

## THE POPULARIZATION OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

Once they had found a foothold among the merchants, professionals, and prosperous tradesmen of cities like Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, it became difficult to contain the spread of voluntary associations. Their proliferation was fueled by the Revolution, which not only exposed masses of people to the possibilities of association, but also provided a powerful ideological motive for doing so. The democratization of government was an empty formula unless the people were willing to assemble themselves to exercise their rights and pursue their purposes.

Economic and social factors also promoted the use of associations. The growth of the economy after the middle of the eighteenth century opened up opportunities beyond those provided by families and rural communities. Following the path that Franklin had trod, young men left home to seek their fortunes on the sea or in the growing pool of day laborers in the cities and towns. Breaking free of families and the system of apprenticeship enlarged opportunities for individuals. But it also deprived individuals of the traditional bonds of social support that could sustain them in times of sickness and economic adversity. For these "strangers in a strange land," voluntary associations began to take the place of families.

Migrants from the countryside were not the only Americans who saw the advantages in voluntary associations. By the late 1780s, they were even to be found among the growing communities of free Blacks. One of the major centers of African-American organizational activity was Philadelphia, where Blacks established the Philadelphia Free African Society in April of 1787. This organization, which was soon emulated in Newport, Boston, and New York, was a mutual benefit society which apparently served both social purposes, as well as providing financial assistance to members.

This charter is especially revealing of the close links between religious and secular voluntarism. The original impetus for the Society's organization was religious but, as the preamble noted, Philadelphia's free black community was too divided denominationally to form a church of its own at this point. Evidently, the next best thing for dealing with the freedmens' "irreligious and uncivilized state" was judged to be a secular association that would, presumably, encourage the habits of self-discipline and regularity promoted by comparable white organizations like the Masons and the Junto.

#### PREAMBLE AND RULES OF THE PHILADELPHIA FREE AFRICAN SOCIETY

Whereas Absolom Jones and Richard Allen, two men of the African Race, who, for their religious life and conversation have obtained a good report among men, these persons, from a love to the people of their complexion whom they beheld with sorrow, because of their irreligious and uncivilized state, often communed together upon this painful and important subject in order to form some kind of religious society, but there being too few to be found under the like concern, and those who were, differed in their religious sentiments; with these circumstances they labored for some time, till it was proposed, after a serious communication of sentiments, that a society should be formed, without regard to religious tenants, provided, the persons lived an orderly and

sober life, in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of widows and fatherless children. . . .

We, the Free Africans and their descendants of the City of Philadelphia in the State of Pennsylvania or elsewhere do unanimously agree for the benefit of each other, to advance one shilling in silver, Pennsylvania currency, monthly and after one year's subscription from the date hereof then to hand forth to the needy of this society, if it should require, the sum of three shillings and nine-pence per week of said money; provided this necessity is not brought on them by their own imprudence. And it is further agreed that no drunkard or disorderly person be admitted as a member, and if they should prove disorderly after being received, the said disorderly person shall be disjoined from us, if there is not an amendment. by being informed by two of the members, without having any of his subscription money returned to him. And if any should neglect paying his monthly subscription for three months and no sufficient appearing for such neglect, if he do not pay the whole at the next ensuing meeting, he shall be disjoined from us by being informed by two of the members as an offender, without having any of his subscription money returned. Also, if any persons neglect meeting every month, for every omission he shall pay 3 pence, except in case of sickness or other complaint that should require the assistance of the society, then, and in such case, he shall be exempt from the fines and subscriptions during said sickness. Also, we apprehend it to be just and reasonable that the surviving widow of a deceased member should enjoy the benefits of this society as long as she remains his widow, complying with the rules thereof, excepting the subscriptions. And we apprehend it to be necessary that the children of our deceased members be under the care of the society so far as to pay their schooling, if they cannot attend the free school; also to put them out as apprentices to suitable trades or places if required. Also that no member shall convene the society together but it shall be the sole business of the committee and

that only, on special occasions and to dispose of money in hand to the best advantage and use of the society after they are granted the liberty as the Monthly Meeting and to transact all other business whatever except that of Clerk and Treasurer. And we unanimously agree to choose Joseph Clark to be our Clerk and Treasurer; and whenever another shall succeed him, it is always understood that one of the people called Quakers, belonging to one of the three Monthly Meetings in Philadelphia is to be chosen to act as Clerk and Treasurer of this useful institution. The following persons met viz., Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, Samuel Boston, Joseph Johnson, Cato Freeman, Caesar Cranchell, and James Potter, also William White whose early assistance and useful remarks were found truly profitable.

Elsewhere in America, African-Americans were active on the religious front. Although the Baptist church is today associated with the conservative southern establishment, in the years following the Revolution, it was the sect of the oppressed, both Black and white. In the New England, it attracted dissenters from the

Congregational establishment, many of them poor, many of them women -- all of whom were treated with a degree of respect and equality unknown in mainstream institutions. In the South, they attracted both Black and white believers. Even members of the slaveholding elite were moved to join, like Virginia aristocrat Robert Carter 3rd, who upon his conversion in 1791 freed his 500 slaves.

Although their primary purpose was religious, the Baptist congregations conducted themselves very much like mutual benefit societies, with a primary focus on the capacity of individuals to regulate themselves spiritually and in their daily lives and with members exercising stringent surveillance over one another. The congregations were ardently voluntaristic, rejecting all forms of government support and actively seeking the disestablishment of religion throughout the states. Along with the Quakers (from whom they had attracted many of their members), the Baptists were at the forefront of efforts to abolish slavery.

The Baptists were an international denomination. And the brethren in England watched developments in the United States with enormous interest. Wealthy English Baptists gave significant support to the American movement. In 1800, Andrew Bryan, the Black leader of the Georgia Baptists wrote this letter to a foreign philanthropist.

LETTER OF THE REVEREND ANDREW BRYAN TO AN ENGLISH PHILANTHROPIST

(1800)

*My Dear and Reverend Brother,* After a long silence occasioned by various hindrances, I sit down to answer your inestimable favour by the late dear Mr. White, who I hope is rejoicing, far above the troubles and trials of this frail sinful state. All the books mentioned in your truly condescending and affectionate letter, came safe, and were distributed according to your humane directions. You can scarcely conceive, much less than I describe, the gratitude excited by so seasonably and precious a supply of the

means of knowledge and grace, accompanied with benevolent proposals of further assistance. Deign, dear sir, to accept our united and sincere thanks for your great kindness to us, who have been so little accustomed to such attentions. Be assured that our prayers have ascended, and I trust will continue to ascend to God, for your health and happiness, and that you may be rendered a lasting ornament to our holy Religion and a successful Minister of the Gospel.

With much pleasure, I inform you, dear sir, that I enjoy good health, and am strong in body, tho' sixty-three years old, and am blessed with a pious wife, whose freedom I have obtained, and an only daughter and child who is married to a free man, tho' she, and consequently, under our laws, her seven children, five sons and two daughters, are slaves. By a kind Providence I am well provided for, as to worldly comforts, (tho' I have had very little given me as a minister) having a house and lot in this city, besides the land on which several buildings stand, for which I receive a small rent, and a fifty-six acre tract of land, with all necessary buildings, four miles in the country, and eight slaves; for whose education and happiness, I am enabled thro' mercy to provide.

But what will be infinitely more interesting to my friend, and is so much more prized by myself, we enjoy the rights of conscience to a valuable extent, worshipping in our families and preaching three times every Lord's day, baptizing frequently from ten to thirty at a time in Savannah, and administering the sacred supper, not only without molestation, but in the presence, and with the approbation and encouragement of many of the white people. We are now about seven hundred in number, and the work of the Lord goes on prosperously. . . .

Another dispensation of Providence has much strengthened our hands, and increased our means of information; Henry Francis, lately a slave to the widow of the

late Colonel Leroy Hammond, of Augusta, has been purchased by a few humane gentlemen of this place, and liberated to exercise the handsome ministerial gifts he possesses among us, and teach our youth to read and write. He is a strong man about forty-nine years of age, whose mother was white and whose father was an Indian. His wife and only son are slaves.

Brother Francis has been in the ministry fifteen years, and will soon receive ordination, and will probably become the pastor of a branch of my large church, which is getting too unwieldy for one body. Should this event take place, and his charge receive constitution, it will take the rank and title of the 3rd Baptist Church in Savannah.

Although African-American Churches grew rapidly in the Early National Period, they remained under the formal control of white denominations. This was particularly problematic in the Methodist Church, whose episcopal organization granted both authority and legal ownership of church property to the denomination (the Methodist Conference) rather than to the congregation. This only changed in 1816, when the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia obtained the permission of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania to take charge of its own affairs. The Blacks resentment

of their "Babylonian Captivity" and their delight at finally obtaining autonomy was eloquently expressed in a sermon by the Reverend Daniel Coker.

*Sermon Delivered Extempore in the African Bethel Church in the City of Baltimore, on the 21st of January, 1816, to a numerous concourse of people, on account of the Coloured People gaining their Church (Bethel) in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, by the Reverend D. Coker, Minister of the said Church. To which is annexed a list of the African Preachers in Philadelphia, Baltimore, &c. who have withdrawn from under the charge of the Methodist Bishops and Conference, (BUT ARE STILL METHODISTS).*

. . . The Jews in Babylon were held against their will. So were our brethren. But how, it will be asked, were your brethren bound?

1. By the deed. 2. By the charter of their church. (To whom were they bound? To the Conference. For how long were they bound? Answer. It was supposed by the ecclesiastical expounders of the law, that it would be till the last trump should sound!) But it will be asked, were they not at liberty to go from under the control of the conference when they thought proper? In answering this we shall disclose a paradox, viz. The conference (as I have understood) have said repeatedly, that the coloured societies was nothing but an unprofitable trouble; and yet, when the society of Bethel Church unanimously requested to go free, it was not granted, until the supreme court of Pa said, it should be so. But again, it will be asked, who could stop them, if they were determined to go. None -- Provided they had left their church property behind; to purchase which, perhaps many of them had deprived their children of bread. --And this in my opinion, would have been about equal to captivity!



2. Those Jews as above stated, had not equal privileges with the Babylonians, although they were governed by the same laws, and suffered the same penalties. So our brethren were governed by the same church law, or discipline, and suffered all its penalties. But it is evident, that there was a difference made between the coloured members and those of a superior colour (vulgarly so called) in point of church privileges; and it is evident that all this distinction was made on account of the complexion. Is this denied [?]. . . .

And how many of you, (I had like to have said) have acted the hypocrite, and mocked God. For while you have prayed that Ethiopia might stretch out her hands unto God, now when God seems to be answering your prayers, and opening the door for you to enjoy all that you would wish, many of you rise up and say, the time is not yet come; and it is thought by some a mark of arrogance and ostentation, in us who are embracing the opportunity that is now offered to us of being free. May the time speedily come, when we shall see our brethren come flocking to us like doves to their windows. And we as a band of brethren, shall sit down under our own vine to worship, and none to make us afraid. . . .

*N.B.* Contrary to the predictions of many, we have found to our great consolation, that the wholesome and friendly laws of our happy country will give us protection in worshipping God according to the dictates of our own conscience.

And my prayer is, that we, the descendants of Africa, may enjoy, and not abuse our glorious privileges: and always retain a high sense of our obligation of obedience to the laws of our God, and the laws of our land.

Like the white churches, African-American congregations early became centers for organizing secular associations for social, literary, educational, welfare, and political purposes. Typical of these ancillary organizations was the Pennsylvania Augustine Society organized by Philadelphia's Black leaders in 1818.

PREAMBLE TO THE CHARTER OF THE PENNSYLVANIA AUGUSTINE SOCIETY  
(1818)

We the subscribers, persons of colour of the city of Philadelphia, in the State of Pennsylvania, sensibly impressed with the high importance of education, towards the improvement of our species, in an individual as well as a social capacity; and fully persuaded, that it is to the prominently defective system of instruction, as it now exists among us, that we must in great measure attribute the contemptible and degraded situation we occupy in society, and most of the disadvantages under which we suffer; and viewing, with serious concern, the formidable barriers that prejudices, powerful as they are unjust, have reared to impede our progress in the paths of science and of virtue, rendering it almost impossible to obtain for our offspring such instruction as we deem necessary to qualify them for the useful walks of society: We therefore are convinced, that it is an unquestionable duty which we owe ourselves, to our posterity, and to our God, who has endowed us with intellectual powers, to use the best energies of our minds and of our hearts, in devising and adapting the most effectual means to procure for our children a more extensive education than we have heretofore had in our power to effect; and now, confidently relying upon the zealous and unanimous support of our coloured brethren, under the protection of divine providence, have resolved to unite and form ourselves into a society, to be known by the name of "The Augustine Education Society of Pennsylvania," for the establishment and maintenance of a Seminary, in which children of colour shall be taught all the useful and scientific branches of education, as far as may be found practicable. . . .

African-Americans began organizing voluntary associations in the blush of post-Revolutionary optimism, when it appeared that slavery would soon be a thing of the past and that citizens, black and white, could enjoy the common benefits of their newly won freedom. This hope was cruelly betrayed as whites, alarmed by the growth of black communities in their cities, began pushing for restrictions on the rights of freedmen. Although Philadelphia had led the nation in abolishing slavery, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, the "City of Brotherly Love" had become more notable for discriminating against blacks. Among the "facts" used to justify discrimination was the supposed undue burden that poor blacks placed on the system of public welfare.

In 1831, on the eve of an effort by the Pennsylvania legislature to further disabilities on free blacks, including what amounted to a state-level version of the fugitive slave law, an advertisement in the Philadelphia Gazette. It summarized the impressive achievements of the city's African-Americans as organizers of voluntary associations and underlined the extent to which, over the years, they had been willing to take civic responsibility -- including caring for their own poor and dependent.

No doubt comparable listings of organizations could have been made for any of the Black communities in Boston, New York, and other major cities in the Northeast. These organizations, few of which enjoyed support from outside their communities, affirm the contemporary analysis of giving patterns, which show that the poorest members of society give proportionately more philanthropically than any other group in society.

## TO THE PUBLIC (1831)

Whereas, we believe it to be the duty of every person to contribute as far as is in their power towards alleviating the miseries, and supplying the wants of those of our fellow beings who, through the many misfortunes and calamities to which human nature is subject, may become fit objects for our charity. And, whereas, from the many privations to which we as a people of colour are subject, and our limited opportunity of obtaining the necessaries of life, many of us have been included in the number dependent on those provisions made by law, for the maintenance of the poor; therefore, as we constitute a part of the public burden, we have deemed it our duty to use such means as was in our reach to lessen its weight, among which, we have found the forming of institutions for mutual relief, the most practicable and best calculated to effect our object. To these institutions, each member pays a sum varying from one to eight dollars as an initiation fee, and from twelve and a half to twenty cents monthly. The funds are exclusively appropriated to the relief of such of its members, as through sickness or misfortune, may be unable to work; to the interments of deceased members, and to the relief of widows and orphans, & Therefore, by contributing a trifling sum to these funds while in prosperity, we not only secure to ourselves a pension in sickness and adversity, but also contribute to the relief of our distressed brethren; and as these societies are incorporated an bodies politic in law, each member is sure of the benefits as are guaranteed by their constitutions. But as the public are not acquainted with the manner of distributing these benefits, nor the amount distributed, many have mistaken our object, and doubted the utility of these institutions -- have thought them incentive to extravagance and dissipation, and formed merely to gratify our ostentatious desire, in consequence of which, the societies have thought it necessary, for the satisfaction of the public, to publish a statement of their expenses for charitable purposes during the past year; which, as we believe, will convince every candid person, that the above named opinions are erroneous, as most of the objects of

these charities are persons whose daily earnings are scarcely adequate to their daily wants; and, many of them having large families, without some such aid they would necessarily become objects of public charity; whereas, by belonging to one or more of these institutions, they receive such aid as enables them to live, and in case of their death to be decently interred without increasing the public expense.

We, the subscribers, being appointed a committee to lay before the public a statement of the expenses of each society, for the year 1830, together with the dates of their formation, do certify the following to be correct.

MALE SOCIETIES

*Formed Paid out from  
from 1830 to 1831*

|  |      |            |
|--|------|------------|
| The African Friendly Society of St. Thomas | 1795 | \$ 76.50   |
| Sons of Africa                             | 1810 | 222.00     |
| Benezet Philanthropic                      | 1812 | 415.19     |
| Benevolent Sons of Zion                    | 1822 | 116.99     |
| Sons of St. Thomas                         | 1823 | 43.12      |
| Harrison Benevolent                        | 1823 | 56.06      |
| Coachman's Benevolent                      | 1825 | 212.12-1/2 |
| United Sons of Wilberforce                 | 1827 | 308.68     |
| Tyson Benevolent                           | 1824 | 93.38      |
| Beneficial Phil. Sons of Zoar              | 1826 | 38.50      |
| United Brethren                            | 1829 | 159.00     |
| Humane Mechanics                           | 1828 | 38.00      |
| United Ben't Sons of Bethel                | 1828 | 178.61     |
| United Shipley Beneficial                  | 1829 | 97.07-1/2  |
| Citizen Sons of Philadelphia               | 1830 | 18.40      |

|                    |      |       |
|--------------------|------|-------|
| Library Benevolent | 1830 | 70.35 |
|--------------------|------|-------|

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\$2202.71-3/4

FEMALE SOCIETIES

|   |      |          |
|---|------|----------|
| The Female Benevolent Society of St. Thomas | 1793 | \$ 80.84 |
|---|------|----------|

|                               |      |       |
|-------------------------------|------|-------|
| Female Benevolent Whitesonian | 1816 | 80.12 |
|-------------------------------|------|-------|

African Female Band Benevolent

|                   |      |        |
|-------------------|------|--------|
| Society of Bethel | 1817 | 428.50 |
|-------------------|------|--------|

|                        |      |            |
|------------------------|------|------------|
| Female Benezet Society | 1818 | 196.12-1/2 |
|------------------------|------|------------|

|                   |      |           |
|-------------------|------|-----------|
| Daughters of Aron | 1819 | 61.12-1/2 |
|-------------------|------|-----------|

|                          |      |            |
|--------------------------|------|------------|
| Female Granville Society | 1821 | 161.22-1/2 |
|--------------------------|------|------------|

|                               |      |        |
|-------------------------------|------|--------|
| Daughters of Africa's Society | 1821 | 149.97 |
|-------------------------------|------|--------|

|                           |      |            |
|---------------------------|------|------------|
| Female African Benevolent | 1822 | 212.55-1/2 |
|---------------------------|------|------------|

Daughters of Zion Angolan

|                   |      |        |
|-------------------|------|--------|
| Ethiopian Society | 1822 | 103.67 |
|-------------------|------|--------|

|   |      |        |
|---|------|--------|
| Daughters of St. Thomas Society -- Feb. 1 | 1822 | 250.72 |
|---|------|--------|

|                              |      |        |
|------------------------------|------|--------|
| Daughter of Absalom, April 5 | 1824 | 360.33 |
|------------------------------|------|--------|

|                       |      |        |
|-----------------------|------|--------|
| Daughters of Ethiopia | 1825 | 131.30 |
|-----------------------|------|--------|

|                      |       |        |
|----------------------|-------|--------|
| Female Tyson Society | _____ | 132.75 |
|----------------------|-------|--------|

|                    |      |        |
|--------------------|------|--------|
| Daughters of Hosea | 1825 | 109.77 |
|--------------------|------|--------|

|                                  |      |       |
|----------------------------------|------|-------|
| Female Methodist Assistance Soc. | 1827 | 32.50 |
|----------------------------------|------|-------|

|                            |      |        |
|----------------------------|------|--------|
| United Daughters of Wesley | 1827 | 144.78 |
|----------------------------|------|--------|

|                           |      |        |
|---------------------------|------|--------|
| Free Daughters of Shipley | 1827 | 108.72 |
|---------------------------|------|--------|

|                     |      |           |
|---------------------|------|-----------|
| Daughters of Isaiah | 1828 | 73.72-1/2 |
|---------------------|------|-----------|

|                     |      |        |
|---------------------|------|--------|
| Daughters of Gideon | 1828 | 189.65 |
|---------------------|------|--------|

|                         |      |       |
|-------------------------|------|-------|
| Female Clarkson Society | 1828 | 90.00 |
|-------------------------|------|-------|

|  |       |                              |
|--|-------|------------------------------|
| United Sister's Society                            | 1828  | 208.75                       |
| United Daughters of Industry                       | 1829  | 39.50                        |
| Female Harrison Benevolent Society                 | 1829  | 97.25                        |
| Female Beneficial Philanthropic<br>Society of Zoar | 1826  | 42.21                        |
| Benevolent Daughters of Zion                       | 1826  | 75.50                        |
| Daughters of Noah of Bethel Church                 | 1822  | 40.00                        |
| Citizen Daughters of Philadelphia                  | 1830  | 15.00                        |
|  | <hr/> |                              |
| Total of male societies                            |       | \$3616.58-1/2<br>2202.71-3/4 |
|  | <hr/> |                              |
| Total of male and female societies                 |       | \$5819.29-1/4                |

There are several societies of the same kind, that have not made their returns to be published, for reasons unknown to us.

John Bowers,  
William West,  
James Cornish,  
Robert C. Gordon, Sr.  
Benjamin Paschall,  
Committee

In January of 1832, Philadelphia Blacks assembled to draft a petition to the Legislature to protest further efforts to restrict their rights and to provides facts about the condition of freedmen in the state. The petition both eloquently evoked the Revolutionary heritage as it was perceived by African-Americans and highlighted the

importance of philanthropy and voluntarism in the black community. As such, the petition exemplifies in a very real sense the role which voluntary associations played in defining the Ante Bellum African-American community and in laying the foundation for Black participation in the abolitionist movement.

*To the Honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of  
Pennsylvania (January 1832)*

The memorial of the people of color of the city of Philadelphia and its vicinity, respectfully sheweth:

That they have learned with deep regret that two resolutions have passed the House of Representatives of this commonwealth, directing the committee of the judiciary to inquire -- First, into the expediency of passing a law to protect the citizens of this commonwealth against the evils arising from the emigration of free blacks from other states into Pennsylvania -- and, secondly, into the expediency of repealing so much of the Acts of Assembly . . . as relates to fugitives from labor from other states, and of giving full effect to the Act of Congress . . . relative to such fugitives.

At the same time that your memorialists entertain the most perfect respect for any expression of sentiment emanating from so high a source as one of the legislative bodies of Pennsylvania, they cannot but lament, that at a moment when all mankind seem to be struggling for freedom, and endeavoring to throw off the shackles of political oppression, the constituted authorities of this great state should entertain a resolution which has a tendency to abridge the liberties heretofore accorded to a race of men confessedly oppressed. Our country asserts for itself the glory of being the freest upon the surface of the globe. She wrested that freedom, while yet in her infancy, by



force of arms, at the expense of infinite blood and treasure, from a gigantic and most powerful adversary. She proclaimed freedom to all mankind -- and offered her soil as a refuge to the enslaved of all nations. The brightness of her glory was radiant, but one dark spot still dimmed its lustre. Domestic slavery existed among a people who had themselves disdained to submit to a master. Many of the states in this union hastened to wipe out this blot: and foremost in the race was Pennsylvania. In less than four years after the declaration of independence by the act of 1st March, 1780, she abolished slavery within her limits, and from that time her avowed policy has been to enlarge and beautify this splendid feature in her system -- to preserve unimpaired the freedom of all men, whatever might be the shade of complexion with which it may have pleased the *Almighty* to distinguish them. "*All Men,*" says our declaration of *rights*, "are born equally free and independent." -- and "have certain inherent and indefeasible rights, among which are those of enjoying and defending life and liberty, of acquiring and protecting property and reputation; and of pursuing their own happiness." *All men* have a natural and indefeasible right to worship the Almighty God according to the dictates of their own conscience," "The people shall be secure in their persons, houses, and possessions, from unreasonable searches and seizures. No person shall be proceeded against criminally by information. No persons shall be put twice in jeopardy of life or limb. Every man shall have a remedy of due course of law." Where, in this forcible epitome of man's indefeasible rights, promulgated nine years after the African had been elevated to freedom -- where, in this declaration of the people of the commonwealth, assembled in convention, do we find a distinction drawn between the man whose skin is white, and him whose skin is dark? Where, in the legislative acts of this commonwealth, under the constitution, and subsequent to this declaration, do we find such a distinction? On what page of our statute book does it appear? . . . "It is not for us to inquire," says the beautiful preamble of the act of 1780, "it is not for us to inquire, why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of the several parts of the earth were distinguished by a

difference in feature or complexion -- it is sufficient for us to know that all are the work of an Almighty hand." And from that day to the present, Pennsylvania has acted upon a principle, that among those whom the same Almighty hand has formed, the hand of man should not presume to make a difference. And why, we respectfully ask, is this distinction now to be proclaimed for the first time in the code of Pennsylvania? Why are her borders to be surrounded by a wall of iron, against freemen, whose complexions fall below the wavering and uncertain shades of white? For this is the only criterion of admission or exclusion which the resolutions indicate. It is not to be asked, is he brave -- but is he black -- is he just -- is he free from the stain of crime -- but is he black -- is he brown -- is he yellow -- is he other than white?

This is the criterion by which Pennsylvania, who for fifty years has indignantly rejected the distinction, who daily receives into her bosom all men, from all nations, is now called upon to reject from her soil, such portions of a banished race of freemen, born within view of her own mountains, as may seek within her limits a place of rest. We respectfully ask, is not this the spirit of the first resolution? And why, we repeat, shall this abandonment of the principles of your honorable forefathers *now* first take place in Pennsylvania? Have the rights we now possess been abused? The domestic history of Pennsylvania answers these questions in the negative. Who can turn to a page in that history that exhibits a single instance of insurrection or violation of the peace of society resulting from the residence of a colored population in this commonwealth? . . . Your memorialists are aware that prejudice has recently been exalted against them by unfounded reports of their concurrence in promoting servile insurrections. With the feeling of honest indignation, inspired by conscious innocence, they repel the slander. They feel themselves to be citizens of Pennsylvania. Many of them were descended from ancestors, who were raised with yours on this soil, to which they feel bound by the strongest ties. As children of the state, they look to it as a

guardian and a protector, and in common with you felt the necessity of maintaining law and order, for the promotion of the common-weal. Equally unfounded is the charge, that this population fills the almshouses with paupers -- and increases, in an undue proportion, the public burdens. We appeal to the facts and documents which accompany this memorial, as giving abundant refutation to an error so injurious to our character. . . .

In connexion with the foregoing memorial, we beg leave to offer the following statement of facts for the information of all who desire to be correctly informed on the subjects to which they relate.

1. By a statement published by order of the guardians of the poor in 1832, it appears that out of 549 outdoor poor relieved during the year, only 22 were persons of color, being about 4 per cent of the whole number, while their ratio of the population of the city and its suburbs exceeds 8-1/4 percent. By a note appended to the printed report of the guardians of the poor, above referred to, it appears that the colored paupers admitted into the almshouse for the same period, did not exceed 4 per cent of the whole number.

2. In consequence of the neglect of the assessors, to distinguish, in their assessment, the property of people of color from that of others, it is not easy to ascertain the exact amount of taxes paid by us. But an attempt has been made to remedy this defect by a reference to the receipts kept by tax-payers. The result thus obtained must necessarily be deficient, and fall short of the amount really paid by people of color; because it is fair to presume that we could not find receipts for all the money paid in taxes, and because no returns have been made except where receipts were found. From these imperfect returns, however, it is ascertained that we pay not less than 2500 dollars annually, while

the sum expended for the relief of our poor, out of the public funds has rarely, if ever, exceeded \$2000 a year. The amount of rents paid by our people, is found to exceed \$100,000 annually.

3. Many of us, by our labor and industry have acquired a little property; and have become freeholders. Besides which, we have no less than six Methodist meeting houses, two Presbyterian, two Baptist, one Episcopalian, and one public hall, owned exclusively by our people, the value of which, in the aggregate, is estimated to exceed \$100,000. To these may be added, two Sunday schools, two tract societies, two Bible societies, two temperance societies, and one female literary institution.

4. We have among ourselves, more than fifty beneficent societies, some of which are incorporated, for mutual aid in time of sickness and distress. The members of these societies are bound by rules and regulations, which tend to promote industry and morality among them. For any disregard or violation of these rules,-- for intemperance or immorality of any kind, the members are liable to be suspended or expelled. These societies expend annually for the relief of their members when sick or disabled, or in distress, upwards of \$7000, out of funds raised among themselves for mutual aid. It is also worthy of remark, that we cannot find a single instance of one of the members of either of these societies being convicted in any of our courts. One instance only has occurred of a member being brought up and accused before a court; but this individual was acquitted.

5. Notwithstanding the difficulty of getting places for our sons as apprentices, to learn mechanical trades, owing to the prejudices with which we have to contend, there are between four and five hundred people of color in the city and suburbs who follow mechanical employments.

6. While we thankfully embrace the opportunity for schooling our children, which has been opened to us by public munificence and private benevolence, we are still desirous to do our part in the accomplishment of so desirable an object. Such of us as are of ability to do so, send our children to school at our own expense. Knowing by experience the disadvantages many of us labor under for want of early instruction; we are anxious to give our children a suitable education to fit them for the duties and enjoyments of life. In making the above statement of facts, our only object is, to prevent a misconception of our real condition; and to counteract those unjust prejudices against us, which the prevalence of erroneous opinions in regard to us, is calculated to produce.

We know that the most effectual method of refuting, and rendering harmless, false and exaggerated accounts of our degraded condition, is by our conduct; by living consistent, orderly and moral lives. Yet we are convinced that many good and humane citizens of this commonwealth, have been imposed upon, and induced to give credit to statements injurious to our general character and standing. At this important crisis, pregnant with great events, we deem it a duty we owe ourselves and to our white friends, and to the public in general, to present to their candid and impartial consideration the above statements. We ask only to be judged fairly and impartially. We claim no exemption from the frailties and imperfections of our common nature. We feel that we are men of like passions and feelings with others of a different color, liable to be drawn aside by temptation, from the paths of rectitude. But we think that in the aggregate we will not suffer by a comparison with our white neighbors whose opportunities of improvement have been no greater than ours. By such a comparison, fairly and impartially made, we are willing to be judged. . . .

Despite such eloquent appeals, the circumstances of Pennsylvania's free blacks could not stand against the economic and political influence of southerners (who were major customers of Pennsylvania businesses), the timidity of community leadership, and the fears and prejudices of the growing class of industrial workers and immigrants (who competed with blacks for jobs). In 1837, Pennsylvania deprived blacks of the right to vote. Other laws stripped them of the right to use such public accommodations as street cars. The following year inaugurated a pattern of officially-sanctioned mob violence against blacks and black institutions that would last until the Civil War.

Sources:

William Douglas, Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America, now styled The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1862), in Herbert Aptheker, ed., A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States (New York: Citadel Press, 1951), I, 17-19.

The Baptist Annual Register, 1798-1801, in the Journal of Negro History I (1916), 86-88, in Aptheker, I, 48-49.

Sermon Delivered Extempore in the African Bethel Church in the City of Baltimore, on the 21st of January, 1816, to a numerous concourse of people, on account of the Coloured People gaining their Church (Bethel) in the Supreme

Court of Pennsylvania, by the Reverend D. Coker, Minister of the said Church.  
To which is annexed a list of the African Preachers in Philadelphia, Baltimore, &c.  
who have withdrawn from under the charge of the Methodist Bishops and  
Conference, (BUT ARE STILL METHODISTS), in Apthecker I, 68-69.

Hazard's Register, March 12, 1831, in Apthecker, I, 112-114.

The Liberator, April 14, 1832, and Hazard's Register, June 1832, IX, 361-62, in  
Apthecker, I, 126-133.

Additional Readings:

Sam Bass Warner, Jr., The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its  
Growth (Philadelphia, 1968).