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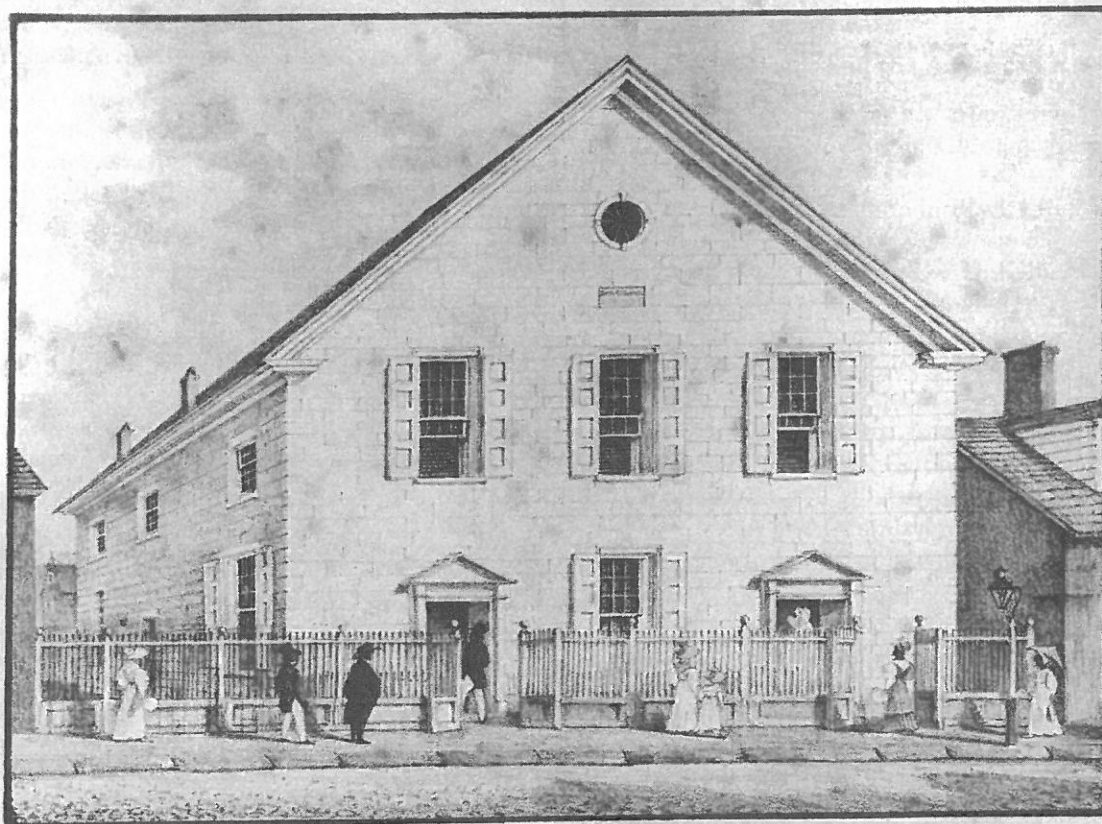
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AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE NEW NATION, 1783-1820



BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA

Founded in 1786 by the Rev. Richard Allen, Bishop of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States

Rebuilt in 1829

Engraved by W. A. Wood, Philad.

Engraved by W. A. Wood, Philad.

Philadelphia's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the mother church of the A.M.E. denomination, as it appeared in 1829.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Forces for Freedom

- Northern Emancipation
- The Northwest Ordinance of 1787
- Antislavery Societies in the North and the Upper South
- Manumission and Self-Purchase
- The Emergence of a Free Black Class in the South

Forces for Slavery

- The United States Constitution
- Cotton
- Conservatism and Racism

The Emergence of Free Black Communities

- The Origins of Independent Black Churches
- The First Black Schools

Black Leaders and Choices

- Migration
- Slave Uprisings
- The White Southern Reaction

The War of 1812

- The Missouri Compromise

Conclusion

Anytime, anytime while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it—just to stand one minute on God's earth a free woman—I would.

Elizabeth Freeman

This, my dear brethren, is by no means the greatest thing we have to be concerned about. Getting our liberty in this world is nothing to our having the liberty of the children of God. . . . What is forty, fifty, or sixty years, when compared to eternity?

Jupiter Hammon

Death or Liberty.

proposed inscription for a flag to be used in Gabriel's planned rebellion of 1800.

Except that they were all born slaves in eighteenth-century America, Elizabeth Freeman, Jupiter Hammon, and Gabriel had little in common. Freeman was an illiterate domestic servant when in 1781, she sued for her freedom in Massachusetts. Hammon, who lived on Long Island, New York, was a poet and orthodox Calvinist preacher who enjoyed the support of his master and never sought his freedom. Gabriel was a literate, skilled slave who in 1800 masterminded a conspiracy to overthrow slavery in Virginia.

In this chapter we explore how African Americans as diverse as Freeman, Hammon, and Gabriel helped shape the lives of black people during America's early years as an independent republic. We also examine how the forces for black liberty vied with the forces of slavery and inequality between 1783 and 1820. The end of the War for Independence created great expectations among

African Americans. But by 1820, when the Missouri Compromise confirmed the power of slaveholders in national affairs, black people in the North and the South had long known that the struggle for freedom was far from over.

That struggle took place at the state and local as well as the regional and national levels. The forces involved in it were often impersonal. They included the emergence of a market economy based on wage labor in the North and an economy based on the production of cotton by slave labor in the South. A revolutionary ideology encouraged African Americans to seek freedom, by force if necessary. Meanwhile economic self-interest encouraged white northerners to limit black freedom, and fear of race war caused white southerners to strengthen the slave system.

Yet individuals and groups also shaped African-American life in the new nation. As urban, church-centered black communities arose, men and women—both slave and free—influenced culture, politics, economics, and perceptions of race. This was particularly true in the North and the Chesapeake, but also to a lesser degree in the Deep South. These were years of considerable progress for African Americans, although they ended with free black people facing deteriorating conditions in the North and with slavery spreading westward across the South.

FORCES FOR FREEDOM

During the decades after the War for Independence ended in 1783, a strong trend in the North and the Chesapeake favored emancipation. It had roots in economic change, evangelical Christianity, and a revolutionary ethos based on the natural rights doctrines of the Enlightenment. African Americans took advantage of these forces to escape from slavery, purchase the freedom of their families and themselves, sue for freedom in the courts, and petition state legislatures to grant them equal rights.

In the post-revolutionary North, slavery, though widespread, was not economically essential. Farmers could more efficiently hire hands during the labor-intensive seasons of planting and harvesting than they could maintain a year-round slave labor force. There-

THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN THE NORTH

- 1777 Vermont constitutional convention prohibits slavery within what becomes the fourteenth state
- 1780 Pennsylvania begins gradually abolishing slavery within its borders
- 1783 Massachusetts's supreme court abolishes slavery there
- 1784 Connecticut and Rhode Island adopt gradual abolition plans
- 1785 New Jersey and New York legislatures defeat gradual abolition plans
- 1799 The New York legislature provides for gradual abolition within its jurisdiction
- 1804 New Jersey becomes the last northern state to initiate gradual abolition

fore northern slaveholders were a tiny class with limited political power. Moreover, trans-Atlantic immigration brought to the North plenty of white laborers, who worked cheaply and resented slave competition. As the Great Awakening initiated a new religious morality, as natural rights doctrines flourished, and as a market economy based on wage labor emerged, northern slaveholders had difficulty defending perpetual black slavery.

In Chapter 4 we saw that emancipation in the North was a direct result of the War for Independence. But the *process* of doing away with slavery unfolded in these states only after the war. Meanwhile antislavery societies proliferated in the upper South, and the national Congress set an important precedent in discouraging the expansion of slavery.

Northern Emancipation

There were similarities and differences in the handling of emancipation between the New England states of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Vermont and the Mid-Atlantic states of Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey (Map 5-1). Slavery collapsed in the New England states because African Americans who lived there refused to remain in servitude and because most white residents acquiesced. The struggle against slavery in the Middle States was longer and harder because more white people there had a vested interest in maintaining it.

Two states—Vermont and Massachusetts (and possibly New Hampshire)—abolished slavery immediately



Map 5-1 Emancipation and Slavery in the Early Republic. This map indicates the abolition policies adopted by the states of the Northeast between 1777 and 1804, the antislavery impact of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, and extent of slavery in the South during the early republic.

during the 1770s and 1780s. Vermont, where there had never been more than a few slaves, prohibited slavery in the constitution it adopted in 1777. Massachusetts, in its constitution of 1780, declared “that all men are born free and equal; and that every subject is entitled to liberty.” Although this constitution did not specifically ban slavery, within a year Elizabeth Freeman and other slaves in Massachusetts sued for their freedom. Freeman, while serving as a waitress at her master’s home in Sheffield, Massachusetts, overheard “gentlemen” discussing the “free and equal” clause of the new constitution. Shortly thereafter she contacted a prominent local white lawyer Theodore Sedgwick Sr., who agreed to represent her in court.

Meanwhile, another slave, Quok Walker, left his master and began living as a free person. In response, Walker’s master sought a court order to force Walker to return to slavery. This case led in 1783 to a Massachusetts supreme court ruling that “slavery is . . . as effectively abolished as it can be by the granting of rights and

privileges wholly incompatible and repugnant to its existence.” At the same time, another judge used similar logic to grant Freeman her liberty. These decisions encouraged other Massachusetts slaves to sue for their freedom or—like Walker—to leave their masters, since the courts had ruled that the law did not recognize the right of slaveholders to their human chattel.

As a result, the first United States census in 1790 found no slaves in Massachusetts. Even before then, black men in the state had gained the right to vote. In 1780 Paul and John Cuffe, free black brothers, who lived in the town of Dartmouth, protested with five other free black men to the state legislature that they were being taxed without representation. After several setbacks, the courts finally decided in 1783 that African-American men who paid taxes in Massachusetts could vote there. This was a notable and rare victory. Before the Civil War, only several New England states and—by the mid-1840s—New York permitted black men to vote.

P R O F I L E

ELIZABETH FREEMAN

Known as Mum Bett, Elizabeth Freeman showed a strength of character that impressed everyone she met. Although records are contradictory, she was probably born in 1744 in Claverack, New York. As her parents were African slaves, she was also a slave. On the death of her first master in 1758, Freeman and her sister became the property of Colonel John Ashley, a court of common pleas judge, in Sheffield, Massachusetts. She married while quite young, gave birth to her only child—a daughter—and became a widow when her husband was killed fighting on the Patriot side in the War for Independence.

Freeman, who was illiterate, may have first learned of natural rights when in 1773 a group of men met at Ashley's home to draft a protest against British policies in the American colonies. "Mankind . . . have a right to the undisturbed Enjoyment of their lives, their Liberty and Property," the document declared. She took these words to heart, and when she learned while serving as a waitress in 1780 that the state of Massachusetts had adopted a bill of rights asserting that all people were born free and equal, she was ready to apply the doctrine.

In 1781 Freeman received "a severe wound" to her arm when she attempted to protect her sister from Ashley's wife, who "in a fit of passion" was threatening her with a hot kitchen shovel. Outraged at this attack, Freeman left the Ashley home and refused to return. Instead she engaged the legal assistance of Theodore Sedgwick Sr. in a suit for her freedom on the basis of Massachusetts's new bill of rights. The jury found in Freeman's favor and required Ashley to pay her thirty shillings in damages. It was at this point that Mum Bett changed her name legally to Elizabeth Freeman. Shortly thereafter the Massachusetts supreme court declared slavery unconstitutional throughout the state.



This portrait of Elizabeth Freeman was painted in watercolor on ivory by Elizabeth Sedgwick in 1811, thirty years after Freeman initiated her famous lawsuit.

For the remainder of her active life, Freeman worked as a paid domestic servant in the Sedgwick household and moved with the Sedgwicks to Stockbridge in 1785. Because Theodore Sedgwick Sr.'s wife was emotionally unstable, Freeman became a surrogate mother to the Sedgwick children, who later testified to her "superior instincts," abilities as a nurse, efficiency, and bravery.

During the 1830s, Theodore Sedgwick Jr. told British writer Harriet Martineau that in 1786 some participants in Shays's Rebellion entered the Sedgwick home while Theodore Sr. was away. Acting quickly to hide the family's silver set, Freeman confronted the men with a kitchen shovel similar to the one her former mistress had used against her. While advising the men "that they 'dare not strike a woman,'" she threatened to use the shovel against any one of them who disturbed the family possessions and she managed to usher them out with only minor damage to the Sedgwicks' property.

Freeman earned enough while employed by the Sedgwicks to purchase her own home and retire. When she died she left a small estate to her daughter, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. She left another legacy with the Sedgwick children. When Theodore Jr. became an abolitionist during the 1830s he credited Freeman as the source of his conviction that black people were not inferior to white people. Earlier Theodore's brother Charles had the following lines inscribed on Freeman's gravestone: "She never violated a trust, nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial, she was the most efficient helper, and the tenderest friend. Good mother fare well."

New Hampshire's record on emancipation is less clear than that of Vermont and Massachusetts. In 1779 black residents petitioned the New Hampshire legislature for freedom. There is also evidence that court rulings based on New Hampshire's 1783 constitution, which was similar to Massachusetts' constitution, refused to recognize human property. Nevertheless, New Hampshire still had about 150 slaves in 1792, and slavery may have simply withered away there rather than having been abolished by the courts.

In Connecticut and Rhode Island, the state legislatures, rather than individual African Americans, took the initiative against slavery. In 1784 these states adopted gradual abolition plans, which left adult slaves in bondage but proposed to free their children over a period of years. In Connecticut all children born to enslaved mothers after March 1, 1774, were to become free at age twenty-five. Rhode Island's plan was less gradual. Beginning that same March 1, it freed the children of enslaved women at birth. By 1790 only 3,763 slaves remained in New England out of a total black population there of 16,882. By 1800 only 1,339 slaves remained in the region, and by 1810 only 418 were left—108 in Rhode Island and 310 in Connecticut.

In New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, the investment in slaves was much greater than in New England. After considerable debate, the Pennsylvania legislature in 1780 voted that the children of enslaved mothers would become free at age twenty-eight. Under this scheme, Pennsylvania still had 403 slaves in 1830 (Table 5-1). But many African Americans in the state gained their freedom much earlier by lawsuits or by simply leaving their masters.

Emancipation came even more slowly in New York and New Jersey. In 1785 their legislatures *defeated* proposals for gradual abolition. White Revolutionary leaders, such as Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, worked for abolition in New York, and Quakers had long advocated it in New Jersey. But these states had relatively large slave populations, powerful slaveholders, and white workforces fearful of free black competition.

In 1799 the New York legislature finally agreed that male slaves born after July 4 of that year were to become free at age twenty-eight and females at age twenty-five. In 1804 New Jersey adopted a similar law that freed male slaves born after July 4 of that year when they reached age twenty-five and females when they reached age twenty-one. Under this plan, New Jersey still had eighteen slaves in 1860.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787

During the 1780s the United States Congress drew its authority from a constitution known as the Articles of Confederation. The Articles created a weak central government that lacked power either to tax or regulate commerce. Despite its weaknesses, this government acquired jurisdiction over the region west of the Appalachian Mountains and east of the Mississippi River, where several states had previously had conflicting land claims.

During the War for Independence, increasing numbers of Americans had migrated across the Appalachians into this huge region. The migrants invariably provoked hostilities with Indian nations, faced British opposition in the Northwest, and contested with Spanish forces in the Southwest. In response to these circumstances, Congress formulated policies to protect the migrants and provide for their effective government. The new nation's leaders were also concerned with the expansion of slavery into this vast region. Thomas Jefferson proposed to deal with both issues. First, he suggested that the region be divided into separate territories and prepared for statehood. Second, he proposed that after 1800 slavery be banned from the entire region stretching from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River and from Spanish Florida (Spain had regained Florida in 1783) to British Canada.

Jefferson's proposal failed to pass Congress in 1784 by a single vote. Instead in 1787, Congress adopted the Northwest Ordinance. It applied the essence of Jefferson's plan to the region north of the Ohio River—what historians call the Old Northwest. The ordinance

Table 5-1 Slave Populations in the Mid-Atlantic States, 1790–1860

	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860
New York	21,324	20,343	15,017	10,888	75	4		
New Jersey	11,432	12,343	19,851	7,557	2,243	674	236	18
Pennsylvania	3,737	1,706	795	211	403	64		

Source: Philip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans, from Africa to the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom*, vol. 1, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975), 374.

provided for the orderly sale of land, support for public education, territorial government, and the eventual formation of new states. Unlike Jefferson's plan, the ordinance banned slavery immediately. But, because it applied only to the Northwest Territory, the ordinance left the huge region south of the Ohio River open to slavery expansion.

By preventing slaveholders from taking slaves legally into areas north of the Ohio River, the ordinance set a precedent for excluding slavery from United States territories. Whether Congress had the power to do this became a contentious issue after President Jefferson annexed the huge Louisiana Territory in 1803. The issue continued to divide northern and southern politicians until the Civil War. Yet, despite the importance of the ordinance for black freedom, African Americans remained slaves in parts of the Old Northwest even after 1787. The first governor of the territory forced those who had been slaves before the adoption of the ordinance to remain slaves. In 1803 when Ohio became a state, the remainder of the Northwest Territory legalized indentured servitude. Therefore, in the southern parts of what became Illinois and Indiana, a few African Americans remained in involuntary servitude well into the nineteenth century.

Antislavery Societies in the North and the Upper South

In 1775 Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet organized the first antislavery society in the world. In 1787 it became the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and Benjamin Franklin became its president. Similar societies were founded in Delaware in 1788 and Maryland in 1789. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were societies in New Jersey, Connecticut, and Virginia. Organized antislavery sentiment also quickly rose in the new slave states of Kentucky and Tennessee. However, such societies never appeared in the Deep South.

From 1794 to 1832, antislavery societies cooperated within the loose framework of the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and Improving the Condition of the African Race. Only white people participated in these Quaker-dominated organizations, although members often cooperated with black leaders. As the northern states adopted abolition plans, the societies focused their attention on Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. They aimed at gradual, compensated emancipation; encouraged masters to free their slaves; attempted to protect free black people from

reenslavement; and frequently advocated sending freed black people out of the country.

Experience with emancipation in the northern states encouraged the emphasis on gradual abolition. So did the reluctance of white abolitionists to challenge the property rights of masters. Abolitionists also feared that immediate emancipation might lead masters to abandon elderly slaves and assumed that African Americans would require long training before gaining freedom. Yet gradualism played into the hands of slaveholders who, like Thomas Jefferson, opposed slavery in the abstract but had no intention of freeing their own slaves.

The antislavery societies of the upper South tended to be small and short lived. A Wilmington, Delaware, society established in 1788, peaked at fifty members and ceased to exist in 1800. The Maryland society organized in 1781 with six members grew to 250 in 1797 but disbanded in 1798. African Americans and their white friends, nevertheless, hoped that antislavery sentiment was advancing southward.

Manumission and Self-Purchase

Another hopeful sign for African Americans was that most southern states liberalized their manumission laws after the Revolution. In general, masters could free individual slaves by deed or will. They no longer had to go to court or petition a state legislature to prove that an individual whom they desired to manumit had performed a "meritorious service." Virginia led the way in 1782 by repealing its long-standing ban on private manumissions. Delaware in 1787, Maryland in 1790, Kentucky in 1792, and the slaveholding territory of Missouri in 1804 followed.

As a result, hundreds of slaveholders in the upper South began freeing slaves. Religious sentiment and natural rights principles motivated many of these masters. Even though most of them opposed general emancipation, they considered the slave system immoral. Yet noble motives were not always the most important. Masters often negotiated self-purchase agreements with slaves that, while ending in manumission, gave masters a profit. Usually slaves raised money by marketing farm produce or through outside employment to purchase their freedom or that of loved ones in installments over a number of years. This allowed masters to enjoy income in addition to the slave's labor over the period of time the slave needed to raise the entire purchase price.

Masters also sometimes manumitted slaves who were no longer profitable investments. The master might be

switching from tobacco to wheat or corn—crops that did not need a year-round workforce. Or a master might manumit older slaves whose best years as workers were behind them. Frequently, however, slaves—usually young men—presented masters with the alternative of manumitting them after a term of years or seeing them escape immediately.

Self-purchase often left African Americans in precarious financial condition. Sometimes they used up their savings to buy their freedom. In other instances they went into debt to their former masters, to white lawyers who acted as their agents, or to other white people who had loaned them money to cover their purchase price. On occasion masters reneged on their agreement to manumit after receiving money from a slave. Many of the freedom suits that became common in the upper South during this period resulted from such unethical behavior.

The Emergence of a Free Black Class in the South

As a result of manumission, self-purchase, and freedom suits, the free black population of the upper South blossomed between 1790 and 1810. Maryland and Virginia had the largest such populations. Between 1790 and 1810, the number of free African Americans in Maryland climbed from 8,043 to 33,927 and in Virginia from 12,766 to 30,570. By 1810 the upper South (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, District of Columbia, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, and Tennessee) had a free black population of 94,085, compared with a northern free black population of 78,181. However, most of the upper South's black population remained in slavery while the North's was on the way to general emancipation. In the North, 74 percent of African Americans were free in 1810, compared to only 10.4 percent of those in the upper South.

In the deep South, both the percentage and the absolute numbers of free black people remained even smaller. During the eighteenth century, neither South Carolina nor Georgia restricted the right of masters to manumit their slaves, but far fewer masters in these states exercised this right after the Revolution than was the case in the Chesapeake. Masters in the deep South freed only their illegitimate slave children, other favorites, or those unable to work. Only 14,180 free black people lived in the deep South in 1810. In North Carolina, a transitional area between the upper and deep South, the state legislature made manumission more difficult after 1777. But many masters—especially those

who were Quakers—freed their slaves anyway or let them live in quasi-freedom.

FORCES FOR SLAVERY

The forces for black freedom in the new republic rested on widespread African-American dissatisfaction with slavery, economic change, Christian morality, and revolutionary precepts. Most black northerners had achieved freedom by 1800; three-quarters were free by 1810; and by 1840, only .7 percent remained in slavery.

Yet for the nation as a whole and for the mass of African Americans, the forces favoring slavery proved to be stronger. Abolition took place in the North where slavery was weak. In the South where it was strong, slavery thrived and expanded. For example, Virginia had 293,427 slaves in 1790. Despite manumissions and escapes, the state had 425,153 slaves in 1820. Although Virginia continued to have the largest population of enslaved African Americans in the country, the rate of growth of the slave population was greater in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Meanwhile slavery expanded westward. For example, when Tennessee was still a territory in 1790, it had 3,417 slaves. By 1820 the state of Tennessee had 80,107.

The United States Constitution

The United States Constitution was a major force in favor of the continued enslavement of African Americans. The Continental Congress had become the central government of the United States when it declared independence from Great Britain in 1776, but the thirteen new states retained sovereignty over their internal affairs. The Articles of Confederation, in effect from 1781 to 1789, formally divided political authority between the states and the central government.

However, wealthy and powerful men soon perceived that the Confederation Congress was too weak to protect their interests. Democratic movements in the states threatened property rights. The inability of Congress to regulate commerce led to trade disputes among the states; its inability to tax left it unable to maintain an army and navy. Congress could not control the western territories, and, most frightening to the wealthy, it could not help states put down popular uprisings, such as that led by Daniel Shays in western Massachusetts in 1786.

The fears Shays's Rebellion caused led directly to a decision to hold the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, which in 1787 produced the constitution

under which the United States is still governed. But the convention could not create a more powerful central government without first making important concessions to southern slaveholders.

The delegates to the convention omitted the words *slave* and *slavery* from the Constitution. But they included several clauses designed to secure the enslavement of African Americans in the southern states. These clauses provided for continuing the Atlantic slave trade for twenty years and returning slaves who escaped to other states to their masters. The Constitution also enhanced representation for slaveholders in Congress and the electoral college that elected the president.

Humanitarian opposition to the Atlantic slave trade had mounted during the revolutionary era. Under pressure from black activists—such as Prince Hall of Boston—and Quakers, northern state legislatures during the 1780s forbade their citizens to engage in the slave trade. Rhode Island led the way in 1787. Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania followed in 1788. Economic change in the upper South also prompted opposition to the trade. Virginia, for example, banned the importation of slaves from abroad nearly a decade before Rhode Island.

Yet delegates to the convention from South Carolina and Georgia maintained that they had an acute labor shortage. The delegates threatened that their citizens would not tolerate a central government that could stop them from importing slaves—at least not in the near future. The convention compromised by including a provision in the Constitution that prohibited Congress from abolishing the trade until 1808. During the twenty years between 1787 and 1808, when Congress banned the trade, thousands of Africans were brought into the southern states. Between 1804 and 1808, for example, forty thousand entered through Charleston. More slaves entered the United States during these two decades than during any other twenty years in American history. Such huge numbers helped fuel the westward expansion of the slave system.

Another proslavery clause of the United States Constitution provided that persons “held in service or labour in one State, escaping into another . . . shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labour may be due.” This clause was the basis for the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which allowed masters or their agents to pursue slaves across state lines, capture them, and take them before a magistrate. There, on presentation of satisfactory evidence, masters could regain legal custody of the person they claimed. This act did not stop slaves from escaping from Virginia and Maryland to Pennsylvania. But it did extend the power

of masters into the North, force the federal and northern state governments to uphold slavery, create personal tragedies for those who were recaptured, and encourage the kidnapping of free black northerners falsely claimed as escapees.

Finally the Constitution strengthened the political power of slaveholders through the Three-Fifths Clause. This clause was also a compromise between northern and southern delegates at the Convention. Southern delegates desired slaves to be counted toward representation in the national government but not counted for purposes of taxation. Northern delegates desired just the opposite. The Three-Fifths Clause provided that slaves be counted as three-fifths of a free person in determining a state’s representation in the House of Representatives and in the electoral college. Slaves would be counted similarly when and if Congress instituted a per capita tax.

This gave southern slaveholders increased representation on the basis of the number of slaves they owned—slaves who, of course, had no vote or representation. The South gained enormous political advantage from it. If not for the three-fifths clause, for example, northern nonslaveholder John Adams would have been reelected president in 1800 instead of losing the presidency to southern slaveholder Thomas Jefferson. For many years this clause contributed to the domination of the United States government by slaveholding southerners, although the South’s population steadily fell behind the North’s. That Congress never instituted a per capita tax made this victory for slaveholders all the more remarkable.

Cotton

Three other factors were more important than constitutional provisions in fostering the continued enslavement of African Americans in the new republic:

1. Increased cultivation of cotton
2. Declining revolutionary fervor
3. Intensified white racism

The most obvious of these three developments was the increase in cotton production. By the late eighteenth century, Britain was the world’s leading textile producer. As mechanization made the spinning of cotton cloth more economical, its demand for raw cotton increased dramatically. The United States took the lead in filling that demand as a result of Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin in 1793. This simple machine provided an easy and quick way to remove the seeds from the cotton most commonly grown in the South.

British demand combined with the cotton gin encouraged cotton production in the United States to rise from 3,000 to 178,000 bales between 1790 and 1810. Cotton became by far the United States' most lucrative export. Southern cotton production also encouraged the development of textile mills in New England, thereby creating a proslavery alliance between the "lords of the lash and the lords of the loom."

Cotton reinvigorated the slave-labor system, which spread rapidly across Georgia into the new slave states of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Cotton was also cultivated in South Carolina, North Carolina, and parts of Virginia and Tennessee. To make matters worse for African Americans, the westward expansion of cotton production encouraged an internal slave trade. Masters in the old tobacco-growing regions of Maryland, Virginia, and other states began to support themselves by selling their slaves to the new cotton-growing regions (see Figure 5-1).

Conservatism and Racism

The waning of revolutionary humanitarianism and the rise of a more intense racism among white people are less tangible forces than the Constitution and cotton production, but they were just as important in strengthening slavery in these years. They also made life more difficult for free African Americans.

By the 1790s white Americans had begun a long retreat from the egalitarianism of the revolutionary era. In the North and Chesapeake, white people became less willing to challenge the prerogatives of slaveholders and more willing to accept slavery as suitable for African Americans. Most Marylanders and Virginians came to think of emancipation as best left to the distant future. This outlook strengthened the slaveholders and their nonslaveholding white supporters in the Deep South who had never embraced the humanitarian precepts of the Enlightenment and Great Awakening.

In part, increasing proslavery sentiment among white Americans stemmed from revulsion against the radicalism of the French Revolution that began in 1789. Most Americans came to value property rights—including rights to human property—and social order above liberty. Also, as cotton production spread westward and the value of slaves soared, rationalist and evangelical criticism of human bondage withered. Antislavery sentiment in the upper South that had flourished among slaveholders, nonslaveholders, Deists, Methodists, and Baptists became increasingly confined to African Americans and Quakers. By the early 1800s, manumissions began a long decline.

Using race to justify slavery was an important component of this conservative trend. Unlike white people, the argument went, black people were unsuited for freedom or citizenship. The doctrines embodied in the Declaration of Independence were, therefore, not applicable to them.

A new scientific racism supported this outlook. As early as the 1770s, some people challenged the Enlightenment's explanation that perceived racial differences were the results of different environments in which Africans and Europeans lived and were not essential or inherent. Scholars began to propose that, on the basis of a great chain of being from lesser creatures to higher creatures, black people constituted a separate species that was as close to the great apes as it was to white people. In the 1780s Thomas Jefferson reflected this view when he argued that "scientific observation" supported the conclusion that black people were inherently "inferior to whites in the endowments of both body and mind."

Such views were common among both white northerners and white southerners and had practical results. During the 1790s, Congress expressed its determination to exclude African Americans from the benefits of citizenship in "a white man's country." A 1790 law limited the granting of naturalized citizenship to "any alien, being a white person." Two years later, Congress limited enrollment in state militias to "each and every

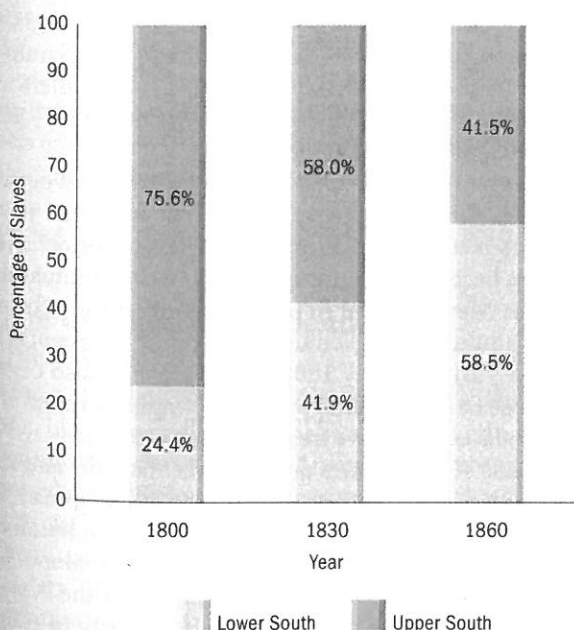


Figure 5-1 Distribution of the Southern Slave Population, 1800–1860. The demand for slaves in the cotton-growing lower South produced a major shift in the distribution of the slave population.

free, able-bodied white male citizen.” These laws implied that African Americans had no place in the United States except as slaves. In other words, the free black class was an anomaly and, in the opinion of most white people, a dangerous anomaly.

THE EMERGENCE OF FREE BLACK COMMUNITIES

The competing forces of slavery and racism, on the one hand, and freedom and opportunity, on the other, shaped the growth of African-American communities in the early American republic. A distinctive black culture had existed since the early colonial period. But enslavement had limited black community life. The advent of large free black populations in the North and upper South after the Revolution allowed African Americans to establish autonomous and dynamic communities. They ap-

peared in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Newport (Rhode Island), Richmond, Norfolk, New York, and Boston. As free black people in these cities acquired a modicum of wealth and education, they established institutions that have shaped African-American life ever since.

A combination of factors encouraged African Americans to form these distinctive institutions. First, as they emerged from slavery, they realized that they would have inferior status in white-dominated organizations or not be allowed to participate in them at all. Second, black people valued the African heritage they had preserved over generations in slavery. They wanted institutions that would perpetuate their heritage.

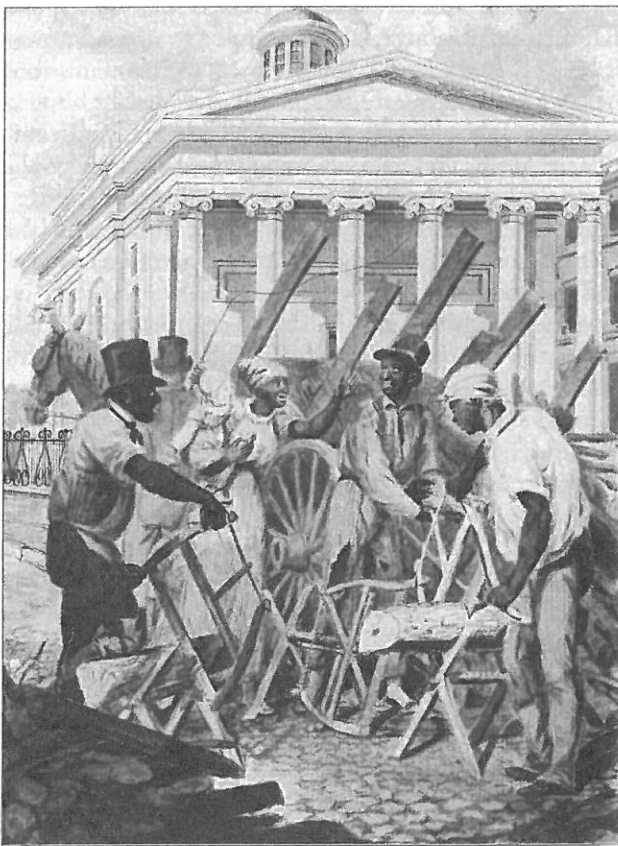
The earliest black community institutions were mutual aid societies. Patterned on white societies, these organizations were like modern insurance companies and benevolent organizations. They provided for their members’ burial and medical expenses and helped support widows and children. African Americans in Newport, Rhode Island, organized the first such black mutual aid society in 1780. Seven years later, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones established the more famous Free African Society in Philadelphia.

Most early free-black societies admitted only men, but similar organizations for women appeared during the 1790s. For example, in 1793, Philadelphia’s Female Benevolent Society of St. Thomas took over the welfare functions of the city’s Free African Society. Other black women’s organizations in Philadelphia during the early republic included the Benevolent Daughters—established in 1796 by Richard Allen’s wife Sarah—Daughters of Africa established in 1812, the American Female Bond Benevolent Society formed in 1817, and the Female Benezet begun in 1818.

These ostensibly secular societies maintained a decidedly Christian moral character. They insisted that their members meet standards of middle-class propriety and, in effect, became self-improvement as well as mutual aid societies. Members had to pledge to refrain from fornication, adultery, drunkenness, and other “disreputable behavior.” By the early 1800s, such societies also organized resistance to kidnappers who sought to recapture fugitive slaves or enslave free African Americans.

Because such societies provided real benefits and reflected black middle-class aspirations, they spread to every black urban community. More than one hundred such organizations existed in Philadelphia alone by 1830. Although they were more common in the North than in the South, Baltimore had about thirty of them by that same year, and even Charleston, South Carolina, had at least two. One of them was the Brown Fellowship, founded in 1790, which admitted only black men

John Lewis Kimmel, “Negroes in front of the Bank of Pennsylvania” 1821. Watercolor on paper. H. 9-3/4, W. 6-1/4 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1942, (42.95.16)



This watercolor depiction of industrious free black workers was painted in Philadelphia between 1811 and 1813 by a Russian diplomat. A woman, carrying a white child, greets men who are sawing wood. Often domestic work and physical labor were the only sorts of work open to black people.

with light complexions. The other was open to all free black men in Charleston.

Of particular importance were the black freemasons because, unlike other free black organizations, the masons united black men from several northern cities. Combining rationalism with secrecy and obscure ritual, freemasonry was a major movement among European and American men during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Opportunities for male bonding, wearing fancy regalia, and achieving prestige in a supposedly ancient hierarchy attracted both black and white men. As historians James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton suggest, black people drew special satisfaction from the European-based order's claims to have originated in ancient Egypt, which black people associated with their own African heritage.

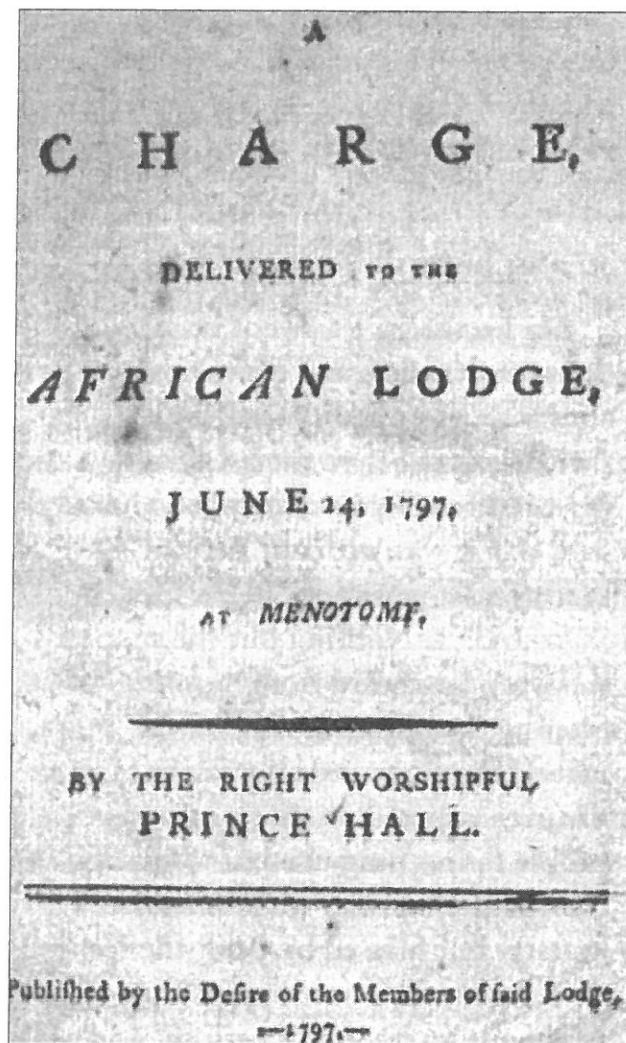
The most famous black mason of his time was Prince Hall, the Revolutionary War veteran and abolitionist. During the 1770s he founded what became known as the African Grand Lodge of North America or—more colloquially—the Prince Hall Masons. In several respects Hall's relationship to masonry epitomizes the free black predicament in America.

In 1775 the local white masonic lodge in Boston rejected Hall's application for membership because of his black ancestry. Instead, Hall, who was a Patriot, got a limited license—for what was called African Lodge No. 1—from a British lodge associated with the British army that then occupied Boston. The irony of this situation was compounded when, after the War for Independence, American masonry refused to grant the African Lodge a full charter. Hall again had to turn to the British masons who approved his application in 1787. It was under this British charter that Hall in 1791 became Provincial Grand Master of North America and began authorizing black lodges in other cities, notably Philadelphia and Providence, Rhode Island.

The Origins of Independent Black Churches

Although black churches emerged at least a decade later than black benevolent associations, the churches quickly became the core of African-American communities. Not only did these churches attend to the spiritual needs of free black people and—in the border South—slaves, too, their pastors also became the primary African-American leaders. Black church buildings housed schools, social organizations, and antislavery meetings.

During the late eighteenth century, as the egalitarian spirit of the Great Awakening waned among white Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians, separate—but not



This is the title page of the published version of Prince Hall's last public speech. He delivered it in June 1797 before the Boston African Lodge that he had established. On this occasion Hall condemned assaults on black people by white mobs and noted revolutionary changes in Haiti.

independent—black churches appeared in the South. The biracial churches spawned by the Awakening had never embraced African Americans on an equal basis with white people. Although there had initially been promising tendencies within biracial churches, as time passed white people denied black people significant influence in church governance and imposed segregated seating, communion services, Sunday schools, and cemeteries on them. Separate black congregations, usually headed by black ministers but subordinate to white church hierarchies, were the ultimate result of these policies. The first such congregations appeared during the 1770s in South Carolina and Georgia.

In contrast to these subordinate churches, a truly independent black church emerged gradually in Philadelphia between the 1780s and the early 1800s. The movement for such a church began within the city's white-controlled St. George's Methodist Church. The movement's leaders were Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who could rely on the Free African Society they had established to help them.

Both these men had been slaves. Allen purchased his freedom in 1780 and Jones bought his in 1783. A fervent Methodist since the 1770s, Allen received permission from St. George's white leadership to preach to black people in the evenings in what was then a simple church building. By the mid-1780s, Jones had joined Allen's congregation, and soon Allen, Jones, and other

black members of St. George's chafed under policies they considered unchristian and insulting. But their own faith that Methodist egalitarianism would finally prevail undermined their efforts during the 1780s to create a separate black Methodist church.

The break finally came in 1792 when St. George's white leaders grievously insulted the church's black members. An attempt by white trustees to prevent Jones from praying in what the trustees considered the white section of the church led black members to walk out. "We all went out of the church in a body," recalled Allen, "and they were no more plagued by us in the church."

St. George's white leaders fought hard and long to control the expanding and economically valuable black

VOICES

RICHARD ALLEN ON THE BREAK WITH ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH

It took an emotionally wrenching experience to convince Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and other black Methodists that they must break their association with St. George's Church. Allen published the following account in 1833 as part of his autobiography, The Life Experiences and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. Although many years had passed since the incident, Allen's account retains a strong emotional immediacy.

A number of us usually attended St. George's church in Fourth street; and when the colored people began to get numerous in attending the church, they moved us from the seats we usually sat on, and placed us around the wall, and on Sabbath morning, we went to the church and the sexton stood at the door, and told us to go in the gallery. He told us to go, and we would see where to sit. We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats. Meeting had begun and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seats, the elder said, "Let us pray." We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H_____ M_____, having hold of the Rev. Absalom

Jones, pulling him up off his knees, and saying, "You must get up—you must not kneel here." Mr. Jones replied, "Wait until prayer is over." Mr. H_____ M_____ said, "No, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and force you away." Mr. Jones said, "Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more." With that he [H_____ M_____] beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L_____ S_____ to come to his assistance. He came, and went to William White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church. . . . We then hired a store-room, and held worship by ourselves. Here we were pursued with threats of being disowned, and read publicly out of meeting if we did continue worship in the place we had hired; but we believed the Lord would be our friend. We got subscription papers out to raise money to build the house of the Lord.

QUESTIONS

1. What appears to have sparked the confrontation Allen describes?
2. How did white church leaders respond to the withdrawal of the church's black members?

congregation. Yet other white Philadelphians, led by abolitionist Benjamin Rush, applauded the concept of an independent “African church.” Rush and other sympathetic white people contributed to the building fund. When construction began in 1793, Rush and at least one hundred other white people joined with African Americans at a banquet to celebrate the occasion.

However, the black congregation soon split. When the majority determined that the new church would be Episcopalian rather than Methodist, Allen and a few others refused to join. The result was *two* black churches in Philadelphia. St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, with Jones as priest, opened in July 1794 as an African-American congregation within the white-led national Episcopal Church. Then Allen’s Mother Bethel congregation got under way as the first truly independent black church. The white leaders of St. George’s tried to control Mother Bethel until 1816. But that year it became the birthplace of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Allen became the

first bishop of this organization, which quickly spread to cities in both the North and the South.

Most significant among these other AME congregations were Daniel Coker’s in Baltimore, the AME Zion in New York, and those in Wilmington, Delaware, Salem, New Jersey, and Attleboro, Pennsylvania. Other independent black churches that formed at this time out of similar conflicts with white-led congregations included the Abyssinian Baptist Church, organized in New York City in 1808 by Thomas Paul, and the African Presbyterian Church, established in Philadelphia by Samuel E. Cornish in 1811.

The First Black Schools

Schools for African-American children, slave and free, date to the early 1700s. In both North and South, white clergy, including Cotton Mather, ran the schools. So did Quakers, early abolition societies, and missionaries acting for the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. But the first schools established by African Americans to instruct African-American children arose after the Revolution. The new black mutual aid societies and churches created and sustained them.

Schools for black people organized or taught by white people continued to flourish. But in other instances, black people founded their own schools because local white authorities regularly refused either to admit black children to public schools or to maintain adequate separate schools for them. For example, in 1796, when he failed to convince Boston’s city council to provide a school for black students, Prince Hall had the children taught in his own home and that of his son Primus. By 1806 the school was meeting in the basement of the new African Meeting House, which housed Thomas Paul’s African Baptist Church.

Hall was not the first to take such action. As early as 1790, Charleston’s Brown Fellowship operated a school for its members’ children. Free black people in Baltimore supported schools during the same decade, and during the early 1800s, similar schools opened in Washington, D.C. Such schools frequently employed white teachers. Not until Philadelphia’s Mother Bethel church established the Augustine School in 1818 did a school entirely administered and taught by African Americans for black children exist.

These schools faced great difficulties. Many black families could not afford the fees, but rather than turn children away, the schools strained their meager resources by taking charity cases. Some black parents also



This pastel portrait of Richard Allen by an unknown artist was done in 1824, when Allen was only twenty-four years old and just beginning his preaching career.

believed that education was pointless when African Americans often could not get skilled jobs. White people feared competition from skilled black workers, believed that black schools attracted undesirable populations, and—particularly in the South—feared that educated free African Americans would encourage slaves to revolt.

Threats of violence against such schools and efforts to suppress them were common. The case of Christopher McPherson exemplifies these dangers. McPherson, a free African American, established a night school for black men at Richmond, Virginia, in 1811 and hired a white teacher. All went well until McPherson advertised the school in a local newspaper. In response, white residents forced the teacher to leave the city, and local authorities had McPherson committed to the state lunatic asylum. Nevertheless, similar schools continued to operate in both the North and upper South, producing a growing class of literate African Americans.

BLACK LEADERS AND CHOICES

By the 1790s, an educated black elite that was well able to provide leadership for other African Americans in religion, economic advancement, and racial politics had come into existence in the North and Chesapeake. Experience had driven this elite to a contradictory perception of themselves and of America. They were acculturated, patriotic Americans who had achieved some personal well-being and security. But they were also well aware that American society had not lived up to its revolutionary principles; they lamented the continued enslavement of the mass of African Americans; and they had misgivings about the future.

Prominent among these leaders were members of the clergy. Two of the most important of them were Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. Besides organizing his church, Allen opened a school in Philadelphia for black children, wrote against slavery and racial prejudice, and made his home a refuge for fugitive slaves. A year before his death in 1831, Allen presided over the first national black convention.

Jones, too, was an early abolitionist. In 1797 his concern for fugitives facing reenslavement led him to become the first African American to petition Congress. His petition anticipated later abolitionists in suggesting that slavery violated the spirit of the United States Constitution and that Congress could abolish it.

Other influential black ministers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were Jupiter Hammon, Daniel Coker of Baltimore, John Chavis of

Virginia, and Lemuel Haynes of New England. Hammon, who is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, became a well-known poet. Coker, who was of mixed race, conducted a school, cofounded the AME Church, and advocated black migration to Africa. Chavis also combined preaching and teaching. Born free, he served on the Patriot side in the War for Independence and entered the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1792. Thereafter he became a Presbyterian missionary among African Americans in Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina and gained a wide reputation as a biblical scholar. Haynes was perhaps even better known for his intellectual accomplishments. The son of a white mother and black father, Haynes served with the Minutemen and Continental Army, spoke against slavery, and in 1780, became the first ordained black Congregationalist minister, serving as pastor to several white congregations.

Vying with clergy for influence were African-American entrepreneurs. Prince Hall, for example, owned successful leather dressing and catering businesses in Boston, and Peter Williams, principal founder of New York's AME Zion church, was a prosperous tobacco merchant. Another prominent black entrepreneur was James Forten of Philadelphia, described as "probably the most noteworthy free African-American entrepreneur in the early nineteenth century." Born to free parents in 1766, Forten was a Patriot during the War for Independence, learned the craft of sail making, and became the owner of his own business in 1798. For the rest of his life, he advocated equal rights and abolition.

American patriotism, religious conviction, organizational skill, intellectual inquisitiveness, and antislavery activism delineate the lives of most free black leaders in this era. Yet these leaders often were torn in their perceptions of what was best for African Americans. Hammon and Chavis were accommodationist about slavery and racial oppression. They both condemned slavery and lauded human liberty, but they were not activists. They maintained that God would eventually end injustice. As late as 1836, Chavis—who lived in the South—wrote "that Slavery is a national evil no one doubts, but what is to be done? . . . All that can be done, is to make the best of a bad bargain. For I am clearly of the opinion that immediate emancipation would be to entail the greatest earthly curse upon my brethren according to the flesh."

Allen, Jones, Hall, and Forten were more optimistic than Hammon and Chavis about the ability of African Americans to mold their own destiny in the United States. Although they each expressed misgivings, they

ABSALOM JONES PETITIONS CONGRESS ON BEHALF OF FUGITIVES FACING REENSLAVEMENT

Absalom Jones wrote his petition to Congress on behalf of four black men who had been manumitted in North Carolina. Because they were in danger of being reenslaved, they had taken refuge in Philadelphia. The men, over whose names the petition appears in the Annals of Congress, were Jupiter Nicholson, Jacob Nicholson, Joe Albert, and Thomas Pritchett. Jones provided brief accounts of their troubles. Here we include only the important general principles that Jones invoked. Southern representatives argued that accepting a petition from alleged slaves would set a dangerous precedent, and Congress refused to accept the petition.

To the President, Senate, and House of Representatives,

The Petition and Representation of the under-named Freeman, respectfully sheweth:

That, being of African descent, the late inhabitants and natives of North Carolina, to you only, under God, can we apply with any hope of effect, for redress of our grievances, having been compelled to leave the State wherein we had a right of residence, as freemen liberated under the hand and seal of humane and conscientious masters, the validity of which act of justice in restoring us to our native right of freedom, was confirmed by judgment of the Superior Court of North Carolina. . . . yet, not long after this decision, a law of that State was enacted, under which men of cruel disposition, and void of just principle, received countenance and authority in violently seizing, imprisoning, and selling into slavery, such as had been so emancipated; whereby we were reduced to the necessity of separating from some of our nearest and most tender connections, and seeking refuge in such parts of the Union where more regard is paid to the public declaration in favor of liberty and the common right of man, several hundreds, under our circumstances, having, in consequence of the said law, been hunted day and night, like beasts of the forest, by armed men with dogs, and made a prey of as free and lawful plunder. . . .

We beseech your impartial attention to our hard condition, not only with respect to our personal sufferings, as freemen, but as a class of that people who, distinguished by color, are therefore with a degrading partiality, considered by many, even of those in eminent

stations, as unentitled to that public justice and protection which is the great object of Government. . . .

If, notwithstanding all that has been publicly avowed as essential principles respecting the extent of human right to freedom; notwithstanding we have had that right restored to us, so far as was in the power of those by whom we were held as slaves, we cannot claim the privilege of representation in your councils, yet we trust we may address you as fellow-men, who, under God, the sovereign Ruler of the Universe, are intrusted with the distribution of justice, for the terror of evil-doers, the encouragement of protection of the innocent, not doubting that you are men of liberal minds, susceptible of benevolent feelings and clear conception of rectitude to a catholic extent, who can admit that black people . . . have natural affections, social and domestic attachments and sensibilities; and that, therefore, we may hope for a share in your sympathetic attention while we represent that the unconstitutional bondage in which multitudes of our fellows in complexion are held, is to us a subject sorrowfully affecting; for we cannot conceive their condition (more especially those who have been emancipated and tasted the sweets of liberty, and again reduced to slavery by kidnappers and man-stealers) to be less afflicting or deplorable than the situation of citizens of the United States, captured and enslaved through the unrighteous policy prevalent in Algiers May we not be allowed to consider this stretch of power, morally and politically, a Governmental defect, if not a direct violation of the declared fundamental principles of the Constitution; and finally, is not some remedy for an evil of such magnitude highly worthy of the deep inquiry and unfeigned zeal of the supreme Legislative body of a free and enlightened people?

QUESTIONS

1. On what principles does Jones believe the United States government is bound to act?
2. What does Jones's petition indicate concerning the status of African Americans before the law?

Source: *Annals of Congress*, 4 Cong., 2 sess. (January 23, 1797), 2015-18.

PROFILE

JAMES FORTEN

James Forten was one of the few black leaders of the early American republic to live well beyond that era.

His long career as a determined opponent of slavery linked the time of Prince Hall and Richard Allen to that of the militant abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass (see Chapters 8 and 9). From the 1790s until his death in 1842, Forten used his wealth and organizational talents to build a cohesive black community in Philadelphia. But he also struggled to create a broader American community based on merit rather than on racial privilege.

Forten was born in Philadelphia in 1766. Family tradition held that one of his great grandfathers was an African who had been brought to Delaware in the late 1600s. His paternal grandfather was one of the first Pennsylvania slaves to purchase his freedom.

As a child, Forten learned to read and write at a school run by Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet and acquired Benezet's broad humanistic philosophy. In 1781 Forten volunteered to serve as a powder boy with a cannon crew on board the American privateer *Royal Louis*. He proved himself a brave sailor in battle. He was also deeply patriotic. When taken prisoner and offered special treatment by the son of a British officer, Forten declared, "No, NO! I am here a prisoner for the liberties of my country; I *never, NEVER, shall prove a traitor to her interests.*" As a result of his defiance, Forten spent seven months on a rotting prison ship in New York harbor.

After his release Forten walked back to Philadelphia and became an apprentice sail maker. He became foreman in 1786 and bought the business in 1798. By 1807 he employed an interracial work force of thirty, and by 1832 had acquired a fortune of about \$100,000—a large sum at the time.

Throughout the 1780s and most of the 1790s, Forten stood aloof from Philadelphia's developing black community. He did not join the Free African Society or help establish separate black churches. Not



James Forten, by an unknown artist.

until 1797 did he emerge as an active black leader. At that time he joined Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in establishing the African Masonic Lodge of Pennsylvania, which Prince Hall came to Philadelphia to install. Forten then joined eighty other Philadelphia African Americans to petition Congress to repeal the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793.

By 1817 Forten had become a major opponent of black migration to Africa. Although he had previously endorsed some colonization schemes, he had come to believe such efforts were racist because they assumed that black people were not suited for American citizenship. Rather than commit resources to sending African Americans to other parts of the world, he was determined to improve their standing in the United States. In 1809 he joined Allen and Jones in creating a self-improvement organization, the Society for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality. By 1830 he hoped to use the newly organized Black National Convention movement to train young black men for skilled trades.

At about the same time, Forten became an important influence on the white abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison. Forten welcomed Garrison to his home, introduced him to other black leaders, and helped finance his antislavery newspaper, the *Liberator*. In 1833 Forten joined Garrison, Arthur Tappan, Lewis Tappan, and other white and black abolitionists in organizing the American Antislavery Society, pledged to the peaceful immediate abolition of slavery without colonization of the former slaves and without compensation to slaveholders. Increasingly radical during his remaining years, Forten advocated an end to war, favored equal rights for women, and resisted the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. He also helped establish the American Moral Reform Society. He demonstrated his commitment to women's rights in the way he raised his daughters, Sarah, Margaretta, and Harriet, who carried on his activism.

believed that—despite setbacks—the egalitarian principles of the American Revolution would prevail if black people insisted on liberty. Forten never despaired that African Americans would be integrated into the larger American society on the basis of their individual talent and enterprise. While he was often frustrated, Hall for four decades pursued a strategy based on the assumption that white authority would reward black protest and patriotism. In 1786, when Daniel Shays led his revolt of white farmers in western Massachusetts, Hall offered to raise seven hundred black volunteers to help defeat the insurgency. Allen and Jones put more emphasis on separate black institutions than did Forten or Hall. Yet they were just as willing to organize, protest, and petition to establish the rights of black people as American citizens.

Migration

African Americans, however, had another alternative: migration from the United States to establish their own society free from white prejudices. There were great practical obstacles to mass black migration to West Africa, the Caribbean, or western North America. It was extremely expensive, difficult to organize, and involved long—often fruitless—negotiations with foreign governments. But no black leader during the early national period was immune to the appeal of such proposals.

As early as 1787, Hall petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to support efforts by black Bostonians to establish a colony in Africa. Although he recognized black progress in Massachusetts, Hall maintained that he and others found themselves “in many respects, in very disagreeable and disadvantageous circumstances; most of which must attend us so long as we and our children live in America.” By 1820 Coker had become so convinced that this view was correct that he led the first party of eighty-six African Americans to the new colony of Liberia on the West African coast.

The major black advocate of migration to Africa during this period, however, was Paul Cuffe, the son of an Ashanti (in modern Ghana) father and Wampanoag Indian mother. He became a prosperous New England sea captain and, by the early 1800s, cooperated with British humanitarians and entrepreneurs to promote migration. He saw African-American colonization in West Africa as a way to end the Atlantic slave trade, spread Christianity, create a refuge for free black people, and make profits. Before his death in 1817, Cuffe had influenced not only Coker but also—at least temporarily—Forten, Allen, and Jones to consider colonization as a viable alternative for African Americans.

Slave Uprisings

While black northerners became increasingly aware of the limits of their freedom after the Revolution, black southerners saw the perpetuation of their enslavement. As cotton production expanded westward and new slave states entered the Union, as masters in such border slave states as Maryland and Virginia turned away from the revolutionary commitment to gradual emancipation, slaves faced several choices.

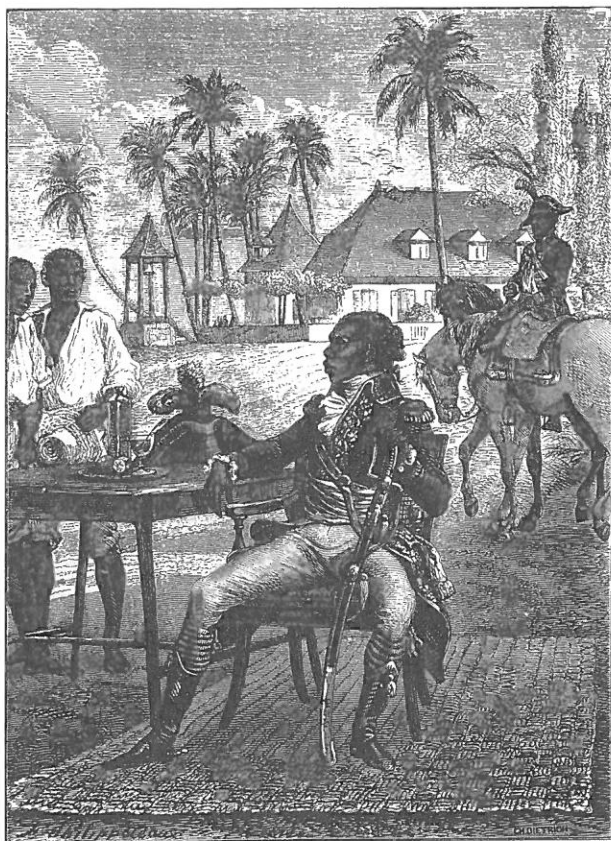
Some lowered their expectations and loyally served their masters. Most continued patterns of day-to-day resistance, and mounting numbers of men and women escaped. A few risked their lives to join revolutionary movements to destroy slavery violently. When just several hundred out of hundreds of thousands of slaves rallied behind Gabriel in 1800 near Richmond or Charles Deslandes in 1811 near New Orleans, they frightened white southerners and raised hopes for freedom among countless African Americans.

The egalitarian principles of the American and French revolutions influenced Gabriel and Deslandes. Unlike earlier slave rebels, they acted not to revenge personal grievances or to establish maroon communities but to destroy slavery because it denied natural human rights to its victims. The American Declaration of Independence and the legend of Haiti's Toussaint L'Ouverture provided the intellectual foundations for their efforts.

L'Ouverture, against great odds, had led the enslaved black people of the French sugar colony of Saint Domingue—modern Haiti—to freedom and independence. This bitter and bloody struggle lasted from 1791 to 1804. Many white planters fled the island with their slaves to take refuge in Cuba, Jamaica, South Carolina, Virginia, and—somewhat later—Louisiana. The Haitian slaves carried the spirit of revolution with them to their new homes.

During the early 1790s, black unrest and rumors of pending revolt mounted in Virginia. The state militia arrested suspected plotters, but they got off with whippings. In this revolutionary atmosphere, Gabriel, the human property of Thomas Prosser Sr., prepared to lead a massive slave insurrection. Gabriel was an acculturated and literate blacksmith who was well aware of the rationalist and revolutionary currents of his time. He was also a large and powerful man with a violent temper. In the fall of 1799, for example, a local court convicted him of “biting off a considerable part of [the] left Ear’ of a white neighbor.”

The ideology of the American Revolution shaped Gabriel's actions. He was also aware that white people



This drawing of Haitian liberation Toussaint L'Ouverture suggests his stature as a military leader. His successful revolution inspired black rebels in the American South.

were politically divided and distracted by an undeclared naval war with France. He enjoyed some secret white support and hoped that poor people generally would rally to his cause as he and his associates planned to kill those who supported slavery and take control of central Virginia.

But on August 30, 1800—the day the uprising was to occur—two slaves revealed the plan to white authorities while a tremendous thunderstorm prevented Gabriel's followers from assaulting Richmond. Then governor—and future United States president—James Monroe quickly had suspects arrested. Gabriel, who relied on white allies to get to Norfolk, was among the last captured. In October he and twenty-six others, convicted of “conspiracy and insurrection,” were hanged. But by demonstrating that slaves could organize for large-scale rebellion, they left a legacy of fear among slaveholders and hope for liberation among southern African Americans.

The far less famous Louisiana Rebellion took place under similar circumstances. By the early 1800s, refu-

gees from Haiti had settled with their slaves in what was then known as Orleans Territory. As they arrived, rumors of slave insurrection spread across the territory. The rumors became reality on January 8, 1811, when Deslandes, a Haitian native and slave driver on a plantation north of New Orleans, initiated a massive revolt in cooperation with maroons.

Although no record of Deslandes's rhetoric survives and his goals may have been less ideologically coherent than Gabriel's, he organized a force of at least 180 men and women. They marched south along the Mississippi River toward New Orleans, with leaders on horseback, and with flags and drums, but few guns. The revolutionaries plundered and burned plantations but killed only two white people and one recalcitrant slave. They were overwhelmed on January 10 by a force of about 700 territorial militia, slaveholding vigilantes, and United States troops. The “battle” was a massacre. The well-armed white men slaughtered sixty-six of the rebels and captured twenty-one, including Deslandes. These captives were tried without benefit of counsel, found guilty of rebellion, and shot. The white authorities cut off each executed rebel's head and displayed it on a pike to warn other African Americans of the consequences of revolt.

The White Southern Reaction

Although Deslandes's uprising was one of the few major slave revolts in American history, Gabriel's conspiracy and events in Haiti left the more significant legacy. For generations enslaved African Americans regarded L'Ouverture as a black George Washington and recalled Gabriel's revolutionary message. The networks among slaves that Gabriel established continued to exist after his death, and as the external slave trade carried black Virginians southwestward, they took his promise of liberation with them.

The fears that the Haitian revolution and Gabriel's conspiracy raised among white southerners deepened their reaction against the egalitarian values of the Enlightenment. Because they feared race war and believed that emancipation would encourage African Americans to begin such a war, most white people in Virginia and throughout the South determined to make black bondage stronger, not weaker.

Beginning with South Carolina in December 1800, southern states outlawed assemblies of slaves, placed curfews on slaves and free black people, and made manumissions more difficult. The old colonial practice of white men patrolling slave quarters on horseback revived. Assuming that revolutionaries like Gabriel

received encouragement from white abolitionists as well as free African Americans, white southerners became suspicious of such outsiders as Yankee peddlers, evangelicals, and foreigners. Forcing free black people out of southern states became more attractive to white southerners and brought about an odd alliance between them and black advocates of emigration to Africa.

THE WAR OF 1812

Many of the themes developed in this chapter—the patriotism of African Americans, their opportunities for freedom, migration sentiment among them, and influences pushing slaves toward revolutionary action—appear in the United States' war with Great Britain that began in 1812. The roots of this conflict lay in a massive military and economic struggle between Britain and France for mastery over the Atlantic world. The struggle lasted from 1793, during the French Revolution, to the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte by a British-led coalition in 1815.

Long-standing disputes, the desire to annex Canada, and especially Britain's interference with the United States' vital trade links to Europe drew this country into the war of 1812, which lasted until late 1814. Although the United States won some important victories, it failed to achieve its major objective—the conquest of Canada—and the war ended in a draw. Yet many Americans regarded the war as a second struggle for independence, and once again, black military service and white fear of slave revolt played important roles.

When the war began, white prejudice and fear of black revolt had nearly nullified memories of the service of black Patriot soldiers during the Revolution. The Militia Act of 1792 had eliminated armed black participation in all state militias except that of North Carolina. The secretary of the Navy ended black service on American warships in 1798. Because of the news from Haiti and because of Gabriel's conspiracy, white southerners joined John Randolph of Virginia in regarding African Americans as "an internal foe." Therefore, when the war with Great Britain began, the southern states refused to enlist black men for fear they would use their guns to aid slave revolts. Meanwhile, the lack of enthusiasm for the war among many northerners, combined with the absence of a British threat to their part of the country, kept northern states from mobilizing black troops during 1812 and 1813.

Southern fears of slave revolt mounted in the spring of 1813 when the British invaded the Chesapeake. As they had during the Revolution, British generals offered

slaves freedom in Canada or the British West Indies in return for help. In response, African Americans joined the British army that burned Washington, D.C., in 1814 and attacked Baltimore.

The threat this British army posed to Philadelphia and New York led to the first active black involvement in the war on the American side. The New York state legislature authorized two black regiments, offered freedom to slaves who enlisted, and promised compensation to their masters. Meanwhile, African Americans in Philadelphia and New York City volunteered to help build fortifications. In Philadelphia, James Forten, Richard Allen, and Absalom Jones patriotically raised a "Black Brigade," which never saw action because the British halted when they failed to capture Baltimore.

African-American men did fight, however, at two of the war's most important battles. During the naval engagement on Lake Erie in September 1813 that secured control of the Great Lakes for the United States, one-quarter of Captain Oliver Hazard Perry's four hundred sailors were black. Although Perry had been staunchly prejudiced against using these men, after the battle he praised their valor.

At the Battle of New Orleans—fought in January 1815, about a month after the war was officially over (news of peace had not yet reached the area)—African Americans also fought bravely. Yet white memories of Deslandes's recent uprising almost prevented them from being allowed to fight on the American side. Many white people feared that, if mobilized, the local free black militia—which dated back to the Spanish occupation of Louisiana from 1763 to 1801—would make common cause with slaves and the British rather than take the American side.

In defiance of such fears, General Andrew Jackson included the black troops in his force defending New Orleans and offered them equal pay and benefits. At least six hundred free black men fought on the American side at the Battle of New Orleans, and Jackson lived up to his promise of equal treatment. It was a choice, he later informed President James Monroe, between having the free African Americans "in our ranks or . . . in the ranks of the enemy."

The Missouri Compromise

During the years following 1815 as the United States emerged from a difficult war, sectional issues between the North and South, which had been pushed into the background by constitutional compromises and the political climate, revived. The nation's first political parties—the Federalists and the Republicans—had failed to

confront slavery as a national issue. The northern wing of the modernizing Federalist party had abolitionist tendencies. But during the 1790s when they controlled the national government, the Federalists did not raise the slavery issue. Then the victory of the state-rights oriented Republican party in the election of 1800 fatally weakened the Federalists as a national organization and brought a series of implicitly proslavery administrations to power in Washington.

It took innovations in transportation and production that began during the 1810s—as well as the continuing disappearance of slavery in the northern states—to transform the North into a region consciously at odds with the South's traditional culture and slave-labor economy. The first major expression of intensifying sectional differences over slavery and its expansion came in 1819 when the slaveholding Missouri Territory, which had been carved out of the old Louisiana Territory, applied for admission to the Union as a slave state. The negative northern reaction was—as Jefferson said—a “fire bell in the night,” awakening slaveholders to an era in which slavery could no longer be avoided as an issue in national politics.

Northerners expressed deep reservations about the expansion of slavery and the creation of new slaveholding states, which threatened to destroy the political balance between the sections. It took all the skill of the slaveholding speaker of the House of Representatives, Henry Clay of Kentucky, to put together in 1820 a compromise that temporarily quieted discord. This Missouri Compromise (Map 5–2) permitted Missouri to become a slave state, maintained political balance by admitting Maine as a free state, and banned slavery north of the 36° 30' line of latitude in the old Louisiana Territory. Yet sectional relations would never be the same, and a new era of black and white antislavery militancy soon confronted the South.

CONCLUSION

The period between the War for Independence and the Missouri Compromise was a time of transition for African Americans. On the one hand, the legacy of the American Revolution brought emancipation in the North and a promise of equal opportunity with white Americans. On the other, slavery and racism had begun to grow stronger by the 1790s. Through a combination of anti-black prejudice among white people and African-Americans' desire to preserve their own cultural traditions, black urban communities arose in the North, upper South, and occasionally—in Charleston and Savannah for example—in the deep South.

Spreading freedom in the North and the emergence of black communities in both the North and South were heartening developments. There were new opportunities for education, spiritual growth, and economic development. But the mass of African Americans remained in slavery. The forces for human bondage were growing stronger. Freedom for those who had gained it in the upper South and North was marginal and precarious.

Gabriel's conspiracy in Virginia and Deslandes's rebellion in Louisiana indicated that revolutionary principles persisted among black southerners. But these rebellions and British recruitment of slaves during the War of 1812 convinced most white southerners that black bondage had to be permanent. Therefore, African Americans looked to the future with mixed emotions. A few determined that the only hope for real freedom lay in migration from the United States.

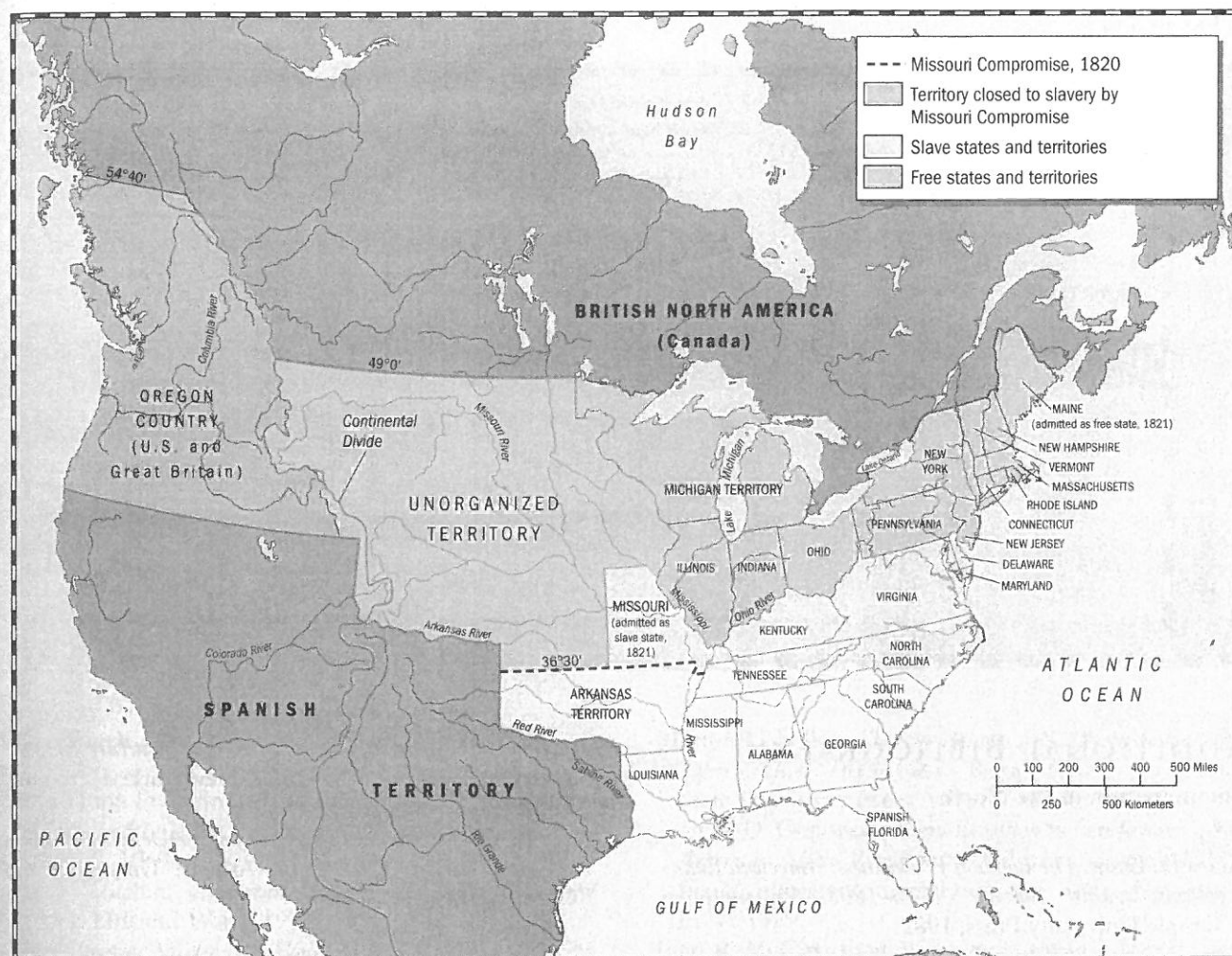
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Which were stronger in the era of the early American republic, the forces in favor of black freedom or those in favor of continued enslavement?
2. How were African Americans able to achieve emancipation in the North?
3. How was the United States Constitution, as it was drafted in 1787, proslavery? How was it antislavery?
4. How important were separate institutions in shaping the lives of free black people during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?
5. What led Gabriel to believe that he and his followers could abolish slavery in Virginia through armed uprising?

RECOMMENDED READING

Ira Berlin. *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. New York: New Press, 1974. The early chapters of this classic study indicate the special difficulties the first large generation of free black southerners faced.

Douglas R. Egerton. *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. This most recent account of Gabriel's conspiracy emphasizes both the revolutionary context within which he acted and his legacy.



Map 5-2 The Missouri Compromise of 1820. Under the Missouri Compromise, Missouri entered the Union as a slave state, Maine entered as a free state, and Congress banned slavery in the huge unorganized portion of the old Louisiana Territory north of the 36° 30' line of latitude.

Philip S. Foner. *History of Black Americans, from Africa to the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975. This is the first volume of a comprehensive three-volume history of African Americans. It is detailed and informative about black life between 1783 and 1820.

James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton. *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. This is a well-written interpretation of the northern free black community and its origins.

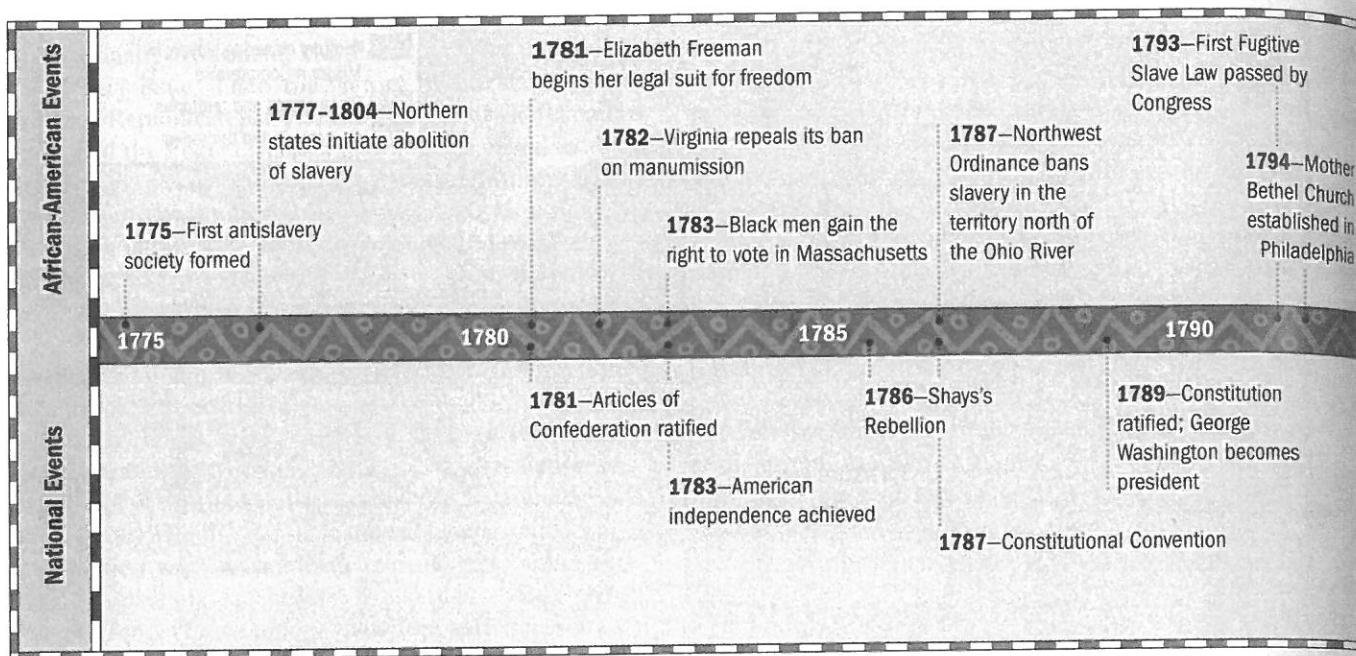
Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan. *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*. Rev. ed.

Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989. This delightfully written book provides informative accounts of black leaders who lived during the early American republic.

Gary B. Nash. *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988. This path-breaking study of a black community analyzes the origins of separate black institutions.

Donald R. Wright. *African Americans in the Early Republic, 1789–1831*. Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1993. This is a brief but comprehensive account that reflects recent interpretations.

TIMELINE



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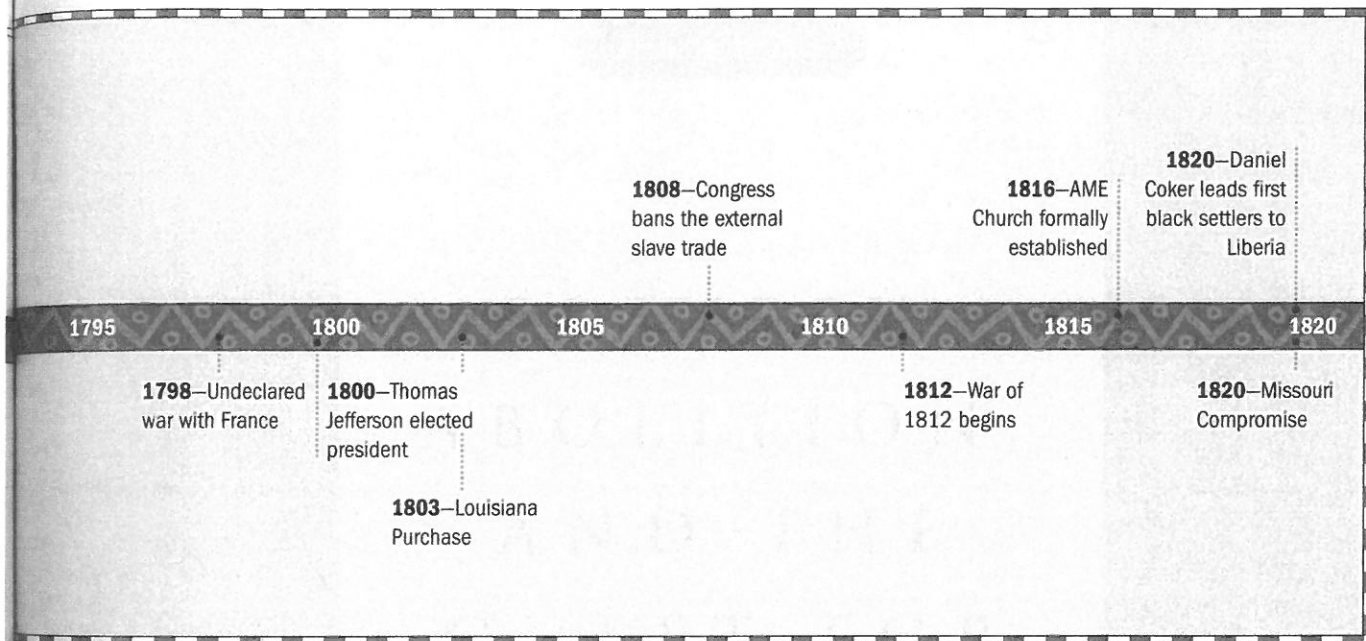
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