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# **The Black American Revolution: The American Revolution as Experienced by African Americans**

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on how the American Revolution mobilized the enslaved and free Black population in a way that constitutes a "Black American Revolution." In particular, the enslaved population engaged in multiple efforts for freedom, ranging from fighting in the Revolutionary War to writing petitions to state legislatures. First, I present how the "slavery metaphor" propagated by white Loyalists indicates the inherent differences in how the white and Black populations experienced the Revolution. There is an overall discussion of the various methods the enslaved used in their attempts to gain freedom: military service, slave petitions, freedom suits, and escape. I also examine the surge of free Black communities as a result of the Revolution, helped by white abolitionist allies. Additionally, the impact the Revolution had on slavery as an institution is assessed in both the North and South. Finally, the overall success of the Black American Revolution is determined.

On August 23rd, 1776, nearing the Battle of Long Island between American and British troops, General George Washington inspirationally ordered his Continental Army, “Remember officers and soldiers, that you are free men, fighting for the blessings of Liberty — that slavery will be your portion, and that of your posterity, if you do not acquit yourselves like men.”<sup>1</sup> Washington’s army faced defeat in this particular battle, but nonetheless this indicates something quite clear about the American Revolution: liberty was one of its leading ideals and goals, one of such importance that it remains a part of the ideals of the nation. But this statement and similar ones made in Revolutionary America say more than just what is plainly stated due to the usage of the word “slavery.” By mentioning slavery, Washington was telling his army that if they lose this battle, they and America’s future generations will become “slaves.” While the colonists on the side of American independence used words like “slavery” to describe their subjugation under the British, half a million non-metaphorical slaves were in the colonies belonging to many of the men saying the same rhetoric, George Washington included.

The glaring contradiction runs clear: the same individuals who wanted freedom from Britain were denying the freedom of those they had enslaved. This is not to say that all of the founding fathers necessarily enjoyed the institution of slavery. In fact, Washington himself had gradually begun to indicate support for abolition in his private remarks. Even still, they were all dependent on it in some capacity. Slavery was deeply ingrained in Colonial American life, so much so that it had a considerable impact on social classes and the economy, especially in the South. In the mid-18th century, there was a “transformation of the southern colonies from societies with slaves into slave societies,” while slave labor’s economic importance decreased in

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<sup>1</sup> George Washington, General Orders. August 23rd, 1776. New York. *National Archives*.

the northern colonies.<sup>2</sup> At this time, the system was not necessarily racially based but was seen as another form of servitude similar to indentured servants. However, nearing the end of the 18th century, the system turned into a “coherent racist doctrine,” in which southerners perpetuated racist myths about Black people in order to proclaim their superiority over them.<sup>3</sup> The start of the revolution brought to light its contradictory ideals, and some colonists were afraid of being subject to chattel and/or political slavery by the British, despite their own practice of it. As a result, the revolution itself would come to influence this shift from a form of servitude into a racially based slavery system, as southerners used the myth of a racial hierarchy to try and justify these contradictions.

The usage of the slavery metaphor by white Patriots itself exemplifies the stark difference between the white and Black populations in Revolutionary-era America. The American Revolution, therefore, was “split” into two – one revolution experienced by the white colonists, and another experienced by the people they enslaved. Slavery was the reality for African Americans, so they were seeking *emancipation* rather than simply independence. Clearly, the Black side of the revolution was not a fight against political slavery, but the chattel slavery they had endured for more than a hundred years by this point. As a result, although both groups may have had the goal of “freedom,” what this meant was widely different between them. For the Patriots, it meant being able to represent themselves under their own independent government and country. For the enslaved, it was freedom from the fundamental stripping of their personhood. They believed that freedom was one’s birthright, while white Americans evaded the

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<sup>2</sup> Duncan J. MacLeod, “Toward Caste,” *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1983), 229.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

question of natural rights by seeing Black people as an outgroup removed from the overall body.<sup>4</sup> Most of the ideals of the American Revolution are made well known through the publication of *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine in 1776. Paine, a strong proponent of the Patriot cause, wanted “immediate independence, a union of thirteen states, and republican governments for those states.”<sup>5</sup> Further, the impact of the revolution is well-known and studied, as it led to the establishment of the new American government and the country’s successful independence. The way that the revolution impacted the white population, especially white men with property, came through in concrete ways as they held political power. However, this was of course not the case for the Black population. While the Patriots successfully gained independence, slaves were still fighting for emancipation through serving in the military on both sides of the Revolutionary War, writing petitions, engaging in freedom suits, and through the growing abolitionist movement – all of which constitutes a separate “Black American Revolution,” in which the Black population experienced the American Revolution fundamentally different than the white population.

This paper will be focused on primary source documents from various sources, most significantly from the enslaved through one autobiography and multiple petitions and freedom suits from 1765 to 1800. There will also be writings from white Patriots to demonstrate their reaction to an increase in anti-slavery rhetoric as well as their usage of the slavery metaphor in Revolutionary America. Changes in state laws regarding slaves will be discussed as they experienced multiple changes throughout the revolution, especially in the northern colonies. Therefore, although the paper is not focused on the North, sources and examples from northern colonies will receive significantly more attention. Additionally, the paper will be organized

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Quarles, “The Revolutionary War as a Black Declaration of Independence,” *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1983), 293.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 157.

thematically. First, it will focus on the methods of the enslaved population to gain freedom, then the increase in the free Black population and abolitionism, and then finally the consequences overall in the North and South, respectively, and the ultimate success of the revolution for Black people.

There has been a shift in the way historians study the revolution, especially when it comes to the groups involved and who the revolution benefited the most. Earlier historians studying the American Revolution did so with romanticism and oftentimes were focused on the founding fathers. Additionally, historians prior to the 1900s were more concerned with the political and military aspects of the revolution. Franklin Jameson's "American Revolution Considered As a Social Movement" in 1925 not only caused a shift to studying the results of the revolution rather than its origins, but he also claimed that, "the strength of the revolutionary party lay most largely in the plain people, as distinguished from the aristocracy."<sup>6</sup> There was even more of a shift in the mid-1960s with Jesse Lemisch's "The American Revolution Seen From the Bottom Up" in which he questioned what the "ordinary folk" were doing "while the elites were thinking great thoughts."<sup>7</sup> This shift allowed for more discussion amongst historians for other groups within the population that had not received an equal amount of scholarly attention. This included African Americans and therefore the study of how "many African Americans took all the talk about freedom as a call to action of their own."<sup>8</sup> In the 1970s, Edmund S. Morgan argued in "American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia" that "the rise of liberty and equality in this country was accompanied by the rise of

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<sup>6</sup> John Franklin Jameson, *American Revolution Considered As a Social Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 18.

<sup>7</sup> John E. Selby, "Revolutionary America: The Historiography," *OAH Magazine of History* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 5-7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25162978>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

slavery” which he called “the central paradox in American history.”<sup>9</sup> Further, more historians like Ira Berlin and Benjamin Quarles posed the idea of a revolution that was separate from the whole that specifically impacted Black people.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the shift from studying the revolution based on its leaders to studying the involvement of ordinary people made way for the acknowledgment of other groups. These groups, including Black Americans, had their own motivations and involvement that was separate from the general white population’s.

The usage of slavery as a metaphor is a prime indication of how differently the white and Black populations experienced the revolution. In the 1760s, John Dickinson wrote in *Letters from a Farmer*, “Those who are taxed without their own consent, given by themselves or their representatives, are slaves. We are taxed without our own consent given by ourselves, or our representatives. We are therefore—I speak it with grief—I speak it with indignation—we are slaves.”<sup>11</sup> This rhetoric was not unique during the revolution; in fact, using the word “slavery” was quite common amongst the Patriots to describe the American colonies under British rule. This is especially true after the passing of the Stamp Act of 1765, which had “forced North Americans to make an evaluation of their relationship with Britain.”<sup>12</sup> This also was not an ironic usage of the word. The word “slavery” was used because white colonists could compare their situation to an institution that was already present in their society. The metaphor implies that there was a common understanding of what exactly it meant to be a “slave” to another power. As Patricia Bradley argues, the slavery metaphor indicates that referencing slavery “brought to the

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred F. Young and Gregory Nobles, *Whose American Revolution Was It?: Historians Interpret the Founding* (NYU Press, 2011), 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>11</sup> John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer; in Pennsylvania, to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J. Almon, 1768), 74-76.

<sup>12</sup> F. Nwabueze Okoye, “Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Jan. 1980): 4.

political meaning a colonial context beyond hyperbole."<sup>13</sup> The metaphor's usage in written publications, for example, was a propaganda tool to motivate white colonists in their rebellion against the British. Because slavery existed in the country in its literal form, using the metaphor "heightened the perceived threat and thus advanced the patriots' cause."<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, it also made said cause more vulnerable to those pointing out its contradictory nature. The slavery metaphor emboldened the patriots to declare independence, but it also influenced some abolitionist sentiments amongst those who criticized its usage. For example, in 1774, abolitionist preacher Nathaniel Niles said in a sermon, "Let us either cease to enslave our fellow-men, or else let us cease to complain of those that would enslave us."<sup>15</sup> Similar abolitionists would mimic this rhetoric by pointing out how the patriots complained of slavery while actively practicing it. Regardless, however, Dickinson's pamphlet and the metaphor in general were popular during the Revolutionary era. *Letters from a Farmer* had received more attention than previous political writing and was one of the most popular until Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*.<sup>16</sup>

Although the slavery metaphor is more often seen as being in reference to political slavery, through the belief that Britain had complete political control over the colonies, it is also referencing chattel slavery. This is seen through the usage of phrases such as "cruel bondage," and "absolute slavery."<sup>17</sup> Using these phrases while also practicing slavery was not necessarily a

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<sup>13</sup> Patricia Bradley, *Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Peter A. Dorsey, "To 'Corroborate Our Own Claims': Public Positioning and the Slavery Metaphor in Revolutionary America", *American Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (September 2003): 353-386. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30041981>

<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Niles, "Two Discourses on Liberty," (Sermon, Newburyport, MA, June 5, 1774), Evans Early American Imprint Collection, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N10656.0001.001>.

<sup>16</sup> Carl F. Kaestle, "The Public Reaction to John Dickinson's Farmer's Letters," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 78, no. 2 (1968): 326.

<sup>17</sup> Okoye, "Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries," 5.



matter of a lack of self-awareness. Slave owners did not see the “slavery” they experienced under the British and the chattel slavery of Africans as being equivalent. Instead, they feared that the two would eventually *become* equivalent if America continued to be ruled by Britain. As George Washington would write in a letter in 1774, “The crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights, or submit to every imposition that can be heaped upon us; till custom and use will make us as tame and abject slaves as the Blacks we rule over.”<sup>18</sup> This fear directly positions the slavery metaphor as the dividing line between a white Patriot version and an enslaved version of the American Revolution. Their positions were fundamentally different, and so too were their understandings of what the revolution could potentially bring.

Because there are these two “versions,” Black people had different methods in comparison to the Patriot population. Although, one method technically shared between them was serving in the army during the Revolutionary War. Slaves served on both the Patriot and Loyalist sides with varying success. Britain had made some movements towards the abolition of slavery, and although this did not happen to its full extent until the 1830s, this did incite hope in slaves and fear in white colonists.<sup>19</sup> In particular, when Britain allowed slaves to fight in the British army, there was a fear amongst slave owners that arming slaves would lead to an armed slave revolt. As a result of these fears, George Washington banned all Black men, both free and enslaved, from joining the Continental Army in 1775.<sup>20</sup> In response, the Royal Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, saw this as an opportunity to bring more people to the side of the British. He issued a proclamation that same year in which he stated, “I do hereby further declare all indentured servants, negroes, or others, free that are able and willing to bear arms” for the

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<sup>18</sup> George Washington, letter to Bryan Fairfax, August 24th, 1774.

<sup>19</sup> Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

British.<sup>21</sup> An estimated 800 to 1000 slaves fled from their masters' homes directly after Dunmore's Proclamation and hundreds would continue to do so throughout the war. Dunmore formed the Royal Ethiopian Regiment, consisting of an estimated 300 escaped slaves. Inscribed on their uniforms were the words "Liberty to Slaves."<sup>22</sup>

Virginians, feeling angry and betrayed by the Royal Governor, responded with their own ordinance that outlined the punishment for slaves found fighting for the British. It stated that Virginia would have "full power and authority to transport such slave, or slaves, to any of the foreign West India islands" to be sold, and if transportation was not possible, then the slave would be either brought back to their owner or "dealt with according to an act of assembly for punishing slaves committing capital offences."<sup>23</sup> Of course, Dunmore's Royal Ethiopian Regiment was not the only instance of slaves joining the British, as many would escape their masters to join or even trail behind British troops. Boston King, a slave who fought on the side of the British due to a similar promise of freedom, details his successful escape in his memoir in which he says they "received me readily, and I began to feel the happiness of liberty, of which I knew nothing before."<sup>24</sup> King expresses how he and other slaves hoped that the British would have compassion on them, especially as many were desperate for freedom after having dealt with particularly cruel and violent masters. When the war was over, King describes how he was brought to Nova Scotia as a free man with his wife. He resettled in Sierra Leone, West Africa in 1792. When he was given an opportunity to go to a school in England, he expressed, "Many of

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<sup>21</sup> John Murray, "A Proclamation," *Virginia Gazette*, November 25th, 1775.

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Virginia General Assembly. *An ordinance for establishing a mode of punishment for the enemies to America in this colony*, December 1775 - Act VII, *The Statutes at Large* 9 (2015): 101, 106.

<sup>24</sup> Boston King, "Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, March-June 1798," in *I Belong to South Carolina: South Carolina Slave Narratives*, ed. Susanna Ashton (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 22.

these white people, instead of being enemies and oppressors of us poor Blacks, are our friends, and deliverers from slavery."<sup>25</sup> According to the *Book of Negroes*, a document written by the Commander-in-Chief for the British forces, around 3,000 slaves were brought to Nova Scotia and then later to Sierra Leone, just as King had been.<sup>26</sup> The promise of freedom mobilized many to fight in the war, and even when they did not, many used the opportunity to escape and follow behind British forces.

Although there were generally more slaves that fought on the side of the Loyalists, some did also find success by fighting on the side of the Patriots. Washington lifted his ban on Black men in his Continental Army in 1778, not only due to the lack of manpower, but upon realizing the advantage Black recruitment gave to the British troops.<sup>27</sup> Afterward, the First Rhode Island Regiment was created soon after the Rhode Island Resolution for Negro Recruitment of 1778, which declared that any slave that fought under Colonel Christopher Greene would be emancipated.<sup>28</sup> When this regiment was eventually disbanded in 1783, its members were allowed freedom, although they were not immediately paid monetarily for their service. Rhode Island would then pass a gradual emancipation law that same year.<sup>29</sup> Similar Black regiments were formed in colonies like Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. In fact, Massachusetts would have an all-Black regiment named the Bucks of America that was also led by a Black man, Colonel George Middleton. Similar to Rhode Island, Massachusetts would outlaw slavery in the 1780s, indicating that Black military service on the side of the Patriots did have an influence on enacting emancipation laws. The involvement of Black troops and leaders like

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<sup>25</sup> King, "Memoirs of the Life of Boston King," 38.

<sup>26</sup> Graham Russell Gao Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, eds. "Introduction," *The Book of Negroes: African Americans in Exile after the American Revolution* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 11-47. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1zm2thw.5>

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert, 63.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

Middleton “helped advance the revolution that led to the abolition of slavery in the North.”<sup>30</sup> Not everyone who served on either side was necessarily able to escape, nor did emancipation laws automatically mean that Black people were now treated as equals. Even still, this was one of the methods many underwent as a means for emancipation.

Another method used by the enslaved to attempt emancipation was in the form of slave petitions, and although these petitions were not as successful as other methods, they do demonstrate how slaves demanded legislative action regarding their emancipation. Slave petitions oftentimes directly referenced the revolution in the hope that the same principles of freedom and liberty would apply to them. One of the earliest examples of a slave petition is from January 1773, in which a slave named Felix wrote to the Massachusetts Legislature on behalf of the “many slaves, living in the town of Boston, and other towns in the province.” He says that the slaves are not “vicious,” but instead “discreet, sober, honest, and industrious” as well as “virtuous and religious.”<sup>31</sup> He goes on further to say, “Our greatest unhappiness is not our fault; and this gives us great encouragement to pray and hope for such relief as is consistent with your wisdom, justice, and goodness.”<sup>32</sup> Although this petition did not succeed in freeing the slaves of Boston, it did spark a debate about abolition amongst the state legislature. Due to the legislature’s inaction, on April 20th of that same year, Felix would be joined by three other slaves in another petition where they directly reference the Patriot’s claim that the British were enslaving them. They stated, “We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their fellow-men to enslave them. We cannot but wish and hope Sir, that you will have the same grand object, we mean civil and religious liberty, in view in your

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<sup>30</sup> Gilbert, 111.

<sup>31</sup> Felix, letter to MA Legislature, January 6th, 1773.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

next session."<sup>33</sup> The mentioning of revolutionary-era rhetoric in slave petitions further indicates that the revolution itself was a direct motivator for these types of attempted actions. Additionally, slaves were aware of the rhetoric made by the Patriots and used it to their advantage by appealing to the ideals of the revolution. Even when these slave petitions were not always successful in their primary goals, they did exemplify the mobilization of the enslaved to demand such legislative action.

Additionally, the revolution caused an increase in manumission and “freedom suits.” Specific examples of this increase occurred in Virginia, where slaves sued for their freedom based upon new state laws with some success. In 1782, Virginia passed a manumission law that allowed slave owners to free their slaves without needing permission from the General Assembly. This law also required former slaves to carry a document with them that stated they had been freed. It also, indirectly, had the effect of making it legally possible for slaves to purchase themselves by entering into agreements with their owners where the slave would pay their owner to be manumitted.<sup>34</sup> In freedom suits, a slave could claim freedom by saying that they were a descendant of a free woman, even if their father was a slave. These claims were based on Virginia laws in which children were either enslaved or free depending on the mother’s status.<sup>35</sup> This was the case for Phene Phillips in 1796, when she claimed freedom because her mother had been manumitted prior to giving birth to her, therefore making her free as well. The case was tried in 1800 and the verdict declared that Phene “is a free woman and not a slave.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bestes, Peter et al., letter to MA Legislature, April 20th, 1773.

<sup>34</sup> Michael L. Nicholls, “‘The squint of freedom’: African-American freedom suits in post-revolutionary Virginia,” *Slavery and Abolition* 20, no. 2 (Taylor & Francis Online, 2008): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440399908575277>.

<sup>35</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Appealing for Liberty: Freedom Suits in the South* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 43.

<sup>36</sup> Nicholls, “‘The squint of freedom’: African-American freedom suits in post-revolutionary Virginia,” 50.

Following the verdict, Phene's two siblings and later Phene's eldest son would similarly sue for freedom, illustrating how freedom suits oftentimes established precedents across a generation. Her son was also successful and declared free in 1806. However, the success of freedom suit attempts decreased towards the 1800s, as there were fears over the growing free Black population in Virginia and other states with similar manumission laws. Even still, the ability of slaves to undergo judicial action strengthened their resolve in fighting for emancipation.

As a result of the growing free Black population from these methods, the revolution also caused the formation of free Black communities and leaders. This mirrors how the revolution brought a sense of a shared identity and the emergence of prominent Revolutionary leaders for white colonists. Many freedmen became part of the abolitionist movement and church leaders, such as the preachers Harry Hosier, Peter Spence, Absalom Jones, and Richard Allen. In particular, Richard Allen would be one of the founders of the Free African Society in 1786 Philadelphia, which was meant to help slaves who had become recently free through mutual aid. Allen would also be the founder of the first Black school in Philadelphia in 1797 and the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church denomination in 1816.<sup>37</sup> Black churches were especially significant to the creation of a free Black community. The formation of independent Black churches and their mutual aid programs, as well as simply using the word "African" while naming these secular organizations indicates "a sense of racial identity and pride" that emerged.<sup>38</sup> Similar Black communities formed in places like Baltimore, Charleston, and New York City.<sup>39</sup> Specifically in New York City, the free Black population rose from 3,332 in 1800 to 7,470 by

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<sup>37</sup> Huggins, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Quarles, "The Revolutionary War as a Black Declaration of Independence," 297.

<sup>39</sup> Gary B. Nash, "African Americans in the Early Republic," *OAH Magazine of History* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 13.

1810, while the slave population decreased from around 2,500 to 1,446.<sup>40</sup> This increase was both in part due to a New York manumission law in 1799, but also due to the migration of newly freed Black people from the surrounding states. Overall, there was an increase in Black communities during the Revolutionary Era due to an increase in free Black people.

The emergence of Black communal institutions also meant that those still in slavery could see a bigger opportunity to escape by fleeing to these newly formed communities. For example, Ona Judge, a personal slave for Martha Washington, fled the presidential house in Virginia in 1796 with the help of the free Black community in Philadelphia. In an 1845 interview with an abolitionist newspaper, she explicitly states, “I had friends among the colored people of Philadelphia, had my things carried there beforehand, and left Washington’s house while they were eating dinner.”<sup>41</sup> Although they attempted to get her back, she lived the rest of her life outside of slavery as a fugitive slave. She would be followed nine months later by Hercules, Washington’s head cook, who also escaped to the Black community in Philadelphia. Hercules’s escape was especially significant because he had “enjoyed a special status in the executive mansion” and Washington believed that this “should have immunized him against the fever for freedom.”<sup>42</sup> These two slaves are just a small example of slaves fleeing to free Black communities after they had emerged towards the end of the revolution. Just as the white colonists had their own significant figures and leaders of the revolution, the enslaved witnessed the emergence of free Black leaders and churches that served as communal institutions. This method of escape would only increase in the 1800s with the emergence of the Underground Railroad, considering free Black people were at the forefront of helping slaves escape. Richard Allen’s

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<sup>40</sup> Shane White, “‘We Dwell in Safety and Pursue Our Honest Callings’: Free Blacks in New York City, 1783-1810,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (Sept. 1988): 448.

<sup>41</sup> Rev. T.H. Adams, “Washington’s Runaway Slave, and How Portsmouth Freed Her,” *The Granite Freeman*, 1845.

<sup>42</sup> Huggins, 63.

church is just one example of a Black church that sheltered escaped slaves in the church's basement.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, the increase in free Black communities and churches meant that slaves had help in their pursuit of freedom.

When it comes to the white population, the revolution created a self-awareness regarding the hypocrisy of slavery. Therefore, the revolution contributed to the growing number of white abolitionists. Anti-slavery rhetoric existed prior, but the events of the revolution exacerbated the anti-slavery movement. The rise of abolitionism amongst the white population is seen especially in the Quakers, who were a key group in support of abolitionism. They freed their slaves and worked toward legislation that would lead to full abolition.<sup>44</sup> Quakers would oftentimes help Black people directly. As Samuel Ringgold Ward remarked in his autobiography about his parents' escape from slavery, "They therefore did as the few who then escaped mostly did—aim for a Free State, and settle among Quakers. This honoured sect, unlike any other in the world, in this respect, was regarded as the slave's friend."<sup>45</sup> A notable Quaker and abolitionist was Anthony Benezet, who opened the Friends School for Black People in 1770 Philadelphia and would be one of the founders of the Free African Society alongside Richard Allen.<sup>46</sup> Further, he created the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1775, which was not only the first abolition society in America but the majority of its membership was made up of Quakers like himself as well as free Black people.<sup>47</sup> Benezet wrote in 1783 that he can "with truth and sincerity declare" that "the notion entertained by some that the Blacks are inferior to the whites in their capacities

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<sup>43</sup> Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 134.

<sup>44</sup> Schweninger, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, & England* (Paternoster Row: John Snow, 1855), 22.

<sup>46</sup> Brychan Carey and Geoffery Plank, *Quakers and Abolition* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2014), 107-108.

<sup>47</sup> Carey and Plank, *Quakers and Abolition*, 113.



is a vulgar prejudice.”<sup>48</sup> This too, combined with free Black communities, would help slaves escape to freedom, as Quakers would later also be involved in the Underground Railroad. For example, in counties in Pennsylvania like Delaware, Chester, and Lancaster, “the areas of greatest reported Underground Railroad activity had both significant African American and a significant Quaker presence.”<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, white abolitionists did have a part to play in how slaves escaped and in the continued effort for full abolition.

The increase in anti-slavery rhetoric would lead to the abolition efforts in the northern colonies, but they were in the form of gradual emancipation as opposed to overarching immediate change. As a result of the slavery metaphor, through which white colonists interpreted “the imperial conflict as an attempt by Britain to make them slaves”, northern colonists understood that this made the chattel slavery they themselves practiced an issue. The acknowledgment of this contradiction influenced them to abolish slavery.<sup>50</sup> Slavery was also not as profitable in the North as it was in the South, especially when the North experienced rapid industrialization in the early 1800s. However, more often states were passing “post-nati emancipation” laws in which “the children born to enslaved women would be free after a specified date.”<sup>51</sup> This kind of gradual emancipation law was passed in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey in the years 1784 to 1804.<sup>52</sup> An outlier was Vermont, which allowed for the full abolishment of slavery in 1777. Nevertheless, as the children of slaves became free, it did mean that slaves “could envision a different future for their people,

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<sup>48</sup> David L. Crosby, *The Complete Antislavery Writings of Anthony Benezet, 1754-1783: An Annotated Critical Edition*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2014), 209.

<sup>49</sup> Carey and Plank, *Quakers and Abolition*, 125.

<sup>50</sup> MacLeod, “Toward Caste,” 230.

<sup>51</sup> Ira Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

if not for themselves.”<sup>53</sup> Although slavery was not abolished everywhere nor was any restriction upon it immediate, the revolution did increase anti-slavery sentiments and furthered the cause towards abolitionism.

In the South, however, slavery was only weakened temporarily because of the revolution. Instead, slavery was left more strong afterward as the Southern economy became more dependent on slave labor. In the 1800s, southern society’s slave owners became more “paternalistic” by justifying slavery as being for the betterment of the enslaved. They based this on the belief that slaves were inferior and needed the “help” of white slave owners through food and housing, posing slavery as a domestic institution. The South’s reservations about abolishing slavery only increased through this paternalistic justification. The shift of viewing slavery through a paternalistic lens was a reaction to how the revolution and slavery were incompatible, considering paternalism was “aimed at rendering slaveholding consistent with existing republican and emerging humanitarian ideals.”<sup>54</sup> Even further, the “cotton revolution” of the early to mid-1800s following the invention of the cotton gin furthered the South’s economic dependence on slavery.<sup>55</sup> The cotton gin, invented in 1793, caused cotton to be produced more efficiently and made it more profitable. The increase in cotton production also caused an increase in the necessity of slave labor, as the slave population rose to the millions by 1860. In this way, the revolution did exemplify that slavery was incompatible with the country’s ideals, but the South continued to justify its dependence on it.

If the American Revolution is split between a white and a Black revolution, then the success of both sides was also fundamentally different. The white side of the revolution was

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<sup>53</sup> Berlin, *The Long Emancipation*, 71.

<sup>54</sup> Lacy Ford, “Reconfiguring the Old South: ‘Solving’ the Problem of Slavery, 1787-1838”, *Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (June 2008): 109. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25095466>

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

notably successful, with the foundation of the new government and constitution. On the other hand, the Black side of the revolution was significantly more complex. Many had gained freedom and full abolition eventually occurred in the North, but the revolution did not officially bring an end to slavery. As a result, historians like Benjamin Quarles refer to Black peoples' hope for equality during the revolution as a "dream deferred" rather than a dream fully realized.<sup>56</sup> However, it did plant the seed for the abolitionist movement that did not end when the revolution did. The revolution caused some white colonists to truly question the institution of slavery, especially with their acknowledgment that it was directly contradictory to the revolution's ideals. But, as Quarles argues, these white colonists were outnumbered by those who "subscribed to an equation of equality that excluded nonwhites," in which non white people were outside of the sociopolitical community to which the tenets of freedom applied.<sup>57</sup> Even still, the revolution did not necessarily "end" for the enslaved and free Black people alike. Black people continued to fight for abolition, for example in a 1799 petition signed by 74 free Black people in Philadelphia in which they say they want Congress to "exert every means in your power to undo the heavy burdens, and prepare way for the oppressed to go free, that every yoke may be broken."<sup>58</sup> This petition was overwhelmingly rejected by a vote of 85 to 1, signifying that this fight was not going to end anytime soon. The revolution was successful in mobilizing Black individuals into fighting for a common goal, just as it did for the Patriots, but their attempt did not immediately reach the same success. Rather, "to them the full worth of the American Revolution lay ahead."<sup>59</sup>

What we know of as the American Revolution does not take into account how different the revolution was for the Black population. Slaves attempted multiple methods to gain

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<sup>56</sup> Quarles, "The Revolutionary War as a Black Declaration of Independence," 293.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Absalom Jones et al., petition to the President, Senate, and House of Representatives, 1799.

<sup>59</sup> Quarles, "The Revolutionary War as a Black Declaration of Independence," 301.

emancipation and found some significant success as well as significant loss. The abolitionist movement would only continue to grow after the revolution, as well as the emergence of free Black communities and prominent Black leaders. Although slavery was abolished in the northern colonies, this “Black American Revolution” was ultimately less successful in bringing about emancipation in the short term. Even still, it did still plant the seed for full abolition years later. The ideals of freedom and equality that are associated with the American Revolution ultimately did not leave the minds of African Americans.

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