

defense of their sovereign." Hoping to lay the matter to rest, he volunteered that "Lord Dunmore's proclamation should be laid on the table, that, if reprehensible, it might be attended to." Despite North's public disavowal of attempts to incite a slave insurrection, the temptation to employ slaves in some capacity remained, particularly in the South, whose huge black population made slaves a potentially powerful political, psychological, and military weapon.

Aware of the dangers inherent in such a plan, and with the memory of the public controversy still fresh in mind, the government proceeded cautiously. But the British path toward the military employment of slaves was smoothed by the decision of Americans to accept volunteered slaves for military service. . . .

At the outbreak of the American Revolution several colonies, all of them in the North, accepted blacks in militia units. Blacks were with the patriot forces at Lexington and Concord and at Bunker Hill. Several served with Connecticut units during the Boston campaign. At the time of the Lexington engagement, however, rumors that slaves were mobilizing to massacre the citizens left defenseless when the militia marched off to fight caused such panic among white citizens that the Massachusetts Committee of Safety decided in May to prohibit the enlistment of slaves in any of the colony's armies. Five days after he was appointed commander in chief of the Continental Army, George Washington, the Virginia slaveholder, issued orders against enlisting blacks, although those already in the army were allowed to remain. In a move that suggests the degree to which white attitudes toward slavery had hardened as a result of British "tampering" and escalating slave resistance, Edward Rutledge, who represented South Carolina at the Continental Congress, moved that all blacks, whether slave or free, be discharged from the Continental Army; although the motion was "strongly supported" by southern delegates, it failed. The actuality of black insurrection in Virginia, however, gave the delegates second thoughts and on November 12, 1775, the Continental Congress formally declared all blacks, slave or free, ineligible for military service. Similar policies were subsequently approved by the other northern states.

But the weight of common sense and military necessity compelled the abandonment of the policy. Despite his own repugnance for using slaves as soldiers, Washington was among the first to recognize that slavery had become a military weakness because of the willingness of slaves to fight for the enemy. Dunmore must be crushed instantly, he earnestly urged his countrymen, "otherwise, like a snowball, in rolling, his army will get size." Convinced that the outcome of the war hinged "on which side can arm the Negroes the faster," Washington publicly advocated the recruitment of blacks into the Continental Army, otherwise "they may seek employ in the ministerial army." His great influence in support of the military employment of blacks persuaded the cautious Continental Congress to agree to allow the enrollment of free blacks, although the exclusion of slaves from American armies continued.

Although Dunmore had not created slave rebellion but merely exploited it, the crisis created by his reception and use of black soldiers worked by no means entirely to the disadvantage of America. By blaming Dunmore for inciting slaves to rebellion, colonists found a strong stick with which to beat their opponents. The "dread of instigated Insurrections" combined with the hardening of attitudes after Lexington and Concord were, even to a moderate like Henry Laurens, "causes sufficient to drive an oppressed People to the use of Arms." Paradoxically, white Americans found as well

a rationalization for their own incorporation of slaves, rendered necessary by a rapidly developing manpower shortage. When in 1777 Congress began to impose troop quotas on the states, a number of New England towns and state governments began quietly enrolling blacks, although their enlistment was not yet legally sanctioned. . . . Rhode Island, with a population of little better than fifty-one thousand whites and the British in possession of most of the state, including the capital city of Newport, had difficulty in filling its quota. . . . Prompted by the seeming hopelessness of the situation, the legislature approved slave enlistments. Promised freedom in return for service during the duration of the war, some two hundred and fifty slaves joined Rhode Island's black battalion. Similar problems . . . led Connecticut to form an all-black company. . . . By the end of 1777 free blacks and slaves were serving in mixed regiments in a number of states, most of them in the North.

Eager to escape blame for having first resorted to the use of slaves, Lord North later claimed that it was the American decision to enlist blacks that forced Britain to follow suit. In fact the precipitating factor was the decision made in 1778 to shift the seat of the war to the South. During the revolutionary war, Britain pursued a variety of strategies for ending the rebellion: by subduing New England; by securing the Middle Colonies; by pacifying the South. Although the shifting strategies were often marked by confusion, by 1778 operations in the southern colonies clearly occupied the principal place in British planning. Britain's Southern strategy finally emerged with three crucial components: to enlist the help of loyalists to defeat the rebels and to hold territory once it was liberated by British regular forces; to weaken rebel resistance by depriving the South of its labor force and by cutting off southern resources, such as tobacco, rice and indigo, the exportation of which helped attract foreign capital and thus sustained the rebellion; to exploit pro-British Indian tribes along the southern frontiers and the tens of thousands of slaves concentrated in the tidewater and the low country. The groundswell of slave resistance that both preceded and accompanied the gradual crystallization of the strategy, played an instrumental role in Britain's decision to gamble on the dangerous expedient of recruiting slaves for military service as well as in the American decision for independence.

Start here → The Revolution in Black Life

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The years between 1770 and 1810 were a formative period for Afro-American culture. The confluence of three events—freedom for large numbers of blacks with the abolition of slavery in the North and large-scale manumission in parts of the South; the maturation of a native-born Afro-American population after more than a century of American captivity; and a new, if short-lived, flexibility in white racial attitudes—made these years the pivot point in the development of black life in the United States. The social patterns and institutions established during the revolutionary era

simultaneously confirmed the cultural transformation of the preceding century and shaped black life well into the twentieth century. In many ways, the revolutionary era, far more than the much studied Reconstruction period, laid the foundation for modern Afro-American life.

The events and ideas of the revolutionary years radically altered the structure of black society and the substance of Afro-American culture. The number of blacks enjoying freedom swelled under the pressure of revolutionary change, from a few thousand in the 1760s to almost two-hundred thousand by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century. Freedom even within the limited bounds of white domination, enhanced black opportunities by creating new needs and allowing blacks a chance to draw on the rapidly maturing Afro-American culture to fulfill them. But the revolution in black life was not confined to those legally free. The forces unleashed by the American Revolution soon reached beyond the bounds of free black society and deeply influenced the course of slave life in the critical years before the great migration to the Lower South. Most importantly, the revolution in black life created new and enlarged older regional distinctions between the black populations, free and slave, of the North, the Upper South, and the Lower South. In each of these regions, differences in the size, character, and dynamics of development of the free and slave black populations bred distinctive patterns of relations with whites and among blacks, shaping the development of black life and American race relations during the nineteenth century and beyond.

The growth of the free Negro population was one of the most far reaching events of the revolutionary era. Before the Revolution only a tiny fraction of the black population enjoyed liberty in English mainland North America. A 1755 Maryland census, one of the few enumerations of colonial freemen, counted slightly more than 1,800 free Negroes, who composed about 4 percent of the colony's black population and less than 2 percent of its free population. Moreover, over 80 percent of these freemen were of mixed racial origin, and more than one-fifth were cripples or old folk deemed "past labour." Few full-blooded Africans found their way to freedom. . . . Although colonial freemen demand further study, it appears that Maryland's free Negroes typified those found throughout the mainland English colonies. . . .

Although few in number and much like whites in appearance, free Negroes raised white fears of subversion. During the colonial years, lawmakers steadily gnawed at the freemen's liberty, taxing them with numerous proscriptions on their civil, political, and social rights. On the eve of the Revolution, few whites, even those who opposed slavery, showed any inclination to increase the number of Negro freemen. But the events of the revolutionary years moved in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways. As the war dragged on, military necessity forced the British and them, more reluctantly, Americans to muster black slaves into their armies by offering them freedom in exchange for their services.

The British, who had no direct interest in slavery, first offered the exchange. In November 1775, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, declared martial law and freed all slaves that were able and willing to bear arms in His Majesty's service. Even though this declaration shook colonial Virginians, it came as no surprise. Dunmore and other British officials had been threatening such action for several months. Slaves, ever alive to the possibilities of liberty, quickly picked up these first

rumblings of freedom. Some months earlier, a group of blacks had visited Dunmore and offered to join him and take up arms. At that time, Dunmore brusquely dismissed them. But the blacks would not be put off, and when Dunmore officially tendered the promise of liberty, they flocked to British headquarters in Norfolk harbor.

Defeat deflated Dunmore's promise of liberty. In December, about a month after his proclamation, patriot troops routed Loyalist forces, including a large number of blacks wearing sashes emblazoned with the words "Liberty to Slaves." The loss broke the back of Dunmore's attempt to discipline rebellious Virginians. . . .

The manpower shortage that forced Dunmore to use black troops worsened as the war dragged on. British commanders, despite popular opposition in England, increasingly followed Dunmore's lead and recruited slaves. When the war turned south in 1778, thousands of blacks flocked to the British standard. General Henry Clinton, the British commander-in-chief, officially promised liberty to all slaves who deserted their masters for British service. In the years that followed, British reliance on black manpower increased, and the proponents of utilizing black military might on a massive scale grew ever more vocal. . . .

Colonial commanders and policymakers were considerably more chary about accepting slave recruits. Many were large slaveholders who had much to lose from any disruption of slavery. Most feared that a servile revolt or a mass defection of slaveholders would follow the arming of blacks. Although blacks had occasionally served in colonial militias and distinguished themselves in the first battles of the Revolution, the Continental Congress, at South Carolina's instigation, barred them from the Continental army. But patriots proved no more immune to the exigencies of war than the British. As the struggle for independence lengthened and manpower grew critically short, the patriot policy shifted. The northern states, led by New England, began to solicit black recruits, and Rhode Island created a black regiment. When the war moved south, Upper South states grudgingly adopted a similar course of action: in spite of their larger black populations and greater dependence on slave labor, Maryland authorized slave enlistments and eventually subjected free Negroes to the draft. Virginia allowed black freemen to serve in its army and navy, and Delaware and North Carolina, following Virginia, occasionally permitted slaves to stand as substitutes for their masters. In the Lower South, however, white resistance to arming blacks stiffened. The numerical superiority of blacks in the lowland rice swamps, the large numbers of newly arrived African slaves, and the commonplace absenteeism bred an overpowering fear of slave rebellion. Despite the pleas of the Continental Congress and the urgings of commanders in the field, South Carolina and Georgia rejected the hesitant measures adopted in the Upper South. . . .

Almost everywhere, the war widened opportunities for blacks to gain their liberty. When the British left America at the end of the war, they carried thousands of blacks to freedom in Great Britain, the West Indies, Canada, and, eventually, Africa. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others that were freed by British wartime policy eluded their masters and remained in the United States. There is "reason to believe," petitioned angry white Virginians in 1781, "that a great number of slaves which were taken by the British Army are now passing in this Country as free men." Many blacks who fought with the patriots also secured their liberty. Some grateful masters freed their slaves, and occasionally state legislatures liberated individual bondsmen by special enactment. . . .

Whatever the effects of official British and American policy, the chaos created by rampaging armies did even more to expand a slave's chances for liberty. The actions of soldiers of both belligerents, and the often violent disputes between patriot and Tory militiamen, created near anarchic conditions, revealed the limits of slaveholder authority, and encouraged slaves to take their freedom. Runaways, previously few in number, increased rapidly in the confusion of the war. This was especially true in the Upper South, where the nature of agriculture had allowed second and third generation Afro-Americans to gain broad familiarity with the countryside. At war's end, these fugitives also passed into the growing free black population.

The war did not last long enough to destroy slavery, but the libertarian ideology that patriots used to justify their rebellion continued to challenge it when the war ended. If all men were created equal, why were some men still slaves? . . .

Slavery fell first in New England, where blacks were few in number and never an important part of the labor force or a threat to white dominance. In the Middle Atlantic states, where blacks were more numerous and bondage more deeply entrenched than in New England, slavery proved more resistant to revolutionary change. But an influx of white immigrant workers assured employers of an adequate supply of labor, and undermined the most persuasive argument against abolition. By 1804, every northern state had provided for eventual emancipation.

Still, slavery died hard. In 1810, almost 30,000 blacks—almost a quarter of the region's black population—remained in chattel bondage. Although that number fell dramatically in succeeding decades, slavery continued. There were over 1,000 bondsmen in the "free" states in 1840. Moreover, in many of the new northern states, slaveholders and their allies tried to overthrow the antislavery provisions of the Northwest Ordinance and reinstate the peculiar institution. Failing that, they enacted various forms of long-term indentureships, which allowed chattel bondage to flourish covertly until the Civil War. Nevertheless, slavery was doomed, and the mass of Northern black people had been freed.

South of Pennsylvania, emancipation faced still greater obstacles, and, in the long run, these difficulties proved insuperable. But the Christian egalitarianism unleashed by the evangelical revivals of the mid-eighteenth century complemented and strengthened the idealism of the Revolution in many parts of the South. Like revolutionary ideology, the religious awakenings transcended sectional boundaries. Methodists and Baptist evangelicals crisscrossed the southern states and, in hundreds of camp meetings, made thousands of converts. Propelled by the revolutionary idea that all men were equal in the sight of God, they frequently accepted black and white converts with equal enthusiasm. The equality of the communion table proved contagious, and some evangelicals broke the confines of other-worldly concerns to make the connection between spiritual and secular equality. Methodists, Baptists, and other evangelical sectarians joined with Quakers to become the mainstays of the southern antislavery movement. Like their northern counterparts, they organized antislavery societies, petitioned legislatures, and aided freedom suits.

Economic changes in the Upper South, especially in Maryland, Delaware, and northern Virginia, offered emancipationists an opening wedge. Beginning in the 1760s, the increased worldwide demand for foodstuff encouraged planters to expand cereal production. Dislocations in mercantile ties, resulting from the war and

the depression that accompanied independence, further speeded the shift from tobacco to cereal agriculture in many parts of the Chesapeake region. This change reduced the demand for slaves, since wheat culture on small units under the existing technology thrived on free labor. Many farmers found themselves burdened with a surplus of slaves. Moreover, the agricultural transformation and the resultant establishment of new methods of processing and development of new patterns of marketing quickened the pace of commerce, stimulated the growth of light industry, and swelled urban centers. Baltimore, Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg grew as never before. In all, changes in the agricultural landscape increased commercial activity, and nascent urbanization and industrialization profoundly altered the region. Many Americans believed that the Upper South would follow the pattern of development exemplified by Pennsylvania, and not the states farther south. As the price of slaves sagged under the weight of these changes, the future of slavery became an open question. . . .

The economic transformation of the Upper South supported freedom in other less direct ways. The growing number of tenant farmers and independent tradesmen in the region, often in need of an extra hand and rarely in a position to purchase slaves, frequently employed blacks, with few questions asked. The ability to find a safe haven, even for a few days, could make the difference between a successful flight and a return to bondage. The success of many fugitives, like relatively indiscriminate manumission, not only enlarged the free black population, but darkened it as well. The larger, darker-skinned free Negro population canonized fugitives, increased their chances of success, and encouraged still other blacks to make their way from slavery to freedom. The increase in runaways began during the tumult of the Revolution continued into the postwar years.

Slavery easily survived the increase of manumissions and runaways, recovered its balance, and in most places continued to grow. But the social changes of the revolutionary era profoundly altered the size and character of the free Negro population in the Upper South, and sent reverberations of liberty into the region's slave quarters.

The growth of the free Negro population can be most clearly viewed in Maryland. Between 1755 and 1790, the number of free Negroes in that state increased almost 350 percent, to about 8,000, and in the following decade it again more than doubled. By 1810, almost a quarter of Maryland's blacks were free, numbering nearly 34,000. Although not immediately apparent, slavery in Maryland had been dealt a mortal blow.

Free Negroes registered similar gains throughout the Upper South. In 1782, the year Virginia legalized private manumissions, St. George Tucker estimated the number of freemen in his state at about 2,000. By 1790, Virginia's free Negroes had increased to 12,000. Ten years later, Negro freemen numbered 20,000, and by 1810, the total stood at over 30,000. During the twenty years between 1790 and 1810, the free Negro population of Virginia more than doubled. In all, the number of Negro freemen in the Upper South grew almost 90 percent between 1790 and 1800, and another 65 percent in the following decade, so that freemen now composed more than 10 percent of the region's black population. . . .

The social forces that transformed black society in the North and in the Upper South met stern resistance in the Lower South. There, economic and demographic

Free Negro Population, 1790-1810

	1790	1800	1810
United States	59,466	108,395	186,466
North	27,109	47,154	78,181
South	32,357	61,241	108,285
Upper South	30,158	56,855	94,085
Lower South	2,199	4,386	14,180*

* Increase in the Lower South between 1800 and 1810 is largely due to the accession of Louisiana.
Source: *Population of the United States in 1860* (Washington, DC, 1869), pp. 600-601.

considerations countered the ideology of the Revolution and the great revivals. . . . Following the war, Lower South whites imported thousands of slaves from the states to the north and, in 1803, South Carolina reopened the slave trade with Africa. Not until the 1790s, when the successful black revolution in Saint Domingue sent hundreds of light-skinned *gens de couleur* fleeing for American shores, did the number of free Negroes increase significantly in the Lower South. Thus, unlike northern and Upper South freemen, Lower South free people of color remained a tiny mulatto fragment of the larger black population.

In transforming the structure of black society, the events of the revolutionary years created new, and enlarged older, regional distinctions between the black populations of the North, the Upper South, and the Lower South. By the end of the century, northern whites had committed themselves to emancipation, and the great majority of blacks enjoyed freedom. Upper South slavery, on the other hand, withstood the challenges of the revolutionary years, but its free black population expanded rapidly during the period, so that better than one black in ten was free by 1800. Slavery in the Lower South, although greatly disrupted by the war, never faced the direct emancipationist pressures present in the North or even the Upper South. It stood almost unchallenged throughout the postwar period, quickly recouped its wartime losses, and entered into a period of its greatest expansion. Lower South free people of color remained as they had been in the colonial era, a small appendage to a rapidly increasing slave population. . . . These regional distinctions in the structure of both slave and free black societies reflected and influenced white racial attitudes and shaped the development of black life in the years to come. . . .

Structural and cultural changes in black society profoundly influenced white attitudes and behavior. In the long run, they stiffened white racism. With so many blacks in possession of freedom, whites could no longer rely on their status alone to distinguish themselves from a people they despised. They began to grope for new ways to subordinate Negro freemen and set themselves apart from all blacks. Thus as the free Negro population grew, whites curbed their mobility, limited their economic opportunities, all but obliterated many of their political rights, and schemed to deport freemen from the country. Yet, the Revolution, with its emphasis on equality, forced whites to reconsider their racial values. This reconsideration produced a new flexibility in the racial attitudes of some whites and a brief recession in the color line. The liberalization of manumission codes, the passage of antiskidnapping laws,

the increased number of free Negroes, and the challenge to slavery all reflected small, but real, changes in white racial attitudes. These changes allowed blacks some room to maneuver in a society that was often hostile to their very being. Nevertheless, racism remained a potent force in revolutionary America. The society and culture that emerged from this first attempt to remake black life in America represented an easing of white racial hostility within a system of continued racial oppression.

The cumulative impact of freedom, cultural maturation, and the new flexibility in white attitudes unleashed the creative energies of black people. Newly freed blacks moved at once to give meaning to their freshly won liberty and form to the cultural transformation of black life in America. They took new names, established new residential and occupational patterns, reconstructed their family life, chose the first recognizable leadership class, and developed new institutions and modes of social action. . . .

Although accompanied by proscription and exclusion, freedom also created new opportunities, often for slaves as well as freemen. It allowed some blacks to attain positions from which all blacks previously had been barred. Suddenly blacks took the role of a painter, poet, author, astronomer, minister, and merchant. The almanacs of Benjamin Banneker, the poems of Phillis Wheatly and Jupiter Hammon, and the portraits of Joshua Johnston stand not only as tributes to the achievements of talented men and women, but also as symbols of the cultural transformation of the revolutionary era.

The new opportunities of freedom also allowed some freemen to accumulate property and achieve a modicum of economic security. William Flora, a revolutionary veteran, purchased several lots in Portsmouth, Virginia, soon after his discharge from the army. Later he opened a livery stable, served Portsmouth for thirty years, and willed his property to his son. In 1783, James McHenry, a Maryland shoemaker, purchased his freedom, and four years later rented a farm for \$35 a year and had "a house and other stock more than sufficient for his farm." Henry Carter, a Virginia freeman, was similarly successful. He was emancipated in 1811, and within six years not only had "funds sufficient to purchase his wife Priscilla but some other property, personal & real." Throughout the nation the growth of a black property-holding class followed the growth of the free Negro population. In some places, freemen controlled sizable businesses. The striking success of sea captain Paul Cuffee of New Bedford, Massachusetts, sail manufacturer James Forten of Philadelphia, and merchant Robert Sheridan of Wilmington, North Carolina, suggests how quickly blacks took advantage of the expanding, if still limited, opportunities created by freedom. Although most blacks remained, as in slavery, poor and propertyless, some freemen rose to modest wealth and respectability.

Slowly, a new black elite emerged: Prince Hall in Boston, Richard Allen in Philadelphia, Daniel Coker in Baltimore, Christopher McPherson in Richmond, Andrew Bryan in Savannah, and a host of others in black communities throughout the new republic. Born in the decade before the Revolution, these men came of age with the emergence of the free Negro population and the maturation of Afro-American culture. Many of them owed their liberty to the changes unleashed by the American Revolution, and they shared the optimism and enthusiasm that accompanied freedom. Wealthier and better educated than most blacks, they moved

easily into positions of leadership within the black community and pressed whites to expand black liberty. Pointing to the ideas of the Declaration of Independence, the new black elite provided the leadership in petitioning Congress and state legislatures to abolish slavery and relieve free blacks of the disabilities that prevented them from enjoying their full rights as citizens. Norfolk freemen, in a typical action, requested that they be allowed to testify in court against whites so they could prove their accounts. Boston blacks demanded an equal share of the city's school fund so they might educate their children. South Carolina's free Negroes petitioned for relief from a special head tax that pushed them into a condition "but small removed from Slavery." And from Nashville, Tennessee, came a plea that free Negroes "ought to have the same opportunities of doing well that any Person being a citizen & free . . . would have, and that the door ought not be kept shut against them more than any other of the Human race." In the North, blacks, themselves but recently liberated, urged an end to the slave trade and the establishment of a universal emancipation. Occasionally, a few bold southern freemen like Baltimore's Daniel Coker added their voices to this public condemnation of slavery. These freemen protested in vain. Even the most restrained pleas led to harsher repression, further anchoring them to the bottom of free society. . . .

Frustrated by unyielding white hostility, freemen took two divergent courses. Some turned away from slaves in an effort to ingratiate themselves with whites, by trying to demonstrate they were more free than black. This strategy was especially evident in—although not limited to—the Lower South, where ties between freemen and slaves had never been strong and where many of the newly arrived *gens de couleur* had suffered heavy losses at the hands of the Haitian slave rebels. During the 1790s, the free people of color in Charleston established the Brown Fellowship Society, an organization limited to free brown people, and one which remained a symbol of mulatto exclusiveness throughout the antebellum period.

Most freemen, especially in the North and Upper South, took a different course. Increasingly, they turned inward and worked to strengthen the black community—free and slave. Freemen, frequently joined by slaves, established institutions where blacks might pray, educate their children, entertain, and protect themselves. African churches, schools, and fraternal societies not only served the new needs of the much expanded free Negro population and gave meaning to black liberty, but they also symbolized the emergence of Afro-American culture and represented the strongest effort to unite the black community.

Yet, even while they shouldered the new responsibilities of freedom, blacks did not immediately form separate institutions. The development of the African church, for example, was not merely a product of the emergence of the free Negro population. At first, most blacks looked to the white-dominated evangelical churches, which made acceptance of the gospel the only criterion for salvation and welcomed blacks into the fold. Free Negroes, along with slaves and poor whites, found this open membership policy, the emotional sermons, and the generous grants of self-expression an appealing contrast to the icy restrictiveness of the older, more staid denominations. Although racially mixed congregations were often forced to meet at odd hours to avoid hostile sheriffs and slave patrols, black membership in these churches grew rapidly. By the end of the eighteenth century, thousands of blacks, free and slave, had joined Methodist and Baptist churches.

The newness of the evangelical denominations together with their Christian egalitarianism fostered new racial patterns. In many such churches, blacks and whites seated themselves indiscriminately. It was not unusual for black churchmen to attend synods and association meetings with whites. In 1794, when one Virginia church called this practice into question, the Portsmouth Baptist Association firmly announced that "it saw nothing in the Word of God nor anything contrary to the rules of decency to prohibit a church from sending as a delegate, any male member they shall choose." Sometimes blacks served as preachers to a mixed congregation. John Chavis, a black Presbyterian circuit rider, enjoyed his greatest success among whites; Fayetteville whites regarded Henry Evans, a black Methodist, as the "best preacher of his time in that quarter"; and when Richard Allen looked down from his Philadelphia pulpit he saw "Nearly . . . as many Whites as Blacks."

Yet the old racial patterns had remarkable resilience. Christian egalitarianism momentarily bent the color line, but could not break it. In most churches, membership did not assure blacks of equal participation. Indeed, whites usually placed blacks in a distant corner or gallery and barred them from most of the rights of church members. One Virginia congregation painted some of its benches black to avoid any possibility of confusion.

As blacks found themselves proscribed from white churches or discriminated against in mixed churches, they attempted the difficult task of forming their own religious institutions. In doing so, blacks not only lacked the capital and organizational experience, but they frequently faced fierce white opposition. This was especially true in the South, where whites identified freemen with slaves and seemed to see every meeting of free blacks, no matter how innocuous, as an insurrectionary plot. The abolition of slavery in the North, in large measure, had freed whites from this fear, allowing blacks greater organizational opportunities. Northern whites frequently took a benign view of black institutions and believed, along with Benjamin Rush, that it would "be much cheaper to build churches for them than jails."

Regional differences in white attitudes allowed blacks to act more openly in the North. While northern freemen quickly established their own churches and schools, southern free blacks, frequently joined by slaves, continued to meet in tense opposition. . . . Despite the rising pitch of white opposition, the number of black churches increased steadily throughout the 1780s and 1790s. . . . The rank discrimination of white-dominated churches fostered black separatism, but some blacks welcomed the split. It allowed them, for the first time, full control over their own religious life. By the end of the century, black communities from Boston to Savannah boasted their own African churches. . . .

During the early years of the nineteenth century, blacks continued to establish new African churches in the northern and border slave states. In 1816, leading black churchmen from various parts of these regions joined together to form the first independent black denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. But if the African church flourished in the North, it fell upon hard times in the South. While the abolition of slavery had freed northern whites from the fear of insurrection, those anxieties grew among white southerners. In 1800, when Gabriel Prosser's aborted insurrection in Virginia nearly transformed the worst fears of southern whites into a dreadful reality, the African church came under still greater pressure. Hysterical whites shut many black churches and forced black ministers to flee the South. Even white churchmen found themselves under attack for proselytizing blacks. When a

white circuit rider tried to preach to a mixed congregation in Richmond in 1802, he was threatened with the lash and driven out of the city. Charleston Methodists similarly found themselves "watched, ridiculed, and openly assailed" for allowing blacks to attend their meetings. The growth of the African church in the South was abruptly halted during the first years of the nineteenth century. Later it would revive under very different conditions.

The early development of African schools followed the same tortuous path as that of the independent black churches. In the years immediately following the Revolutionary War, the momentary respite in racial hostility encouraged some freemen and sympathetic whites to establish integrated academies throughout the North and even in some border states. But the emotions and ideals that united poor whites and blacks in evangelical churches were absent from the founding of schools. Schools were middle- and upper-class institutions, and class distinctions alone doubtless excluded most free blacks. Handicapped by a lack of funds and surrounded by increasingly hostile whites, integrated schools languished. By the turn of the century, the ebbing of revolutionary egalitarianism forced those few remaining integrated schools to close their doors or segregate their classrooms. The support of black schools fell largely on black communities. African schools, usually attached to black churches, continued to meet in the North, and in some places increased in size and number. But in the South, they faced intense opposition from whites, who viewed them as nurseries of subversion. . . .

The dismantling of African churches and schools suggests the intensity of white opposition to the development of independent black institutions wherever slavery continued to exist. Yet, even as whites closed black churches and schools and slapped new proscriptions on black liberty in order to freeze blacks into a place of permanent social inferiority, they could not erase all the gains made in the first flush of freedom. In the North, African churches and schools continued to grow and occasionally flourish, and even in the South some of these institutions limped on, although often forced to accept white supervision or meet clandestinely.

On the surface, African churches and schools and allied benevolent and fraternal societies were but a weak imitation of those of the larger society. Often they reflected white values and mimicked the structure of their white counterparts. But, on closer inspection, they embodied an Afro-American culture that was over a century in the making. Whites who visited black church meetings or attended black funerals almost uniformly observed the striking difference between them and their own somber rituals. It was no accident that blacks called their churches African churches, their schools African schools, and their benevolent societies African benevolent societies.

These organizations provided an institutional core for black life throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. In African churches and schools, black people baptized their children, educated their youth, and provided for the sick, aged, and disabled. African churches strengthened black family life by insisting that marriages be solemnized, by punishing adulterers, and occasionally by reuniting separated couples. Leaders of these institutions, especially ministers, moved into dominant positions in the black community, and African churches, in turn, provided a means of advancement for ambitious black youth. More than this, these institutions gave the black community a sense of solidarity and common purpose.

At no time was this more evident than in the postrevolutionary era, when slaves and freemen joined together to re-form black society and give shape to the cultural transformation of the preceding century. Later, free Negroes and slaves would drift apart, and many of the institutions formed during this earlier era would become identified with the free blacks and urban slave artisans who placed them at the center of black life in the North and urban South. But the new social and institutional forms established during the years after the Revolution were not lost for the mass of enslaved black people. The changes set in motion by the Revolution permeated slave life in ways that are only barely recognized now. The new occupational, religious, and familial patterns and the new social roles and modes of social action established by the convergence of changes in Afro-American and Anglo-American life during the revolutionary era continued to inform slave society, as the great cotton boom pulled slaves out of the seaboard states and into the Lower South. The revolution in black life spread across the continent. On the rich, loamy soils of the cotton South, slaves reshaped the cultural legacy of the revolutionary era to meet the new needs of plantation life. And with the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth Amendment, the transformed institutional and cultural legacy of the revolutionary era emerged once again and stood at the center of black life.

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