks could overcome ignorance and whites could learn to live without slavery. When he read the history of Africa, “among whom learning originated,” and who sent Hannibal to nearly conquer Rome, he believed there was hope for the future of blacks in America.³⁹ Walker based this hope partly on the belief that God would raise up another Hannibal that would assist blacks in their cause. As far as whites, he noted simply that they must “treat us like men, and there is no danger but we will all live in peace and happiness together...there is not a doubt in my mind, but that the whole of the past will be sunk into oblivion, and we yet, under God, will become a united and happy people.” White people might think this goal unrealistic, but Walker believed that “nothing is impossible with God.”⁴⁰ Like the preachers of the Second Great Awakening that argued people could perfect themselves and their society, Walker believed that white Americans could avoid the destruction of their nation by repenting their sins and changing their ways.

David Walker’s pamphlet and other activities helped strengthen the antislavery movement by spreading the influence of the black press in the North and his own ideas throughout the country. Along with his participation in the Massachusetts General Colored Association he served as one of three agents in the state for *Freedom’s Journal*, with the other two being Rev. Thomas Paul and John Remond, a well-known caterer and abolitionist from Salem. As an agent Walker worked to raise funds for the paper and increase its subscription base. By the time he published the third edition of the *Appeal* in 1830 *Freedom’s Journal* had folded but former editor Samuel Cornish started *The Rights of All*,

³⁹ *David Walker’s Appeal*, 19-20.

⁴⁰ Both quotations are on *ibid*, 70.

and Walker similarly called for blacks to help circulate the paper and contribute to its success in any way possible.⁴¹

For his own work, Walker used networks of sailors to distribute it throughout the South. One white sailor whom authorities in Charleston arrested on 27 March 1830 for distributing the *Appeal* testified that while in Boston “a coloured man of decent appearance & very genteely dressed” came aboard his ship and said that “he wished him(Smith) to bring a packet of pamphlets to Charleston for him and to give them to any negroes he had a mind to, or that he met.”⁴² The black man who approached Smith was presumably Walker, and he cautioned Smith to keep his actions unknown to whites. Unfortunately for him he was unable to do so and was sentenced to one year in prison and fined \$1,000 for “distributing some pamphlets of a very seditious & inflammatory character among the Slaves & persons of color” in Charleston. Walker’s strategy here presaged the later campaign waged by the American Anti-Slavery Society to inundate the South with abolitionist literature and helped to harden the battle lines between abolitionists and defenders of slavery.⁴³

Soon after Walker published his work other southern states took action to make sure it stayed out of the hands of slaves. The *Appeal* made its way to ports from Virginia to Louisiana, and white leaders confiscated it wherever they found copies. Because it showed up in Virginia in 1830 authorities at the time attributed a connection between Walker’s

⁴¹ Ibid, 67.

⁴² “Testimony and Confession of Edward Smith” in *David Walker’s Appeal*, 85; For the contribution of free black sailors to abolitionism and their work as information conduits see W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 190-214.

⁴³ *David Walker’s Appeal*, 85; For the American Anti-Slavery Society’s campaign to flood the South with abolitionist tracts see Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 426-428.

writing and Nat Turner's 1831 uprising in Southampton, but this connection is unlikely.⁴⁴ According to Sean Wilentz, when the *Appeal* was printed "legislators in Georgia and Louisiana became so alarmed that they enacted harsh new laws restricting black literacy, including a ban on antislavery literature."⁴⁵ When the final edition of the work appeared in June 1830 the mayor of Savannah wrote to Boston mayor Harrison Gray Otis and demanded Walker be stopped, to which Otis replied he had no power to do so. Walker's fiery denunciation of American slaveholders helped contribute to unified southern opposition to abolition, and had long-term implications for the politics of slavery. By pushing southerners toward censoring and confiscating mail, which northern whites would strongly object to as a violation of their constitutional liberties, Walker helped bring in thousands of new activists to the movement.

Perhaps even more significant was his influence on white abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison started his antislavery career as a colonizationist and advocate of gradual abolition, yet by 1831 he was a proponent of immediate emancipation, writing one year later that "I am constrained to declare, with the utmost sincerity, that I look upon the colonization scheme as inadequate in design, injurious in its operation, and contrary to sound principle."⁴⁶ Garrison never did adopt the belief that violence was necessary to overthrow slavery, but he did say that if his strategy of moral suasion did not convince masters to free their slaves, then the physical strength of the slaves would do so. Where Walker's influence was most apparent was in Garrison's rhetorical style. In his opening

⁴⁴ Sean Wilentz points out that by his own testimony Turner began receiving divine instruction a decade before both Walker's *Appeal* and Garrison's *Liberator* appeared. See *The Rise of American Democracy*, 340.

⁴⁵ *David Walker's Appeal*, vii.

⁴⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (1832; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 2.

editorial to the *Liberator* Garrison wrote: “I am aware that many object to the severity of my language, but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice.”⁴⁷ Garrison’s language here is very similar to the rhetoric Walker himself employed in his own writings. This influence reveals that David Walker profoundly impacted the growth of abolitionism and the strategies these activists would employ by continuing the Puritan tradition of the jeremiad and calling for immediate emancipation for all slaves, both tactics that built upon the work of previous black abolitionists in Massachusetts.

Interracial Cooperation and Abolition’s New Generation

Another way that black abolitionists in the 1830s built upon the work of their predecessors was by continuing to cooperate with white activists to get themselves heard and to influence whites’ antislavery rhetoric and activities. Blacks comprised the majority of subscribers to Garrison’s *Liberator* in its earliest years and contributed their fair share of articles and other writings to the paper. Garrison’s 1832 *Thoughts on African Colonization* likewise drew heavily from the work of blacks, as it reprinted dozens of minutes from anti-colonization meetings throughout northern black communities. One such meeting occurred in Boston on 12 March 1831 and included the leading African American abolitionists in the state—Rev. Samuel Snowden, Robert Roberts, James G. Barbadoes, Masonic leader John T. Hilton, Rev. Hosea Easton and Thomas Dalton. A committee was formed to consider the

⁴⁷ *Liberator*, 1 January 1831, 1. For more on Walker’s influence on Garrison see Donald M. Jacobs, “David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison: Racial Cooperation and the Shaping of Boston Abolition” in Donald M. Jacobs, ed. *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1-2.

establishment of another ACS auxiliary in the state and resolved that Boston's black residents should strenuously oppose any attempts to send them to Africa and "every operation that may have a tendency to perpetuate our present political condition."⁴⁸

White abolitionists such as David Lee Child also included blacks' voices in their publications to bolster their own cases against slavery. Child, a justice of the peace in Boston and one of the most prominent antislavery activists in the city, appended affidavits from prominent black abolitionists regarding the kidnapping of free blacks to his tract *The Despotism of Freedom*. Black kidnappings in Boston became more widespread during the 1820s, with slave traders selling free African Americans into southern slavery.⁴⁹ To address this issue black abolitionists Robert Roberts and James G. Barbadoes gave Child affidavits in November 1833. In Barbadoes' account, he described the kidnapping of his son Robert H. Barbadoes in New Orleans in 1818. According to his account Robert was imprisoned for five months and denied any communication with the outside world. "He was often severely flogged," James recalled, "to be made submissive, and deny that he was free born."⁵⁰ Robert encountered another slave who was later freed and who wrote to James Barbadoes to inform him of Robert's situation. Robert was also eventually freed, but James' account, along with that of Roberts, demonstrated that slavery was not solely a southern problem but a national one, as blacks throughout the country had to fear for their safety.

⁴⁸ "A Voice from Boston" in Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization*, 21.

⁴⁹ James Brewer Stewart, "Boston, Abolition, and the Atlantic World, 1820-1861" in Jacobs, ed. *Courage and Conscience*, 109.

⁵⁰ "Affidavit of James G. Barbadoes" in David Lee Child, *The Despotism of Freedom; or the Tyranny and Cruelty of American Republican Slave-Masters* (Boston: Boston Young Men's Anti-Slavery Association, 1833), 71.

Another important development in the growth of interracial activism among abolitionists in the early 1830s was cooperation in antislavery societies. Prior to this period organizations such as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and the Massachusetts General Colored Association consisted solely of whites or blacks, but this changed in 1832. In December 1831 David Lee Child, Garrison, and his partner at the *Liberator* Issac Knaap, among other activists, met at the African Baptist Church in Boston to organize the New England Anti-Slavery Society. The constitution of this institution stated that “every person of full age, and sane mind, has a right to immediate freedom from personal bondage,” demonstrating again the impact that black abolitionists’ insistence on immediate emancipation had on their white coworkers. Along with pushing for the abolition of slavery the NEASS endeavored “by all means sanctioned by law, humanity, and religion...to improve the character and condition of free people of color.”⁵¹ Signers of the constitution included John T. Hilton, James G. Barbadoes, Hosea Easton, and Thomas Paul, making this organization the first interracial antislavery society in the nation. And just two years later black and white abolitionists formed the Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, which similarly had as its goal immediate emancipation and included black activists such as Charles Lenox Remond.⁵²

In many ways the New England Anti-Slavery Society built off the work of black abolitionists from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Intimately tied to Thomas Paul’s activism in the 1810s and 1820s had been his mission work with the Boston Baptist

⁵¹ Records of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Boston Public Library.

⁵² “Constitution of the New England Anti-Slavery Society” in *ibid*; Anti-Slavery Society of Salem and Vicinity Records, Philips Library, Salem, MA.

Association and efforts to spread Christianity in America and Haiti. In an August 1832 meeting the new organization affirmed the importance of this strategy to abolitionism, resolving that “we consider the cause of Missions and efforts to evangelize the heathen of vast importance to our country and to the world, and that the main objects of this Society are intimately connected with such efforts.”⁵³ Just one month later the members voted to raise \$50,000 to establish a school for black youths on the manual labor system and appointed Barbadoes and Hilton to the fundraising committee. Their presence on this committee demonstrates the commitment that this organization had to interracial cooperation, and the means they employed to bring about abolition demonstrate the influence of blacks’ ideas, ones that had their genesis among some of the earliest black activists in the city.

Greater interracial cooperation among abolitionists in Massachusetts marked the emergence of a new generation black abolitionists in the state. Like David Walker, however, this new generation was greatly influenced by the work of their predecessors. For one, activists such as James G. Barbadoes, John T. Hilton and Samuel Snowden joined or formed organizations similar to the ones begun by earlier abolitionists. In 1818 Snowden became the pastor of Boston’s second black church, while John T. Hilton became the leader of the African Masonic Lodge during the 1820s. In addition to his aforementioned work, Barbadoes took part in the National Negro Conventions of the 1830s, where he was joined by Hosea Easton, Robert Roberts, and Snowden as delegates from Massachusetts. Along with Thomas

⁵³ Records of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, Boston Public Library.

Paul, Samuel Snowden had first introduced William Lloyd Garrison to local blacks in 1830, a crucial step in Garrison's decision to start his paper in Boston.⁵⁴

Of equal importance to institutional continuity were family ties among black abolitionists in this era. We have seen how Primus Hall continued the work his father began in the 1780s by opening his home to the African School and helping found the African Baptist Church in 1805. Other children of these early black leaders made their impact felt as well. Scipio Dalton had been a member of the black Masons and played a leading role in founding the African Society and the African Baptist Church, while his son Thomas Dalton became the first president of the Massachusetts General Colored Association. Thomas Lewis was similarly a black Mason and helped form the two organizations that Scipio Dalton did, and his son Walker Lewis became another founder of the MGCA in 1826. And Thomas Paul probably fathered more abolitionists than any of his contemporaries. His son Nathaniel Paul became a minister in New York and an abolitionist speaker, while Thomas Paul Jr. was an apprentice to William Lloyd Garrison. Thomas Paul's daughter Susan Paul similarly became an abolitionist, and one of the most distinguished female activists in the movement, joining the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. These familial connections provided an important source of continuity between the earlier stages of the movement and helped strengthen the work of both black and white abolitionists in the 1820s and beyond.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ "Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the People of Colour" in Howard Holman Bell, ed. *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 7; Roy E. Finkenbine, "Boston's Black Churches: Institutional Centers of the Antislavery Movement" in *Courage and Conscience*, 176.

⁵⁵ James Oliver Horton, "Generations of Protest: Black Families and Social Reform in Ante-Bellum Boston" *The New England Quarterly* 49(1976): 242-256; J. Marcus Mitchell, "The Paul Family" *Old-Time New England* 63(1973): 75.

Maria Stewart and the Growth of Female Abolitionism

As Susan Paul's activism suggests, the 1830s witnessed a sharp departure from the earlier abolitionist movement with the greater and more open involvement of women in the cause. To be sure, women had always been vital to the success of abolitionism in Massachusetts by initiating freedom suits, publishing poetry, and raising funds for processions celebrating the end of the slave trade. Women were barred, however, from membership in organizations such as the African Masonic Lodge, the African Society, and the Massachusetts General Colored Association, as black leaders in Boston and throughout the state adhered to the traditional gender roles of American society. This situation began to change in the 1820s, however, as women challenged the premises of the "cult of true womanhood," an ideology which propagated four basic virtues for proper female behavior—piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness.⁵⁶

By arguing that their innate "piety" and "purity" uniquely qualified them for reform work, women started becoming involved in the temperance and sabbatarian movements, and soon extended their work to abolitionism. Susan Paul's Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society had similar goals as their male counterparts but was also concerned specifically with the condition of black women. In early 1834 members organized a primary school for black girls and the Samaritan Asylum, which was a home for indigent and orphaned black children. They cooperated with their counterparts in Salem, who in 1834 had formed the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society, by accepting children from that town into their Samaritan

⁵⁶ Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 40.

Asylum. Both organizations helped raise funds for the movement, with the Salem society giving William Lloyd Garrison \$100 for his trip to London to attend the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society convention. Overall, Massachusetts women organized more than forty female antislavery societies during the 1830s and “played a key role in forming the National Convention of Anti-Slavery Women in 1837,” according to Richard Newman.⁵⁷

Women were also vital in the petition campaigns waged by abolitionists in the 1830s, another strategy dating back to the eighteenth century. Shirley Yee notes that “for black women, petitioning served as a way both to protest slavery and race discrimination and to participate in a political system that excluded them from full citizenship on the basis of race and sex.”⁵⁸ Black and white women excelled in this process, contributing more than forty percent of the 34,000 signatures on Congressional petitions between 1831 and 1835. Along with their signatures, women initiated many of these petition campaigns, hoping to both pressure national leaders into supporting abolition and individual masters into freeing their slaves. This work helped to increase the mass appeal of abolitionism in the North and slowly undermine the institution of slavery.⁵⁹

If the growth of female abolitionism represented a radical break from the earlier stages of the antislavery movement, many of the strategies and arguments black women advanced demonstrate the influence of their predecessors’ ideas about respectability and black unity. Maria Stewart’s writings, for instance, drew heavily from both the work of her

⁵⁷ Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society Record Book, 1834-1846, Philips Library, Salem, MA, 11; See also Folder 2, Correspondence, August 1834-April 1839 in *ibid*; Debra Gold Hansen, “The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics” in Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds. *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 47; Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 139.

⁵⁸ Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists*, 134.

⁵⁹ Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 140, 146.

intellectual mentor, David Walker, and the goals that black abolitionists in the state had worked toward since the 1780s. Stewart was a self-educated woman and a member of Thomas Paul's African Baptist Church. After the death of her husband in 1829 she underwent a conversion experience that led to her involvement in the antislavery cause. She published her first tract in 1831, entitled *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*, where she called for black unity and self-improvement.⁶⁰

Her focus on black unity was reminiscent of Walker's admonitions in his *Appeal*. Like Walker, she believed that ignorance was too widespread in Boston's black community, which provided another spur to her activism. Stewart believed strongly that "the day on which we unite, heart and soul, and turn our attention to knowledge and improvement, that day the hissing and reproach among the nations of the earth against us will cease."⁶¹ In a later publication she similarly argued that "were the American free people of color to turn their attention more assiduously to moral worth and intellectual improvement, this would be the result: prejudice would gradually diminish, and the whites would be compelled to say, unloose those fetters."⁶² Advocating a politics of respectability initiated by Prince Hall in the 1790s, Stewart called for free blacks to remain above reproach in order to assist their southern brethren. If blacks could not unite themselves and elevate their character, she believed that they would receive no help from whites. "Shall we, for a moment," she asked, "persist in a course that will dampen the zeal of our benefactors."⁶³

⁶⁰ Marilyn Richardson, ed. *Maria Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3-8.

⁶¹ Maria Stewart, *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality* *ibid.*, 37.

⁶² Maria Stewart, "Lecture Delivered at Franklin Hall" *ibid.*, 46.

⁶³ Maria Stewart, "Cause for Encouragement," *Liberator*, 14 July 1832, 110.

Stewart saw herself as an instrument of God in the reformation of the black community and, like Walker, sometimes spoke in prophetic tones. “It was God alone who inspired my heart to publish the mediations thereof,” she noted in a speech before the African American Female Intelligence Society. “And it was done with pure motives of love to your souls, in the hope that Christians might examine themselves, and sinners become pricked in their hearts.”⁶⁴ As her contemporaries and previous black abolitionists in Massachusetts had done, Stewart called for blacks to repent of their sins and live moral lives. Although the present outlook was grim for African Americans, Stewart retained hope that they could improve themselves and foretold that “many powerful sons and daughters of Africa will shortly arise, who will put down vice and immorality among us, and declare by Him that sitteth upon the throne that they will have their rights.”⁶⁵

Along with these entreaties, Stewart critiqued the sexism prevalent in American society and castigated men for failing to improve blacks’ condition. She despised the fact that black girls could be no more than servants because of the racism and sexism they faced and argued that if the colonists refused to be servants to the British than neither should black women be satisfied with their condition. Stewart also believed that the future of the race lay in the hands of black women. “O woman, woman! Upon you I call; for upon your exertions almost entirely depends whether the rising generation shall be any thing more than we have been or not.”⁶⁶ Perhaps the primary reason the future of the race lay in the hands of women for Stewart was the failures of black men. In her speech at the African Masonic Lodge she

⁶⁴ Maria Stewart, “Address Delivered before the African American Female Intelligence Society” in *Maria Stewart*, 52.

⁶⁵ Maria Stewart, “An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall” *ibid*, 63.

⁶⁶ Maria Stewart, “Address Delivered before the African American Female Intelligence Society,” 55.

boldly proclaimed that “if you are men, convince them that you possess the spirit of men,” and further asked “where can we find among ourselves the man of science, or a philosopher, or an able statesman, or a counsellor [*sic*] at law?”⁶⁷ Her language here again displayed the influence of Walker, especially in her critique of black manhood, but Stewart also moved beyond his influence in “insisting upon the right of women to take their place in the front ranks of black moral and political leadership.”⁶⁸ By doing so, she became one of America’s first feminist writers and played a key role in fusing the cause of the slave with the plight of women in America.

Abolition and National Politics

The work of abolitionists in the late-1820s and early 1830s pushed the issue of slavery into the forefront of national politics. In 1833 activists from around the North, including Boston’s James Barbadoes, formed the American Anti-Slavery Society, and within two years there were 200 local chapters around the country. By 1838 there were 1,350 auxiliary societies, with a total membership of 250,000 people, or two percent of the American population. A primary strategy of this organization was to inundate the South with abolitionist tracts, of which they printed one million by the end of 1835. When burglars broke into the Charleston post office in June 1835 and burned a bag of antislavery publications, President Andrew Jackson supported their actions, even calling for federal legislation allowing censorship of abolitionist materials in the South. At the same time abolitionists began to flood Congress with petitions calling for the abolition of slavery in the Capitol and the entire country, along with a restriction on the spread of slavery to the West.

⁶⁷ Maria Stewart, “An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall,” 57.

⁶⁸ Richardson, ed. *Maria Stewart*, 19.

The result was that on 25 May 1836 Congress adopted the Gag Rule, a motion by South Carolina representative James Henry Hammond to table all antislavery petitions before Congress. This rule was in effect until 1844, but backfired on slavery's defenders. Whereas prior to the Gag Rule only eight to twenty percent of eligible male voters signed abolition petitions, thirty-seven percent did so afterward. By restricting the constitutional liberties of whites, the supporters of slavery actually helped to increase abolitionism's appeal across the North.⁶⁹

Abolitionist agitation also played a role in South Carolina's response to the Congressional tariff of 1832, known as the Nullification Controversy. This tariff passed Congress as a protectionist measure and actually cut the average rates under the 1828 tariff in half, but this was not enough for South Carolina's radicals. In the wake of the Vesey Conspiracy, Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion and subsequent debates over emancipation in Virginia, coupled with the low price of cotton and the continuous agitation of activists such as Walker and Garrison, nullifiers demanded that the tariff be repealed and passed their Ordinance of Nullification declaring the tariffs unconstitutional and of no effect within the state. This action precipitated a constitutional crisis, as President Jackson was strongly committed to upholding the sovereignty of the federal government, and was resolved only when Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun pieced together a compromise promising to lower the rates over the next ten years. This compromise resolved the issue in the short-term, but the ordeal demonstrated the real influence that abolitionists began to have in this period.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Drescher, *Abolition*, 308-309; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 426-427.

⁷⁰ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 374-389.

Despite this influence, however, antislavery activists faced sharp challenges to their efforts throughout the nation. Much of the hatred of abolitionism related to slavery and a desire to perpetuate the institution, but this was not all. After Britain abolished colonial slavery in 1834 many abolitionists there looked to America and began collaborating with activists here, which “led some to call the movement an Anglo-American aristocratic plot.”⁷¹ Furthermore, the active participation of women upset those who believed the abolitionists were overturning all social conventions, leading to sharp opposition to the movement. In the mid-1830s mob activity began to rise, with much of the animus directed toward free blacks and abolitionists. In 1835 Harrison Gray Otis gave an anti-abolition speech in Boston, and soon thereafter a mob attacked William Lloyd Garrison and nearly killed him. That year there were sixty-eight mobs in the North that killed eight people, while seventy-nine southern mobs killed sixty-three people. Most of these mobs were led by local notables, as “elites, especially businessmen, were intensely and even violently hostile to the spread of abolitionism,” according to Paul Goodman.⁷² So while black abolitionists in Massachusetts had their share of successes in this era, they also saw a rise in white racism and had to contend with violent reactions to their work.

⁷¹ Ibid, 409.

⁷² Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), xiv; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 435; Drescher, *Abolition*, 265; Stewart, “Boston, Abolition, and the Atlantic World,” 116.

Conclusion

In an 1837 speech to the United States Senate, South Carolinian John C. Calhoun told his audience that “abolition and the Union cannot co-exist.”⁷³ His statement is indicative of the effect that abolitionists had in pushing southerners and defenders of slavery to more radical positions. In a dialectic that would last for the next thirty years, antislavery agitation hardened the position of slavery’s supporters, which in turn helped increase the popularity of abolitionism when northerners felt that the “Slave Power” was gaining too much power and violating their civil liberties. In this era Massachusetts black activists exerted more influence on the course of the movement than they had ever done before. They helped change the nature of the movement in America by firmly rejecting colonization and pushing whites to support immediate emancipation. They were also at the vanguard of greater female participation in the movement, and advanced uncompromising arguments against slavery that influenced abolitionists until the Civil War.

But while much was new about their efforts, there was much that had remained the same over the past fifty years. Petitioning as a strategy continued to be important, along with interracial cooperation on antislavery publications. Institutions that the first generation of abolitionists established remained important centers of abolitionist activity, while familial connections served to socialize this new generation of activists. Most important of all, the arguments they employed in the antebellum period were similar to those first advanced by activists such as Caesar Sarter, Phillis Wheatley and Prince Hall, namely that slavery must be immediately abolished or America would face God’s wrath, blacks must be treated as equal human beings, and that blacks must help their own cause by living moral lives and educating

⁷³ John C. Calhoun, “Speech in the U.S. Senate” in Paul Finkelman, ed. *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South, a Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 57.

themselves. This situation shows us that the northern antislavery movement was not a failure, as some scholars have suggested, and that instead of the antebellum period being a new and radical phase of the movement it was a continuation of the work that black abolitionists in Massachusetts began in the 1770s.

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