“TO PLEAD OUR OWN CAUSE”: THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN REFORM MOVEMENT, 1794-1850

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Stacey Svilich
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents who have always supported me no matter what path I chose to take, and to my husband whose support and reassurance through this process is a huge reason why this project is completed. I love all three of you more than you will ever know. Thanks for all of your love and support.
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My friend Dillon Carroll helped me out tremendously, especially as this project got nearer to its completion. Thank you so much for always taking the time to answer my questions and offer advice in regards to the thesis process. I wish you the best of luck in all of your future endeavors and I know that you will make a great historian and professor one day.

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ABSTRACT

“TO PLEAD OUR OWN CAUSE”: THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN REFORM MOVEMENT, 1794-1850

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This project seeks to examine African Americans’ attempt to reform America after the American Revolution, so that all people living in the newly formed nation would have freedom and equality. More specifically, this project sheds light on their use of printed word as a vehicle of reform. There is a large body of work that deals with African American protest and print culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but there are very few works that focus on print as a vehicle of reform. Print had been important in the colonies for commercial and political news, and it became increasingly important throughout the Revolutionary era as a vehicle of protest. In the early nineteenth century print technology improved making printed works easier and cheaper to produce. Historians that I consulted to explain the importance of print in eighteenth and nineteenth century America include Sidney Kobre, Robert Hoe, Carol Sue Humphrey, and William L. Joyce. Increasingly denied political rights in America, African Americans realized
that print would offer the only medium through which they could be heard. Black leaders began printing pamphlets in the late eighteenth century, and by 1827 they had established the first black newspaper in America. Historians that I consulted on African American print culture include Jacqueline Bacon, Frances Smith Foster, Richard Newman, Phillip Lapsansky, and Patrick Rael. African American’s printed works focused on reforming America by first reforming the black community. Black leaders knew that whites viewed the black race as an inferior group. In order to change this opinion, black leaders sought to reform the black community by establishing a variety of mutual aid and fraternal societies, as well as black schools. This community building provided black leaders with the confidence they needed to begin speaking on behalf of the African American race. Historians that I consulted on black community building include James Oliver Horton, Lois E. Horton, Harry Reed, and Gary Nash. The numerous pamphlets written by blacks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as well as several of the black newspapers printed before the Civil War provided me with the evidence to argue that blacks sought to reform America into a place where all people could live free and equal. I also examined numerous letters written by blacks to their friends as well.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1827 the first African American newspaper was established in New York. In its opening editorial, the black editors stated “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long others have spoken for us.” The editors intended, in part, to provide accurate representations of the black community in America, something that whites had failed to do.¹ But while the development of the first independent black newspaper is important for a variety of reasons, it was not the first attempt by black Americans to speak on behalf of their own community. Thirty-three years before the appearance of *Freedom’s Journal*, black writers published the first black pamphlet to defend Philadelphia’s black community after a white editor misrepresented them in his newspaper. That was the first time that blacks took advantage of the medium of print as a vehicle of protest. Before this, blacks had resorted to violence or petitioning to protest their situation. But following the publication of this first black pamphlet in 1794, print became the preferred method of protest among African American activists. In the years leading up to the American Civil War, black activists came to rely on print as the only way in which they could be included in the American political conversation.

¹ *Freedom’s Journal*, March 16, 1827.
This project is meant to bring to light the attempt by black activists to reform America through the use of printed works. Not so much concerned with the success activists achieved, this paper emphasizes their persistence in speaking out on the issues that most affected them even as they were pushed further outside the margins of American society. Their works created a black print culture that defined their reform movement. Black activists never explicitly stated they were developing a reform movement but the topics covered in their works show that they indeed sought to reform American society. Their movement focused on two initial goals, the immediate end to slavery in the United States and full citizenship for black Americans. These two goals were always a primary objective of the black activists, but they “constituted the core” of what would become a reform movement that sought to completely alter American society so that even the minds of white supremacists would be changed. Many scholars have pointed out that the press allowed black Americans to “gain access to the discourse of the nation” but they often overlook the idea that the press was in fact a vehicle of reform for black activists. Denied political power, black activists used the only medium that allowed them to speak freely on behalf of their race. The black press provided the best means to represent the black community.

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It is important to understand that black activists were not just working towards ending slavery and obtaining equal rights. Their reform movement also encompassed the building of black communities and the elevation of the race. Many believed that the latter especially was the means by which to obtain freedom and equality. This is why it is important not to categorize black activism as solely abolitionist in nature. Rather it was a movement in which African American leaders sought to elevate the status of the black community, as well as undertake the reform of America.

Although this reform movement encompassed the protest of the status of blacks in America, not all of the printed works were defensive or argumentative. Many of the works highlighted the importance of black education and hard work, both qualities that black leaders believed would help elevate the race. But even these types of writings could be categorized as protest if considered in the context of what blacks were trying to do by developing these qualities. Black leaders hoped to completely alter American society and provide a better place for the black race in the country. Anything that sought to better the position of the black race was in its own way a protest against what white America had in mind for African Americans.

A brief analysis of the black leaders of the reform movement is necessary in order to understand what they were attempting to achieve with their rhetoric. The black activists were some of the bravest men of their time. They spoke out against white American society and its treatment of African Americans, slave and free, at a time when it was highly unpopular to do so. Every time they picked up the pen or stood at a podium, they were risking their lives. Yet without their courage, black Americans would have stood very little chance of achieving even the slightest successes in their movement.
These black leaders sought to make a change for African Americans when it became evident that most whites were unwilling to do so. But it is also important to understand that these leaders were among the small handful of educated free blacks living in the North. This paper focuses on the North because its free black population published most of the early black writings. Among the free blacks living in the North, the majority were very poor uneducated people who did not have the skills or financial resources to develop a black reform movement. Black leaders were for the most part professionals, particularly clergymen. Fortunate enough to obtain a good living, they used their resources to finance the publication of pamphlets and newspapers. They also helped to develop national conventions, build churches, and establish various black organizations, all of which contributed to the black reform movement. Hoping for universal freedom, black activists “inaugurated new tactics to reinvigorate the cause of racial justice.” They organized local, state and national protest organizations as well as a variety of mutual aid, fraternal, and literary societies. They also created schools that sought to educate black children, and above all else, they developed a black print culture that gave them the ability to speak on behalf of their own communities. Black activists hoped that the use of literary tactics would prove to white Americans that “African Americans were not the passive, inarticulate underlings that Enlightenment taxonomy often projected.”

The earliest black leaders have been referred to by historians as the “black founders.” Richard Allen, Prince Hall, and Absalom Jones were three of the most

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influential of the early leaders. Born in the eighteenth century, these men lived through the formation of the American nation. These black founders were among the first black activists to take advantage of the printing press, mostly in the form of pamphlets, and they were also responsible for the beginning stages of community development as they pushed for the creation of the first black church, as well as other institutions that “nurtured African American struggles for justice throughout the nineteenth century.”

They made up the first of three generations of black leaders before the start of the Civil War.

The work of the second generation of black leaders differed from that of the early leaders, but they were by no means less influential. Using a much less deferential tone in their work, they focused on mobilizing the masses to work towards their goals. David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, and James Forten were some of the most influential men of this generation.

The third generation of black activists saw the development of the first black newspaper and the changes it made in black print culture. These activists became much more focused on the issue of immediate abolition, especially following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which threatened all blacks living in America. Some, like Martin Delany, argued in favor of emigration to places like Haiti, Canada or Africa, as they became more convinced that America would never provide the opportunities for

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blacks to live as equal citizens. But most of this generation of activists sought to shut down attempts by whites to colonize them out of America. The most well-known activist of the third generation was Frederick Douglass whose works were influential not just among African Americans, but among many white Americans as well. The leaders of all three generations played significant roles in the black reform movement of the post-revolutionary and antebellum eras.

All of these black leaders were among the first civil rights activists in American history. Their body of work represents some of the greatest material produced by American writers. Their rhetorical skills equaled those of contemporary white writers, including Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Yet because of the social status of these black leaders whites often overlooked their writings. Still they spoke on behalf of their own race and became part of the national conversation on the issues that most affected them. They published hundreds of original pieces of work and reprinted numerous orations, speeches, and sermons in the form of pamphlets, and after 1827, in their independently owned newspapers. They had a vision of an American society that included black freedom and equality. Print provided them the only means through which they could share their vision with the rest of America.

Historians rely in part on the writings of those who came before them. For this work I relied upon the writings of these black activists to provide insight into what they believed American society should be like. I examined several black newspapers and pamphlets published in the early republic and antebellum eras. I also read through hundreds of letters written by blacks to their white and black friends about topics they believed needed to be addressed in American society. In addition to these primary
sources, the works of several historians contributed to my understanding of black American life and the importance of the press as a vehicle of reform. I have quoted my sources directly, without correction, so that the material could be presented as it was written.

This piece of work is not intended to become the cornerstone of early black press historiography. But I do hope that it brings to light some very important works published in America and the reform movement that was created out of the publication of these works. It took an enormous amount of courage for black activists to speak out against the social norms of American society. But blacks wanted so badly to participate as American citizens and they sought out whatever means they could to have a voice in society. Print provided that voice, and through the publication of their works, blacks attempted to reform American society into a place that all people could live free and equal.
CHAPTER II

THE FOUNDATION OF THE REFORM
MOVEMENT: THE ESTABLISHMENT
OF FREE BLACK COMMUNITIES

The free blacks of the new American republic lived through a turbulent era, witnessing a number of contradictory events. Their generation was part of the nation’s first northern experiment with emancipation, beginning in 1780 when Pennsylvania passed the first gradual abolition act. At the same time the first discriminatory codes and practices appeared in the North. They also observed the enormous growth of slavery in the South and Southwest at the same time the North and Midwest were experiencing a dramatic development of free black communities. It was during their lives that the overseas slave trade ended in 1808, but there was a surge in the domestic slave trade, something that greatly threatened their own lives. They also saw the colonization movement come to fruition, threatening to colonize free blacks in Africa. At the same time free blacks were building black businesses and cultural institutions as never before, only strengthening their economic roots and claims of citizenship in America. These early black activists lived the experiences they witnessed. They were the builders of the first independent black institutions, the voices who spoke on behalf of black education.
and moral uplift, and the creators of a new kind of protest ideology, one that established “print as a key form of black activism.”

African Americans found themselves more and more shut out of American political life just as whites became more involved in the new republic. In the late eighteenth century, the expansion of citizenship began when urban workingmen organized and began to play a role in politics of the nation. The number of white male voters doubled in the 1790s when property requirements were lowered for voting and office holding. By the mid-1820s the right to vote extended to virtually all adult white males. This expansion of franchise for white men, however, “was often accompanied by the restriction or elimination of the franchise for black men.” In New Jersey, the constitution limited voting with property requirements until 1807, when it added racial restrictions as well. The New York constitution of 1777 allowed black franchise based on property requirements. But when the New York constitution was rewritten in 1821 it required blacks, but not whites, to have lived in the state for three years and have more than $250 in property before they could vote. Similar stories exist for other northern states. As blacks were increasingly shut out of political participation, the need to assert their rights in some way became more important.

Racial discrimination limited blacks in other areas of life besides suffrage. It was very hard for most free blacks to get work in anything more than the most menial jobs. As increasing numbers of European immigrants came into the United States in the

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early nineteenth century, blacks faced a growing hostility and economic competition that often resulted in violence and riots. Philadelphia in 1829 and 1834 and Cincinnati in 1829 were the sites of three of the worst racially motivated riots of the era. These race riots made clear that free blacks were not welcome in the northern cities. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson argued that blacks were not able to reason the way whites were, and that they lacked “the capacity for the autonomy and self-restraint required of a citizen.”\(^{10}\) This was the prominent feeling of whites in the late eighteenth century when the first black printed works of protest came into circulation in the United States. It was clear that there needed to be a different side of the story being told, and that the only people to tell that story were blacks themselves.

Blacks knew they were not welcome in American cities, nevertheless they were there. They needed to create a place for themselves and work towards changing the opinions of whites regarding black capabilities and position in American society. It was an extremely hostile environment they lived in, this land of liberty for all. Blacks wanted to know their place and role in the new republic. They realized they needed to create a place for themselves since none would be created for them. And once they found that place they wrote and published their views on some of the major topics of the day, topics that involved them and their brethren still enslaved in the new democratic nation. They would assert themselves using printed word as their vehicle of protest.

Before they could create a reform movement, newly freed blacks needed to develop a sense of community among blacks. Wanting to participate in American society,

\[^{10}\] Horton and Horton, *In Hope*, 167.
black leaders knew that all blacks shared something that kept them from being part of white American society. Slavery and racial discrimination tied all blacks together, and the communities that free blacks built were based on these twin evils.\textsuperscript{11} Blacks did not just build geographic communities based on where they were forced to live, which was usually the outskirts of the existing cities. True, this element contributed to their community building in that they were brought together and shared similar stories and supported each other. Most whites considered blacks to be inferior, and this ultimately tied them together as a black community. But black leaders wished for African Americans to be more than just separate black communities from the rest of America. Most blacks wanted to be part of the American society and political body. So even though geographically they were forced to the outer realms of American cities, they forced their way into American society by building independent black institutions that helped instill a sense of black American identity among free blacks. Yes their institutions were independent of white institutions, but most blacks were not allowed within the walls of white institutions. Blacks knew that in order to participate in American society they must establish for themselves their own institutions in which they could show white Americans that they too were capable of participating in American society through the use of institutions. The institutions they built catered to specific issues within the black community and American society as a whole.

Blacks did not originate the idea that institution building and collective action were the way to prove one’s American identity. On his American tour in the 1830s,

\textsuperscript{11} Reed, \textit{Platform for Change}, 63.
Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville commented that Americans everywhere had formed “associations for the smallest tasks.” He noticed that associations were formed to “promote public order, commerce, industry, morality, and religion.”\textsuperscript{12} Although he was speaking of white American society, blacks took their cue from those by whom they wished to be viewed as equals. Blacks, like whites, established associations and societies, and built institutions for a variety of purposes. These various organizations were meant to serve the needs of the black community, while at the same time proving to white society that blacks were capable of participating in American society. But something more than just accomplishment of these goals came out of the building of black institutions. Blacks gained a confidence and an awakening that allowed them to step out of their geographic communities and become part of the wider black communities in other locales, and more importantly become part of American society. They accomplished this goal with the use of printed works that spoke of the ills that blacks faced and presented solutions to these problems.

Blacks had an opinion about the way America should be and it was through printed works that they shared these ideas with the rest of American society. Black leaders informed other blacks that they should expect more from the country for which they and their ancestors had shed their blood, sweat, and tears. Black activists believed that it was not fair for white America to declare liberty for all while enslaving and discriminating against blacks. They informed white America that they were not going to accept that only certain people would benefit from democracy in America. They

empowered themselves because whites were not willing to help. Black leaders encouraged fellow blacks to advance their race so that whites could see that blacks were capable of living as good American citizens. This determination is what created the institutional infrastructure of black America. The changes that blacks were determined to make both in their own communities, and in American society, help develop the organizations they built. Their organizational infrastructure worked towards the end goals of racial uplift, abolition of slavery, and civil rights. From these organizations came the printed works that presented the ideas and opinions of blacks about the way American society and politics should be so that all American citizens could equally participate in the newly found country.

Blacks who participated in the organizational aspect of black communities often differed on what they believed the most important cause was. Some fought hardest for black education, knowing that knowledge was power. As slaves they had been kept from education because many white Americans believed that with knowledge, blacks would no longer be any good to them as slaves. Many whites continued to discriminate in education even as the free black communities grew, either believing that blacks were incapable of achieving the type of education they pursued for themselves, or the more racist belief that blacks just were not worthy of proper education. Either way, most whites did not feel that adequate black education was anything they needed to bother themselves with. Other black activists believed that the fight towards abolition was the best cause because if their brethren were still enslaved then the race as a whole was still enslaved.

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Late eighteenth-century advocates of abolition believed that free blacks could not adequately fight for equality in America if over half a million blacks were still enslaved in America. What did that say about the capabilities and potential of the black race if most of them were unable to change their lives for the better? Furthermore, since the inclusion of the Fugitive Slave Cause in the Constitution threatened even freedmen, abolition must be an immediate goal. Without an end to slavery, no black man or woman was safe from slavery. To promote each of these goals of the reform movement blacks established several types of organizations. Many blacks sought to work for more than one, or all, of these causes.

There is one thing that brought all blacks together, and that was the racism that each of them faced every day in America. Whether rich or poor, old or young, man or woman, blacks were stereotyped as a group based on their skin color. This racism of white America brought blacks together regardless of their class, age or gender. Mulatto or light skinned blacks were discriminated against based on the color of their skin and even if dark skinned blacks managed to make a good living for themselves, they too were categorized along with the rest of their race. Racial discrimination made it so that most blacks were unable to participate equally in American society and politics, or obtain good employment, being given only the menial jobs in most places of work. Many blacks wondered what good their freedom was if whites were going to continue to oppress them based off the color of their skin.

Racism was the driving force behind the building of the free black communities, and all other pursuits stemmed from the desire for black America to get white America to stop judging them based on the color of their skin, but by their
individual abilities and character. Regardless of their similar ancestry, blacks were individual people, each with abilities and talents that could prove valuable to American society and politics. Black leaders were aware of this, they had seen their own successes contradict the stereotypes that white America had placed on the African race. What they sought to do was to instill this same type of pride in the larger black community so that the race as a whole could prove its worth. Therefore, community building became a “shared, collective, internalized experience.”14 As the infrastructure of the black community developed, so did their level of confidence and sophistication within American society.

As the black institutional infrastructure went through the process of maturation, black leaders began to develop a confidence that allowed them to begin to publish works that spoke out on issues in American politics that revolved around black America, like racism and slavery. Many white Americans had always spoken on behalf of black society. Most often whites misrepresented the black community. Too often the negative aspects of black society were pointed out while black achievements were seldom spoken about. Most whites did not view black organization and community building as a positive change. Rather, most whites became upset at the accomplishments of blacks as their institutions began to foster a new self-confidence, particularly among black leaders. Furthermore, very few whites were willing to help blacks in their pursuits of organizational and community building. There were very few men like Benjamin Rush who believed that helping blacks in their pursuits was the right thing to do. Blacks often

had to turn to other sources for assistance, as in the case of Prince Hall and the founding of the first African Masonic Lodge in March 1775.

During the Revolutionary era in March 1775, Prince Hall and fourteen other blacks became members of an army lodge of Free and Accepted Masons in Boston. The British had approved of the meeting of this small number of blacks to meet as a lodge. After the British left Boston, Hall and the others tried to gain acceptance from the American Masons. They were denied, but continued to meet through the war. Desperately wanting their own Masonic lodge, Hall wrote the London office in March 1784 requesting a charter for his group. Finally in the spring of 1787, Hall and his fellow Masons received the approval to establish their lodge as an official Free and Accepted Masonic Lodge in the United States. Originally called African Lodge No. 1, it became Lodge 459. Although the black Bostonians had received permission from London to establish this lodge, the American Masons continued to deny their legitimacy. Nevertheless, Hall set out to establish black lodges along the eastern seaboard, hoping to establish the first black national organizational structure in America. He succeeded in establishing lodges as far south as Baltimore, yet white Masons in America refused to accept the newly established black Masonic lodges. Some whites began to offer assistance to the pursuits of the black lodge but their assistance was most often paternalistic. In the end, blacks ended up using their own resources to establish their lodges. Hall succeeded in showing that blacks had the capabilities of establishing national organizations that brought them together on the issues that affected them most in America. Hall laid the foundation for a strong black community that sought to help African Americans live more equally in the newly established republic. These first
attempts at national organization showed the power of black collective action. Hall provided the inspiration for future groups to move forth with their plans for black institution building, despite the rejection or resistance from whites Americans. Hall also became a prominent figure in the black protest movement with the publication of his work, “A Charge” in 1797 that pointed out the duty of black Masons in the uplift of their race and the importance of religious piety among African Americans. He also brought attention to the importance of other themes in black America like unity, education, Christianity, self-criticism, and political agitation that developed later on in the black protest movement.

Hall had been one of the first to create a national organizational structure, but other institutions, although not immediately national in nature also played a significant role in black community building. There were two categories into which all black organizations fell. They were either secular or religious. The black church made up the group of religious institutions. After the founding of the first black Methodist and Episcopalian churches, many other sects began to develop independent black churches. The church was the cornerstone of the black community, giving rise to other types of independent black institutions. Even as numerous secular organizations formed, the church remained the most important institution within in the free black communities, spiritually leading blacks in all other pursuits.


16 Reed, Platform For Change, 67.
Upon arriving in Philadelphia in 1786, the Reverend Richard Allen realized that many of his African brethren had been forgotten by the white churches and that many were not attending regular services. He was given a time slot of five in the morning at St. George’s Church in Philadelphia, and upon hearing of a black preacher, “several souls were awakened…earnestly seeking redemption in the blood of Christ.” Realizing that blacks were seeking religious instruction, but due to racial discriminations had been seldom able to find it in the white churches, Richard Allen began to devise his plans for an independent black church. He continued preaching at St. George’s as well as other places, but he never abandoned the idea of establishing an independent black church. His moment for carrying through with his plans came in the early 1790s when an incident occurred at St. George’s that made the black congregants realize they could never be equal worshippers in white churches.

Through his preaching, Richard Allen had been able to drastically increase the number of black congregants at St. George’s and soon there was a need for a larger church. A new balcony was constructed, in large part thanks to the financial contributions of the black congregants. The blacks had always worshipped freely at St. George’s, sitting in the pews where they wished but as their numbers grew whites began to change their attitudes. Following the completion of the new balcony, blacks entered the church and sat in the pews they usually did. They soon realized that things had seriously changed and in his own words, Allen describes the events of that particular morning:

On Sabbath morning we went to church and the sexton stood at the door, and told us to go in the gallery. He told us to go, and we would see where to sit. We expected the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats. Meeting had begun, and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seats, the elder said, ‘let us pray.’ We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H__ M__, having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off of his knees, and saying, ‘You must get up—you must not kneel here.’ Mr. Jones replied, ‘wait until prayer is over.’ Mr. H__ M__ said ‘no, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and I force you away.’ Mr. Jones said, ‘wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more.’ With that he beckoned one of the other trustees, Mr. L__ S__ to come to his assistance…by this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in one body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church. 18

This event is significant for the future of black protest, because it was at this point that African Americans realized that even in the house of the Lord they could not receive equal treatment. Following this event the African Americans were “filled with fresh vigour to get a house erected to worship God in.” It was not an easy task. Several times they were approached by the elder of the Methodist church and threatened with disownment, to which they replied “if you will show us where we have violated any law of discipline of the Methodist church, we will submit.” Even though the Methodist elders could not provide this type of proof the black congregants involved with the erection of the African church were disowned. The black congregants did not become discouraged. They went out among the community in search of donations and in one day alone raised three-hundred and sixty dollars. Soon they had a location purchased for the building of the church, and with the help of blacks and whites, including Benjamin Rush and George

Washington, the black leaders had enough money to begin the construction of their church.\textsuperscript{19}

Initially Allen had purchased land on the corner of Sixth and Lombard streets in Philadelphia, but some of the committee found a spot that they believed better suited the community due to its larger size on Fifth Street. Allen refused to give up his location, having already gone into agreement with the owner Mr. Mark Wilcox. Nevertheless, the committee agreed to begin construction at the Fifth Street location. In an effort to show that he harbored no ill feelings, and likewise on behalf of the committee, Richard Allen was the first to break ground on the new project. This disagreement over the location of the new church was only the beginning of future disputes revolving around the church. The issue regarding the denomination of the church caused a split between most of the church members and Richard Allen, the man who had labored so long to see this project come to life.

In 1793 an election determined that most of the worshippers were in favor of being attached to the Episcopal Church, the new American branch of the Church of England. They appointed Allen as their minister, which he graciously declined. He stated that he was “born and awakened” under Methodism and that “the plain and simple gospel” best suited the coloured people and reminded his fellow blacks not to forget that “the Methodists were the first people that brought glad tidings to the coloured people.”\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, the committee decided to bring the new black church under the guidance of the Episcopal Church, appointing instead the Reverend Absalom Jones. Dedicated July

\textsuperscript{19} Allen, *LEGL*, 14-15.

\textsuperscript{20} Allen, *LEGL*, 16-17.
17, 1794, St. Thomas’s African Episcopal Church was the first African church or meetinghouse erected in the United States of America.\textsuperscript{21} It was not however the first independent black church; that would be the African Methodist Episcopal Church that was constructed by Allen following the break with those who chose to worship as Episcopalians.

Having still in his possession the piece of property on Sixth and Lombard Streets, and still believing that blacks needed a Methodist church to worship in, Allen decided to erect a Methodist church at this location. He had told the members of St. Thomas that he would not do anything to get in their way of building their church, and so once the committee of St. Thomas’s had finished raising their funds, Allen set out to raise the funds necessary for the construction of yet another black church. He was able to finish construction quickly on this project because he purchased an old blacksmith shop frame and had it moved to the location on Sixth and Lombard Streets. On July 29, 1794, Bishop Francis Asbury of the Methodist Church preached the first sermon and dedicated the African Methodist Episcopal Church, nicknamed “Bethel” in the hopes that it would be responsible for the “gathering in of thousands of souls.”\textsuperscript{22} AME continues to be the “oldest plot of land continuously owned by blacks.”\textsuperscript{23} Allen must have been overjoyed that July day; he finally had the black church he had dreamed of, one that would worship the Methodist faith and be a beacon of light to those black souls that felt they had been

\textsuperscript{21} Allen, \textit{LEGL}, 16.

\textsuperscript{22} Allen, \textit{LEGL}, 18.

\textsuperscript{23} Newman, \textit{Freedom’s Prophet}, 71.
forgotten in this earthly world. This joy and hope would soon be crushed as conflict over issues of ownership and frequency of black preaching arose.

Shortly after the dedication of the AME Church, the African founders were approached about incorporating their church to which they happily agreed to, only to find out that the incorporation had given the property of the church to the white Methodist Conference at St. George’s. The same church that Allen and his followers had walked out of for mistreatment now sought to control this newly erected black church. Allen would have none of this. Informing the church elders that the property was his because he had purchased it years before, he immediately sought to change the incorporation. This debate continued for roughly twenty years, with the leaders of St. George’s threatening to take the keys and books from the church several times. Finally, in 1807, Allen and the black officers of AME amended the incorporation without the knowledge of the white elders, to include the “African Supplement.” The addition of this supplement led to the final steps in obtaining independence which took place in the Pennsylvania courts. In 1815, it was agreed that Allen would buy back his own church. Finally in 1816, Richard Allen and the members of the Bethel Church were declared independent of St. George’s Methodist Church. In April of 1816, Allen and fifteen representatives met and organized the first General Conference to establish the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen was elected the first bishop of the AME Church and by the time of his death in 1831, the AME Church claimed over three thousand parishioners in Philadelphia alone. The AME Church is the first independent black denomination in United States history.\(^{24}\)

The importance of the black church cannot be overstated when discussing the black protest movement of the early republic. Arising as a protest against racial discrimination, it became “the most powerful social, political, and financial organization in nineteenth-century African America.” The black church was home to the first black meeting in 1817 protesting the American Colonization Society, its basements hosted numerous black schools and its members organized mutual aid societies and literary societies, and also published hundreds of sermons and pamphlets of protest. The AME Church established the first black publishing house, the African Methodist Episcopal Book Concern in 1817. From their inception, black churches began publishing hundreds of works, fostering a print culture that included, among other things, inspirational and educational pieces of work. As Frances Smith Foster states, “the Afro-Protestant Church…should be considered progenitors of an African American press.” It was also in the black church that free blacks find for the first time a place of acceptance and hope, and in turn they began to foster a sense of self-worth and determination that contributed to their capabilities as protesters.

Even though the importance of the black church never waned, most institutions tended to be secular in nature, helping to attract diverse groups of blacks, who may have attended different churches but wanted to work towards a similar goal in the movement. Rather than taking away from the black church, these secular institutions actually helped reinforce the church, leaving it open to focus solely on religious services.

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for its congregation, rather than working towards other pursuits such as black education or abolition.26 Such was the case with the Free African Society, founded in Philadelphia in 1787. Jones and Allen founded the FAS and did not want the institution to be religious believing that it would keep members from joining if they were not part of a certain religious sect. Rather they wanted the institution to be a place where all free blacks could come for assistance and guidance in their daily lives.

Following emancipation, many northern blacks may have believed that things were going to significantly change for them. They had heard the words, “all men are created equal” for quite some time from their oppressors and so they must have assumed that this meant them as well. They would soon find out they were gravely mistaken. Equality for all was not going to be a reality for the free black communities. Whites’ racial attitudes towards African Americans remained deeply entrenched. And even when blacks did catch a break like in the passing of gradual abolition laws, they were soon knocked back down with something like segregated church pews. Richard Allen knew that religious guidance was something that blacks desperately needed, but even more than that they needed a place where they did not have to worry about segregation or discrimination.

Believing that they had “obtained a good report” within their community and because of their “love to the people of their complexion,” Allen and Jones decided that they must form a society “without regard to religious tenets, provided, the persons lived an orderly and sober life, in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit

26Reed, Platform for Change, 59.
of their widows and fatherless children.” They wanted to emphasize the secular aspect of the society because they believed that regardless of one’s religious beliefs, people of color were facing the same discriminations. On May 17th, 1787 Jones and Allen put forth the Articles of the Free African Society in Philadelphia. In addition to providing free blacks a place of acceptance and comfort, the FAS was a mutual aid society. Members were to pay one shilling a month to the Society, which was used to provide for the needy of the group. The FAS became more than just a mutual aid society however. It was also a forum of racial uplift and moral improvement, despite its secular inception. The group did not allow any “drunkard or disorderly person to be admitted” and if after becoming a member one were to become either of the aforementioned, then they were to be “disjointed from us…without having any of his subscription money returned.”27 By applying these types of rules and regulations, the founders were attempting to hold blacks responsible for their actions. Black founders were fully aware of the stereotypes placed on the African race, and although they were aware that some blacks were indeed drunks and disorderly people, they were tired of whites assuming these traits were inherent to the race. The establishment of FAS is the first attempt by the African American community to insist that whites quit stereotyping the black race. It was steps like these that began to establish a sense of self-confidence, self-worth, and most importantly, the self-determination for blacks to do it on their own.

The presence of black community can be seen in social, political, economic, and religious institutions, as well as in the “sentiments based on shared experience and a sense of common destiny that bound community members together.” Certainly free blacks were never a uniform group. They differed in background, experience, and opinion. But they were “networks of family, friends, and coworkers cemented by bonds of obligation and shared disadvantage and were both based in and transcended geography.”28 They built upon this shared identity with the associations and organizations they built. As black leaders stepped up and took on the role of acting and speaking on behalf of the black race, they instilled in themselves and their followers a sense of African American pride that had not existed before. The black community became more than just a group of people forced to live in the outskirts of northern cities. It became more than just about shared identity and the desire to end slavery and racial discrimination. Black communities became about collective action working towards the ultimate goal of abolition and equality for all. By coming together and forming groups that worked towards smaller goals, like religious fulfillment, financial support, moral reform, or black education, blacks laid the groundwork for a community that sought to bring African Americans into the American political body and society.

While historians have differed in their opinions of just exactly who black leaders were speaking to when they wrote protest ideology, it is clear that they sought to speak to whoever would listen, black or white. But it was only in the action of community institution building that blacks developed this ability to provide for their own

28 Horton and Horton, In Hope, xi.
race, fostering a sense of leadership for their own race. Immediately following the Revolutionary War, early black leaders stepped forward to take the role of leading blacks out of the shadows and into the forefront of speaking about issues in America regarding the African American race. At first it was their actions and not their words that showed blacks’ ability to protest the wrongdoings toward their race. But these actions led to the development of a reform movement focused on the use of printed works. Black institutions that were developed in the post-revolutionary era often differed greatly in their purpose, but they showed that blacks were eager, and able, to develop independent black institutions. Black leaders sought to “define the standards of behavior which were acceptable for the community as a whole.” And very rarely did black organizations compete with one another because each was ultimately committed to eliminating slavery and racial discrimination. As important as these two goals were to the foundation of black American community building, nowhere was the collective action of blacks more important to the success of the black press than in the pursuit of black education and development of literary societies.

Black leaders pushed education as a means of transforming “the children of slaves into accepted citizens in a society dominated by whites.” Furthermore, many argued that education would lead to blacks performing in society “as capably as any other people.” The power of black education can be seen in many of the stories of former slaves who acquired the ability to read, often surreptitiously, realizing the power they

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would have in obtaining freedom and achieving a better life for themselves. Advertisements for black schools can be found on numerous pages of black newspapers in the antebellum era, showing that the goal of black education never ceased in importance. Before the establishment of black newspapers in the 1820s black religious institutions had worked towards black education by establishing black schools, often in the basements of their churches. Abolition societies had also worked on educating black children. As contributory as these efforts were towards the advancement of the race, it was the development of black literary societies that “furthered the evolution of a black public sphere and a politically conscious society”\(^3\) by fostering a sense of self-worth and ability through black reading and writing.

By the early nineteenth century black education had become a central focus within the African American communities of the urban North. Blacks were aware of the threat that black education posed to the anti-equality status quo within American society. But they were also aware of the importance of education within their protest movement. Education of the free black communities would prove beneficial for a variety of reasons. Black activists believed that with an education black people would be more likely to obtain better jobs. This would contribute to the overall success of the black community. Blacks also believed that, if they became as educated as whites, political and social inequality would be less justifiable. Furthermore, black education contributed to the betterment of the race more generally in that if blacks became educated they would have more respect for themselves. They would then act like more respectable citizens which

could lead to equal participation in American society. But black education was also important for reasons that were specific to the black protest movement. Literary societies focused on both reading and writing skills, but it was the writing that could be used “as a means of asserting identity… and communicating with a black public” as well as with white society on issues that were important to the black community.  

African Americans realized early on in the development of the new nation that printed works could be extremely powerful and allow people to have a political voice even if the law or lawmakers refused them this voice. Many of the revolutionary pamphlets published in the American colonies were written by white men who were being refused representation within their own government. These pamphlets had been powerful in mobilizing the masses of people who felt betrayed by their government’s political body. Additionally, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution were extremely powerful works that helped establish an entirely new nation. The promise of freedom and equality implicit in these founding documents clearly inspired black protest. Black writers believed that if they could produce works equaling the quality of those written by the white revolutionaries, they, too, would forge a new type of nation, one that allowed them full citizenship and equal participation. 

Black printed works began appearing early in the new republic. From the time they were used, black printed works became the vehicle through which blacks sought to have a voice in American politics and society. But these early works were produced by a small group of elite African Americans who knew that in order to have a successful 

32 McHenry, Forgotten Readers, 23.

33 McHenry, Forgotten Readers, 23.
movement, they needed to have a larger writing community from which to draw on. They also knew they needed to ensure they had a large reading public that could read the ideas put forth in the printed works. At the turn of the century, there were still very small numbers of literate blacks in America. Black education was illegal in the slave states and had been ill-perceived by most whites in the northern states. Because of this, most newly freed blacks in the northern communities were only semiliterate or altogether illiterate.

To remedy this situation, free blacks began organizing literary societies with twin goals. First, the societies would provide the “means of educating individuals who would be prepared to perform as and would consider themselves capable, respectable citizens.”\(^{34}\) Second, these literary societies would produce a body of readers and writers who would become the foundation of the black protest movement. The literary societies emerged from the earlier black fraternal and mutual aid societies. The new literary societies became as important in fostering a sense of self-worth among African Americans as those earlier groups had been. But they began to take on an even more important role in the black community because of their emphasis on the printed materials so crucial to black protest. Literary societies “encouraged discussion and created a forum for debate on issues of racial and American identity.”\(^{35}\) Within these societies blacks obtained the tools necessary to have a voice in a society that sought to keep them shut out.

Literary societies provided a forum for black writers where their works could be published and discussed among the group. This was important because blacks could

\(^{34}\) McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 23.

try out their ideas on their own people before presenting them to the larger society that included whites. Blacks encouraged, discussed, criticized and took inspiration from the various ideas that were put forth by black writers in the literary societies. They also organized libraries and reading rooms where beginning readers could be instructed in the basics and advanced readers had access to printed works that helped increase their knowledge in a variety of areas. Many of the printed works available to readers in the literary societies would otherwise have been too expensive or impossible for most blacks to obtain. Literary societies also sponsored debates where future black leaders could speak on important issues in the black community. Public speaking was just a starting point for writing. If one could eloquently speak on the issues affecting the black community, then one could write those words on paper. These works could be mass produced for American society to read about and ponder. Literary societies helped develop a stronger, and ultimately a more politically conscious black community.\(^\text{36}\)

Literary societies were set up similar to the mutual aid and fraternal societies. Members paid dues, and that money was used solely for the betterment of the society and its members. The money allowed for books to be purchased which members could then check out for a period of time before being expected to return the items for others in the group to read. The money also went towards other activities, such as debates, that helped achieve the goal of black education. Additionally, all members were expected to uphold themselves in the highest degree and work towards the goal of black literacy, for themselves and the entire black community. This standard of behavior can be found in

\(^{36}\) McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, 50.
the constitutions of most black societies and organizations that were founded in the early republic and antebellum eras.\textsuperscript{37} This highlights the importance blacks placed on proper conduct and the appearance of the black community. But the development and success of literary societies were not just important for fostering a sense of self-worth and advancement of the race as a whole, but for the advancement of the black protest movement already underway in the early nineteenth century. This movement used print as its vehicle of protest and literary societies, more than any other type of black institution, played the most important role in the black protest movement. Highlighting the importance of literary societies was an editorial that appeared in the \textit{Colored American} in 1839.

[Literary societies] have a tendency, when properly conducted to unite talent and abilities which would otherwise be [lost?]; and the commendable spirit of competition which generally exists, engenders and fosters a taste for literary pursuits. A person [may] possess the necessary qualifications to become a public speaker, or the talent, which, if encouraged, and properly applied would eventually make him a good writer, but for the [existence?] of an association with kindred spirits he is deprived of the opportunity of exercising his natural abilities, he requires a field for practice where he can measure his talents and acquirements with others, so that he may judge his own [tendency?] by the merit of those with whom he [is] in competition, and when he is aware wherein he lacks, he can by study and perseverance easily attain an eminence equal with those who were formerly his superiors.\textsuperscript{38}

Literary societies were the starting point for much of the black activism of the antebellum black protest movement. Within the walls of literary societies the greatest black writers developed their skills. It was in the literary societies that blacks reached


\textsuperscript{38} \textit{The Colored American}, October 5, 1839; See also McHenry, \textit{Forgotten Readers}, 81.
their culminating experience of black community building by achieving the greatest goal that contributed to the black protest movement, black education.

Despite the hardships newly free blacks faced in the early republic, they were able to develop a sense of self-worth with the development of black communities based in independent black institutions. The building of black organizations brought about a new kind of self-confidence among free blacks that gave them the ability to begin speaking for themselves on the issues in America that affected them the most. Realizing that they were going to continue being held in an inferior position, despite their newly found freedom, blacks sought to change the minds of white America about their capabilities as members of the American political body and society. Through FAS, black churches, literary societies, and other institutions and organizations that were formed, blacks established for themselves a place that they could turn to in times of need and for education and racial uplift. These institutions in turn gave blacks a new sense of confidence, and this confidence in turn allowed blacks to begin to take care of their own race. More importantly for the first time, black leaders began to speak on behalf of their own race, putting forth positive images and achievements of the black race to counter the negative ones being portrayed by white America. It was through the development of the black community that the black protest movement got its start and that blacks began to address for the first time the issues in American society that most greatly affected them.
CHAPTER III

DEVELOPING A REFORM MOVEMENT:
THE USE OF PRINTED WORD AS A
VEHICLE OF PROTEST

The success of the American Revolution certainly proved that through collective and political action, the impossible can become possible. An entirely new country with a new form of government arose out of the conflict between Britain and the American colonies in the late eighteenth century. The colonists fought off their oppressor and sought to develop the land of liberty and equality for all. But the possibilities promised in America were limited to a select group. For free blacks living in the United States, the possible was in fact the impossible. 39 Although a handful of blacks were allowed to vote in a few northern states in the early republic (New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania did not limit voting based on race in their early constitutions), most states in the North completely excluded blacks suffrage from their constitutions. Despite their exclusion from the political process, blacks were the subject of many political debates in the early republic, most notably over slavery and abolition. As the subject of

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these debates, they were allowed very little official voice in matters that pertained to their existence or well-being in the United States.

Denied political rights and the freedom to involve themselves in matters regarding their race, many blacks felt the need to participate actively in American life following the American Revolution. Having witnessed the power of the collective action that had freed the colonists from their oppressor, free blacks in the post-revolutionary era set out to better the situation of blacks living in America. They sought to reform America in hopes that the ideals professed in its founding documents could become a reality for all American citizens. Establishing a reform movement was no easy task. In the later part of their movement free blacks established national conventions to discuss issues that needed to be addressed in America. But early on in the movement, there was very little means of this type of group cooperation because the black community was still in its early stages of development immediately following the revolution. Blacks needed a means by which they could express their sentiments and spread their message beyond their own neighborhoods, so that a broader community of blacks, as well as whites, could hear what they had to say.

Blacks were well aware of the success that the patriots had achieved in mobilizing the masses through the use of printed works such as Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*. They built upon the patriots’ tradition of using the printing press as a vehicle of protest. By the end of the eighteenth century, blacks had established print as the key to their reform movement. Through the use of pamphlets and especially newspapers, blacks printed a diverse number of works that protested against the African American situation and called for the reform of America. Print provided blacks the opportunity to speak to
white America regarding the issues directly affecting them. Many speeches, addresses
and sermons that were delivered by black orators were later printed in a pamphlet or in
black newspapers so that the message could be spread further. Printed works also
provided African Americans a way of communicating with each other, creating a larger
African American community than existed within their own city limits.

Just like the civil rights activists of the twentieth century used television as a
medium through which to spread their message of equality and the end to racism, black
leaders in the early republic and antebellum eras used print. “More than any other means,
the black press linked African Americans throughout the country in an otherwise
impossible national community.”40 It also brought them into the mainstream debate over
slavery and abolition. In order to understand how and why print played such an important
role in the African American reform movement, we must first take a look at the
development of print in America.

Several factors had to align themselves before large quantities of printed
works could be produced in America. The first hand press was brought over to
Massachusetts in 1638, by Reverend Joseph Glover. It was used primarily for religious
tracts and sermons, laws, and almanacs. Despite this early arrival of a printing press in
the colonies, it would be nearly a century before printers established themselves on the
American continent. Once colonists had developed agricultural systems that produced
surplus, they were able to trade with nearby colonies as well as other countries, bringing
about a demand for commercial news. The political and economic conditions in England,

40 Rael, Black Identity, 216.
the West Indies and other colonies were crucial to those colonists that were hoping to involve themselves in trade with these areas. Fluctuation of prices due to war, pirating on the ocean, and tariffs imposed by Parliament were all concerns for merchants in the colonies. Printed news-sheets provided the colonists with all of this type of information. But the lack of printers in the colonies slowed down the rate at which commercial news could be published. Furthermore, the meager means of transportation limited the distribution of printed works far beyond the seacoast towns. It was not until 1694 that a weekly mail service was established from Boston to New York. As the population increased in other major settlements the postal service expanded, and news became ever more important in the colonies.41

In addition to commercial news, the political affairs on the European continent were of great interest to Englishmen in the colonies. News-sheets, known as “courantos” focused solely on foreign affairs and became very popular in England. They began as single page sheets, but before long they developed into twenty page news-books. As the English Civil War progressed, domestic news became just as crucial as foreign, and in 1641, Diurnall Occurrences, the first newspaper dealing with domestic affairs appeared in England. It was published by Parliament and the King responded by developing another newspaper, Mercurius Aulicus, “mercury of the court” to voice his side of the

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41 For the most detailed account of print culture in the colonies and revolutionary era that I could find, please see Sidney Kobre, The Development of the Colonial Newspaper (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1960). Other works detail nineteenth century print culture, but Kobre’s work was the best account for understanding how print became an important part of colonial America. For early nineteenth-century American print culture see Carol Sue Humphrey, The Press of the Young Republic, 1783-1833 (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996) and William L. Joyce ed., Printing and Society in Early America (Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 1983).
controversy.\textsuperscript{42} The English Civil War caused print to become a means by which people in England could voice their own opinions and argue against those of their enemies. This tradition would soon carry over into the colonies when the colonists began having to deal with political affairs in their own region. But the suppression of print by the royal and Church leaders would keep the publication of these types of works limited primarily to English printers throughout the duration of the seventeenth century. By 1685, there were only four colonies with printing presses: Massachusetts, Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

By the end of the seventeenth century there were approximately a quarter of a million people living in the colonies. The population increases in the American colonies increased the number of people that could potentially become a reading public. As settlements became more established, a leisure class developed. This leisure class began building up private libraries filled with books imported from England. Furthermore, the Puritan Church began placing importance on education, especially in the northern colonies. In 1642, Puritan leaders passed the first law in the colonies that made sure parents were “teaching boys and girls the rudiments of reading and writing.” But by 1647, it became clear that the duty could not be left to the parents, and so the General Court of Massachusetts passed a second law that “compelled all towns with 50 householders or more to pay for the upkeep of a schoolmaster” and all “larger communities with 100 householders to found grammar schools.”\textsuperscript{43} The population growth and the increase in literacy greatly expanded the numbers of people that could

\textsuperscript{42} Kobre, \textit{Development}, 6.

\textsuperscript{43} Kobre, \textit{Development}, 4.
read. So by the end of the seventeenth century, the economy, population, and society were ripe for the distribution of printed works in the American colonies. However, colonists continued to import the majority of their printed works from Britain despite the fact that printers in America had a good environment for selling their works.

One of the biggest barriers to a printer who wished to make a living in the colonies was the fact that the governors in the royal colonies had a tremendous amount of control over the press in America. In 1683, instructions were handed down from the crown that stated:

> . . . and foreasmuch as great inconvenience may arise by the liberty of printing in our said territory under your government, you are to provide all necessary orders that no person keep any printing press for printing, nor that any book or pamphlet or other matters whatsoever be printed without your special leave and license first obtained.44

Additionally, when an attempt was made to publish commercial news in 1684, the Puritan Church established restrictive laws to “suppress any matter deemed obnoxious.” However, in 1695, “the House of Commons refused to renew the royal license system” freeing English newspapers from regulation.45 This greatly impacted the colonies as well. No longer were American printers under such strict regulations from the crown. With this, the first American newspaper made its appearance in Boston in 1704.

The emergence of a regular, though not daily, newspaper was widely accepted in the colonies. Not only could colonists get their news faster now that it was printed in the colonies, but thanks to decentralization, printers could increase their business by

44 Kobre, *Development*, 6

taking on jobs that dealt with non-religious works. More people began taking an interest in printing, and newspapers began to emerge in other colonial cities. As the eighteenth century progressed and tensions flared with Britain, newspapers dealing with economic and political affairs became crucial to the American society. During the American Revolution, Patriot and Tory papers made their appearance, each taking advantage of this still infantile process of distributing news. But even though printed works like newspapers and pamphlets became crucial to the political and economic affairs of the eighteenth century, printing procedures remained much the same as when the first hand press was brought over in 1638. But the early nineteenth century witnessed some revolutionary changes in printing that would not only increase the numbers of American works produced, but greatly reduced the cost of printed works as well.

One of the first changes in print technology came with the invention of the iron press to replace the wooden presses. Developed in 1800 by Lord Stanhope in Britain, the new iron press “allowed a larger sheet to be worked, and...took the impression at a single pull, since it was possible to make the metal platen of an appropriate size, which was not practicable with the old wooden platen.” 46 The problem with the iron press was that it did not increase the amount that could be printed per hour. In 1811, two Germans, Friedrich Koenig and Andreas Bauer, created a steam-powered press, reducing the manual labor involved in pulling down the wooden and iron presses. It also increased the amount of sheets that could be produced per hour. The key to this was the replacement of the flat platen used in the wooden presses, with a rotating cylinder that could move paper

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through rapidly. The invention was truly revolutionary, making it the “biggest single step forward” in print production. The Koenig and Bauer cylinder machine “quintupled the output of the hand-press” that had been in use for two centuries in America. More changes in printing technology occurred throughout the nineteenth century that only helped to increase the output of printed works. But by the 1820s, the technology was advanced enough that printing allowed for the publication of works at a cheaper price. With reduced prices, more people would have had access to printed works.

Advancements in printing technology were sought primarily for the production of newspapers. Between 1830 and 1850, daily newspaper production in the United States increased from 65 periodicals to 254. However, the new machines could be used for all types of printed works. By the time the first black newspaper, Freedom’s Journal appeared in 1827, black activists had been taking advantage of the printing press in the publication of numerous pamphlets throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The establishment of a black newspaper was an important event in black history. But it was also just an extension of American culture that relied on print as a vehicle of protest. Black activists would have undoubtedly been eager to take advantage of this “important tool to sway the ‘public mind’.”

Black printed works came in many forms. Many people are aware of the substantial contribution of slave narratives and autobiographies, as well as the numerous speeches, sermons, and poetry written by African Americans in the early years of the American republic, but few are aware of the importance of black newspapers and


pamphlets as a vehicle of protest. Pamphlets and newspapers were both important forms of protest in the reform movement. Of the two, pamphlets were the first to be used by black writers in the post-revolutionary era.

The history of pamphleteering dates back to the English Civil War when the revolutionary Diggers and supporters of the monarchy used pamphlets as a non-violent means of attacking each other. Pamphlets were then used as one of the primary forms of protest during the American Revolution by men like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson. And in 1789 in France, revolutionaries practically waged war against the ancient regime using pamphlets as their vehicle of protest.\(^{49}\) It is not hard to understand why African Americans in the early republic chose this particular method of protest since they had seen the results that pamphlets produced. Like those who had used pamphlets before them, they too were eager to spread their message and overthrow their oppressor. While blacks would eventually produce a variety of types of works, it is through the use of pamphlets that they began to “project their views into the public sphere.”\(^{50}\)

Once blacks began using pamphlets in 1794 they became the primary method of speaking to a large audience throughout the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Even after the establishment of black newspapers, pamphlets were frequently used. Often excerpts, or in some cases entire pamphlets were reprinted in newspapers. Pamphlets were easy to distribute because they were usually just a few pages in length and small enough in size that large numbers of them could be easily carried and distributed, unlike

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\(^{50}\) Newman, *Pamphlets of Protest*, 1.
books. They provided a platform for a diverse number of topics, whether it was slavery, racism, black education or racial uplift. Pamphlets “offered a media form that promised to preserve words and deeds,” and were “both a medium of the moment-allowing protestors to publish quickly their views-and a substantial document that could stand the test of time.” Each pamphlet contributed to the reform movement in some way or another. The black community produced hundreds of pamphlets between the American Revolution and the American Civil War.

One of the most important black pamphlets was the first one written by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. Published in 1794 “A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications” was the first printed protest against the treatment of blacks. As historian Richard Newman explains, “A Narrative” “became the hallmark of black protest.” Allen and Jones no doubt chose to write their narrative in the form of a pamphlet because they were aware of the success that pamphlets had played as part of the revolutionary protest, just a couple of decades before. The “Narrative” protested the accusations made towards black people during the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia.

The personal histories of Jones and Allen’s are similar to those of many prominent northern black reformers. Both Jones and Allen were former slaves who had

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51 Newman, Pamphlets of Protest, 2

come to Philadelphia after purchasing their freedom following the American Revolution. Jones had been born into slavery in Delaware in 1746. While enslaved he taught himself to read and write, and studied the New Testament thoroughly, something that would be beneficial later in his life when he became a lay minister at St. George’s Episcopal Church. In 1762 he moved to Philadelphia with his owner, and in 1785 he purchased his own freedom. Soon he built a home in Philadelphia, something very few free blacks were capable of doing. In 1787 he co-founded the Free African Society, making him a central figure in the early black reform movement.

Allen was also born into slavery in 1760 in Pennsylvania. Inspired by revolutionary ideology, Allen’s master allowed his slaves to purchase their freedom, and in 1780 Richard Allen became a free man. Like Jones, Allen taught himself to read and write while enslaved, and also became involved in religious pursuits. He became a member of the Methodist church when he was seventeen. Allen had high hopes for his brethren following the American Revolution, but realized soon that whites were not going to fulfill their declarations of freedom and equality for all. Both Jones and Allen became very prominent in Philadelphia’s black community, heading community organizations, helping to found the first independent black church in America and, following their 1794 pamphlet, shaping much of the protest strategy of the black reform movement. Their pamphlet was the first significant piece of black protest writing in the early republic.

Matthew Carey, the famous white printer, had accused Philadelphia blacks of "pilfering white homes as citizens fled the infected city” and of profiteering from the
event. Even though many whites knew that this had not been the case, not one of them stepped up to speak in defense of the black population. So Jones and Allen decided to speak for themselves stating “…we are solicited, by a number of those who feel themselves injured thereby, and by the advice of several respectable citizens, to step forward and declare the facts as they really were.”

The Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia in July 1793 was the first case of the disease in America. Known now to be caused by infected mosquitoes, yellow fever was “long believed to be a miasmatic disease originating in rotting vegetable matter and other putrefying filth, and most believed the fever to be contagious.” As the nation’s capital, Philadelphia was greatly populated. In early September, James Madison received a letter from Thomas Jefferson stating “that everyone who could escape the city was doing so.” Following the epidemic, 5,000 had died and it was estimated that another 17,000 had left the city.

During the epidemic, many white figures stepped up to assist with the ill and dispose of the dead. One of these men was Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and a Philadelphia physician. But no one contributed more to the aid of the sick than the black residents of Philadelphia. Because so many white people left the city, became ill, or died, very few whites stepped up to provide aid in the disaster. Believing that blacks were immune to the disease, Rush asked the members of

53 Newman, *Pamphlets of Protest*, 32


the African Society to come forth and volunteer. Jones and Allen were among two of the first to do so. Using the technique of bleeding the patients and then adding mercury to their systems, the African American volunteers treated hundreds of patients a day. They also carried and buried coffins when the deceased had no one else to do this.  

In his pamphlet, Carey had accused the blacks of “profiteering from the disease, and of plundering the houses of the sick.” Allen and Jones had “acted nobly, but many of the other blacks had not.” Carey stated that:

The great demand for nurses afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of the blacks. They extorted two, three, four, even five dollars a night for attendance, which would have been well paid by a single dollar. Some of them were even detected in plundering the houses. But it is wrong to cast a censure on the whole for this sort of conduct, as many people of have done. The services of Jones, Allen…and others of their colour, have been very great, and demand public gratitude.

Allen and Jones saw this accusation as just another example of “the slavery-inspired every day racism that dismissed black effort and opportunity.” Carey’s pamphlet was very successful; by the time Jones and Allen published their response, four editions of Carey’s pamphlet had been published. Although they had not personally been attacked, Jones and Allen refused to sit by and let further attacks against the black

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community persist. The men believed that those who had fled the city instead of providing assistance had no right to speak ill of those who had stayed and administered those in need. In response to the accusation of profiteering, Allen and Jones stated that the black volunteers “made no charge, but left it to those we served in removing their dead, to give what they thought fit” and “after paying the people we had to assist us, our compensation is much less than many will believe.”

They continued by listing out exactly what they had been paid, and what their costs were, stating, “we do assure the public, that all the money we have received, for burying, and for coffins which we ourselves purchased and procured, has not defrayed the expence of wages which we had to pay to those whom we employed to assist us.” They further commented on how hurt they were that blacks alone were accused of taking advantage of the situation, knowing full well that some whites had also done so. While much of their tone was deferential throughout the pamphlet, they did go as far as to ask “had Mr. Carey been solicited to such an undertaking, for hire, ‘what would he have demanded?” By responding to Carey in their own words, Jones and Allen began a movement that established print as the key to resistance and reform.

The importance of this pamphlet cannot be emphasized enough. It was the first African American polemic in which black leaders sought to express the anger of the black community and directly confront their accuser. It was in Jones and Allen that we

60 Allen and Jones, “A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia.” in Pamphlets of Protest, 34

61 Allen and Jones, “A Narrative,” in Pamphlets of Protest, 34

62 Allen and Jones, “A Narrative,” in Pamphlets of Protest, 35
see “this first generation of African American leaders...begin to assume the agency necessary to argue forcefully against oppression, to assert an empowering African American identity, and to create an independent voice that would influence the generations of rhetors-writers and orators-that followed them.” Following the publication of the “Narrative,” other black writers stepped up and began to speak through the use of printed word. Each author had one or more particular topics they discussed in their works. Among some of the most important goals of the movement were the abolition of slavery and the end to racial discrimination as well as achieving racial unity and obtaining an education. All of these goals were the topic of many of the earliest pieces of work produced by black activists. Each of these early works were crucial in establishing a reform movement based on the use of print.

Shortly after the publication of Jones and Allen’s work, Prince Hall published “A Charge” in which he stressed the importance of black unity as a method of surviving racial tensions. Hall wrote his pamphlet in Boston in 1797 where the Massachusetts Supreme Court had recently declared that slavery was no longer valid, thus freeing around three thousand slaves. This increase in the presence of free blacks in Massachusetts left most whites feeling uneasy and unwilling to accept these newly freedmen as equals. The locally influential Hall, who also founded the first African Mason group in America, felt it was his duty, as a black man and a Mason, to speak in favor of racial unity during the trying times that free blacks were facing in Boston. He

argued “that it is our duty to sympathise with our fellow man under their troubles” and that it was “necessary…to have a fellow feeling for our distres’d brethren.”

Although he was speaking to a group of Masons in Boston, Hall’s “Charge” was published in pamphlet form shortly after, and copies of it spread throughout the black community in Boston.

Hall’s pamphlet started the discussion among black activists of racial unity. Racial unity was especially important due to the extreme racism that blacks faced in America. In 1813, James Forten published one of the most significant pieces of work on the subject of racism. Titled “Series of Letters by a Man of Colour” Forten criticized white Americans for their restriction of black liberties. Forten had amassed a fortune in the sail-making business in Philadelphia. He had become one of the wealthiest black men in America, yet that did not stop whites from treating him as a second-class citizen. Furious at the introduction of a bill that restricted black emigration into Pennsylvania, and limited black residents from moving around the state, Forten pointed out the state’s hypocrisy. Having been the first state to pass a gradual abolition law in 1780, Pennsylvania had been a refuge for blacks looking for opportunities in America. Now with the introduction of the new bill Pennsylvania was not following through on its constitutional promise of liberty and equality for all men. Forten stated in his pamphlet that Pennsylvania “is almost the only state in the Union wherein the African race have justly boasted of rational liberty and the protection of the laws, and shall it now be said they have been deprived of that liberty.” Forten also argued that all blacks should not be

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judged according to the few who are bad. Those who had done wrong should be punished according to the laws of the state, but should not be sent away, or sold back into slavery as some whites proposed to do. Forten was adamant that whites should live by the motto "The Law knows no distinction" and treat blacks as individuals, based on their character, not their color. "The same power which protects the white man, should protect the black," Forten argued and blacks, if treated equally under the law would "cheerfully submit to the laws, and aid in bringing offenders against them of every colour to justice." Before Forten’s pamphlet, black writers tended to be cautious and apologetic. Forten’s work is one of the first examples of a more assertive black rhetoric.

While racial unity and racism were extremely important topics in the reform movement, no topic was covered more by black activists than that of black education. The pursuit of education was an important aspect of white American life. Whites placed importance on classical learning especially. Black leaders were eager to have their brethren partake of this type of education. But education for blacks also had a more significant meaning. Whites justified slavery and restriction on free blacks’ liberties, at least in part, on claims of blacks’ intellectual inferiority. By proving blacks’ intellectual achievements, activists could undermine whites’ claims. Prince Saunders’s pamphlet was among one of the earliest and most influential in shedding light on the importance of black education. Written in 1816, Saunders’s pamphlet urged black Americans to “cultivate the arts and sciences” since they have “contributed to human happiness and


improvement.” Saunders pointed out that there had never been a time “when the attention of so many enlightened men was so vigorously awakened to a sense of the importance of a universal dissemination of the blessings of instruction.” In regards to the reform movement, Saunders argued that the only solution to the unjust treatment of blacks in America was “the intellectual…improvement and elevation of the people of colour.”67

Blacks did not initiate the pursuit of free black education in the United States. One of the most successful accomplishments of the early white abolition societies had been the establishment and sponsorship of free African schools. Starting in 1787, the New York Manumission Society began the process of establishing schools for free black children in New York City, and by the 1820s, it had “administered nearly a half-dozen schools” and “over two thousand black pupils received an education as NYMS-sponsored schools.”68 Furthermore, these early abolition societies had employed black teachers, one of the few ways in which blacks were allowed to participate in these early abolition organizations. But even with the incorporation of black teachers in the organization, the early white abolition societies failed to allow blacks autonomy in their own education. Saunders’ pamphlet is one of the first works that highlights the importance of black education. Following his pamphlet, black activists continued discussing the importance of education throughout the nineteenth century.

The early activists had laid the foundation for future generations of activists. Their pamphlets were critical to the development of the reform movement. The first

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generation of black activists had begun speaking about the horrors of slavery and inequality and the need for racial unity and black education. They had even achieved some successes in their reform movement. They were among the first Americans to question African Americans place in society when they realized that the American ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution did not apply to blacks. By the 1810s a new generation of activists had taken the lead. In 1816 this new generation witnessed an event that would drastically change the black reform movement and the use of printed works.

The year 1816 marked the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS) which sought to colonize free black Americans in Africa. The event represented a turning point in the reform movement, because colonization, with its implicit threat of forced removal, challenged the stability of free blacks in America. After the founding of the ACS, the reform movement took on a more defensive tone as blacks realized they had very little chance of obtaining freedom and equality in America. Black protest against the ACS led to the development of the first black newspaper in America, Freedom’s Journal. Blacks now could spread their message with a new medium that covered a broad spectrum of topics and allowed them “unprecedented access to public debates.” With the publication of the first edition of Freedom’s Journal, the reform movement changed forever.⁶⁹

In 1816, African American reformers received a blow so detrimental to their cause that it threatened everything they had been working to achieve for nearly forty years. That year, a New Jersey Presbyterian minister named Robert Finley led the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS), an organization dedicated to colonizing free black Americans in Africa. Inspired by British efforts to colonize free blacks in Sierra Leone, the ACS sought to appease white Americans who viewed increasing numbers of free blacks as problematic to the United States. Additionally, the Society argued that it intended to assist free blacks who had voluntarily been seeking to emigrate to Africa. In response to the efforts of ACS, black leaders developed the world’s first independent black newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, as a way of voicing their opposition to the ACS’s plans.

The idea for black colonization did not originate with Robert Finley. Since the late eighteenth century some blacks had been searching for an alternative home after they realized that the ideals of American democracy were not going to become a reality for them. Their efforts were supported by white allies like Anthony Benezet and Benjamin Rush, two of the most prominent white abolitionists in the eighteenth century. Following
the Haitian Revolution and establishment of the first independent black nation in the Western world, many blacks in America began to take more interest in leaving America for Haiti. Even Canada became a possible location for an independent black colony.

Paul Cuffe, a black ship captain, had traveled frequently to Africa looking for possible locations for African American emigration. Cuffe’s interest in emigration was “to bring Christianity to Africa, and to further the cause of black independence.” In 1815, Cuffe left America for the colony of Sierra Leone with thirty-eight emigrants aboard his ship. There were a number of whites who supported this venture. They viewed it as a way to help blacks return to their homeland where they could establish an independent black nation, free from the prejudices they faced in America. Whites in this camp tended to be philanthropists, abolitionists, and clergy, mostly from the northern states. The ACS appealed to them as a means of emancipation without the threat of increasing the number of free blacks in America. The ACS also appealed to slaveholders unwilling to free their slaves for fear of having large groups of free black in America. They believed that blacks were incapable of assimilating into American society, and tended to view them as a nuisance that needed to be dealt with. The ACS provided a means of emancipation for these slaveholders, promising to ship the free blacks out of the country once they obtained their freedom. Although they claimed to have the best interests of all Americans, black and white, in mind, the ACS is a perfect example of the increasing racism and hostility in early nineteenth-century America.

The ACS was influential from its inception. Its membership included some of the leading political figures of the day, including Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, Francis Scott Key, and Daniel Webster. Even the prominent abolitionist William
Lloyd Garrison supported the ACS until he was convinced by some prominent African American leaders of its true intentions and racist ideology. Fourteen state legislatures praised the society and in 1819 the ACS received 100,000 dollars from Congress allowing for the departure of the first ship. On January 1820, the Elizabeth set sail from New York headed for Freetown, Sierra Leone, with three ACS agents and eighty-eight black emigrants on board.

By 1816 there was a mixed response towards colonization from blacks in America. The ACS attracted a diversity of people, including abolitionists and clergymen, that is easy to see why the society initially “blinded some black leaders to its initial thrust.”

The society stated that they intended to Christianize and bring commerce to Africa, and this appealed to some blacks. But these ideals were also attractive to many Southerners, and as their numbers increased in the society, the ACS took on a much more racist tone. Nevertheless, throughout its entire existence there remained a small number of blacks that supported the ACS.

Despite the small group of supporters of emigration, the efforts of ACS were an insult to most black Americans. Blacks believed they had proved their citizenship through the improvement of the race and the development of independent communities. Furthermore, many argued that they, more than most whites, deserved to call America home since their ancestors had dripped blood, sweat, and tears on its soil. One free black stated, “the Colonization Society trifle[s] with the liberties of five hundred thousand freemen of colour, whose rights to the country are equally as good as theirs…and many

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70 Nash, Forging Freedom, 234.
of whose fathers fought and bled for the liberty we enjoy… I know that I speak the
sentiments of nearly all my brethren.” Blacks also claimed that their military service in
the American Revolution and the War of 1812 should guarantee them all the rights that
came with American citizenship. With the development of ACS, black opposition to
colonization became even more prominent. Blacks mainly opposed colonization because
of their unwillingness “to leave their enslaved brethren.” and their assertion of their
“rights as Americans.” Most blacks viewed the efforts of ACS as a means of
strengthening slavery in America. Free blacks had been influential in the individual
emancipations of numerous slaves. And immediate abolition was among the goals of the
black reform agenda. Ridding America of free blacks would rid America of the “strongest
voices against slavery,” leaving slaves alone to fight against proslavery advocates.
Many free blacks knew from personal experience that fighting slavery while still
enslaved was a difficult, if not impossible, task to accomplish.

Black activists fought the ACS from its earliest days. Black opposition
became more hostile as blacks began to realize that emigration was not necessarily going
to be voluntary. They responded in a variety of ways. Most immediately, in 1817, blacks
in various cities gathered in protest, forming the “first widespread use of meetings” for
the African American community. These meetings expanded on the organizational efforts
the independent black communities had developed in the northern states. Blacks had
already created a “grid of communication” throughout the northern states, and opposition

71 Freedom’s Journal, September 7 1827.
72 Bacon, Freedom’s Journal, 23.
73 Horton and Horton, In Hope of Liberty, 188.
to ACS “began to weave these strands into an organized network.”\textsuperscript{74} The use of mass meetings linked African Americans communities in various cities, but black activists wanted to be brought into the mainstream debate over colonization. Black activists continued the tradition of utilizing the press as a vehicle of protest. Through the use of printed works, black activists became “of the utmost importance in crippling the colonization movement…and in winning” several white supporters “away from the snare and toward” the “unequivocal demand for immediate abolition of slavery.”\textsuperscript{75}

Blacks had been publishing influential works for more than twenty years when the ACS formed. Black activists of the early movement had primarily published their opinions in pamphlet form. Although capable of reaching a large audience, pamphlets limited how much information could be covered in each piece of work. The works of early black activists were occasionally published in white newspapers. But because these newspapers usually charged a fee to include black authors, black leaders realized they needed their own medium through which to express their concerns on a variety of topics to reach a large audience. For a decade blacks struggled in their protest against ACS, failing to change the minds of most whites towards colonization. Finally, amid “this dark and gloomy period of despair” black Americans received their light at the end of the tunnel. In 1827 \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, the first independent black newspaper, was published. With the establishment of \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, the press became inextricably linked with the protest of colonization. None of the black papers created after \textit{Freedom’s

\textsuperscript{74} Bacon, \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, 23.

Journal turned their back on the issue of colonization. Blacks understood just how qualified their role in public sphere discourse was, and they knew they would only receive a voice through the use of the press.\

Newspapers became the most “important agents” for spreading the message of black protest and activism. Following the publication of Freedom’s Journal, at least a dozen black newspapers appeared along the northeastern seaboard throughout the remainder of the antebellum era. The newspaper “was the first organized attempt by black Americans to use a serial publication to ‘lay [their] case before the public.’” This public included blacks and whites. The paper’s editors became heroes in the black community as the people realized that the “united views and intentions of the people of color” would finally receive proper representation. Establishing a newspaper also meant that blacks no longer had to rely on the “well-meaning but often misguided white advocates” to spread blacks’ message in white newspapers.

In the beginning, two free-born African Americans, Samuel E. Cornish and John B. Russwurm, edited Freedom’s Journal. Born free in Delaware in 1795, Cornish moved to Philadelphia at the age of twenty. He began to teach in a school run by John Gloucester, the minister of the First African Presbyterian Church. In 1817, Cornish

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76 Rael, Black Identity, 214.
77 Rael, Black Identity, 214.
78 McCarthy, “‘To Plead Our Own Cause;’” in Prophets of Protest, 115. McCarthy argues that the development of the newspaper led to a more radical, interracial movement that tended to focus primarily on abolition as the key to reform in America.
80 Rael, Black Identity, 215.
became interested in the ministry and he began studying in the Philadelphia Presbytery. He became the first black American “to undergo the…training and testing procedures required for Presbyterian ordination.” During his time as a minister in Philadelphia he became frustrated with whites who professed their religious convictions while doing nothing to assist the plight of blacks. In 1820 Cornish left Philadelphia and moved to New York.

Cornish became a very active member of the free black community in New York, especially in the anti-colonization movement. While in New York, Cornish obtained a position as a minister in the New York Presbytery. He was very successful in this endeavor, but the church he worked for was suffering financial problems. Approached by a group of black businessmen in 1827 to become the senior editor of Freedom’s Journal, he gladly accepted. He maintained this position for only six months before resigning to become the editor of The Rights of All which began publication in 1829. His departure left John Russwurm as sole editor of Freedom’s Journal.

Born free in Jamaica to a white father in 1799, Russwurm received an education at a boarding school in Quebec. He moved to the United States at thirteen. After graduating from private school in Maine, Russwurm became a teacher in the Boston area. In 1824 he became the first African American student at Bowdoin College.

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in Maine. After graduation he planned on studying medicine. These plans never panned out, and in 1827 he accepted the position as junior editor of *Freedom’s Journal*.82

While the editorship of the newspaper can be solely attributed to Cornish and Russwurm, it took many other people to undertake such a task. The paper required a substantial amount of financial resources, and the editors needed people to promote and distribute the paper. Historian Jacqueline Bacon concludes that the paper received financial support from numerous black and white subscribers, despite the arguments from other historians who suggest only a few whites subscribed. In a letter written by Cornish and Russwurm to Isaac Barton, a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, it’s evident that white subscribers were abolitionists. “We must look to our friends in different parts of the Globe” to accomplish the task of establishing a newspaper, the editors claimed.83 Blacks often referred to white abolitionists as their “friends” and the letter implies that the “support of white abolitionists was instrumental to their project.”84 White support was crucial to the endeavor, but it should not overshadow the black support that the paper received, or the fact that the paper was operated by blacks themselves.

Once they acquired their positions as editors, Cornish and Russwurm controlled the newspaper’s direction. They intended for the newspaper to connect blacks

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84 Bacon, *Freedom’s Journal,* 47.
who lived in different states. The editors stated that there numerous blacks who were “scattered in handfuls over nearly 5000 towns” and could “only be reached by the Press.”\(^8^5\) Black newspapers helped to strengthen the black community by speaking on behalf of the free and slave.\(^8^6\) The press brought together those people that would have otherwise been divided. The press allowed blacks to speak to one another about the issues most pertinent to them. The black editors also intended for the newspaper to be a means of debating current social and political issues with white America. The press became a sort of battlegrounds “over which blacks…contended with white supremacists for the prize of public sentiment.”\(^8^7\) As blacks voiced their opinion in the press, whites responded. A number of racist articles appeared in the white press, but this did not stop blacks from continuing their work of publishing their opinions.

Opposition to colonization can be found frequently in the pages of *Freedom’s Journal*. No one was more adamant that the colonization scheme be revealed for its true intentions than black activist David Walker. In 1829 he published his work “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World.” Excerpts of his work appeared in the pages of black newspapers. David Walker was born in North Carolina to a slave father and free black woman, making him free. In the 1820s Walker moved to Massachusetts where he became a businessman. He got involved in the Boston Colored Association, at which one point he was the leader of the organization. He was involved with *Freedom’s Journal* as both an agent and writer for the publication. When Walker wrote his appeal there had become a

\(^8^5\) *Freedom’s Journal*, March 16, 1827.

\(^8^6\) Rael, *Black Identity*, 216.

silence among the leading white abolition groups regarding the ACS. Walker stated that the colonization scheme was “demonstrative proof, of a plan got up, by a gang of slave-holders to select the free people of colour from among the slaves.” He stated that “America is more our country than it is the whites… we have enriched it with our blood and tears.” Walker wanted blacks to “prove to the Americans and the world, that we are MEN, and not brutes as we have been represented, and by millions treated.” According to Walker, white Americans who did not believe that African Americans would throw off their “murderous government and ‘provide new guards for our future society’” were gravely mistaken. Although few black leaders were ready to use violence, Walker’s work mobilized the masses and helped start a grassroots movement. Although many other black writers had already become less cautious in their tone, Walker’s “Appeal” was the first example of militant African American rhetoric. It was also one of the first works that truly scared white Americans, causing great commotion in the southern states particularly.

Although anti-colonization rhetoric covered the pages of Freedom’s Journal, the editors chose to do something that their white counterparts had seldom done in their newspapers. Cornish and Russwurm ran articles written by whites in favor of colonization with a counter-argument published alongside. Whites very rarely ran the opinions of blacks regarding colonization in the pages of their papers. A few months after


90 Bacon, Freedom’s Journal, 25
the publication began, Cornish and Russwurm stated in an article that they were opposed to colonization, but “if we were wrong, our minds were open to conviction, and we wished to see the subject discussed.” The editors published arguments in favor of colonization, their primary focus was on showing the racist element of ACS.

Black activists viewed the colonization scheme as “an unwarrantable meddling with the rights and interest of a large portion of our citizens.” The black editors knew that it was up to them to set the record straight. Russwurm argued that, “The Society had been very zealous and successful in imposing upon the public, the foolish idea that we are all longing to emigrate…I deem it high time that our friends, in different parts of the Union, should know the truth of the matter—that we are…opposed, in every shape, to the Colonization Society.” Another thing that upset blacks was that the ACS never bothered to consult African Americans, preferring compliance rather than the “true exchange of ideas.” In part, this was the motivation for establishing a black newspaper. Russwurm commented that whites’ determination to keep them out of the colonization plans, “shall not compel us to relinquish our pens.” If they “represent, prejudicially the interests of thousands who had never delegated them any such power” then “we will

91 Freedom’s Journal, June 8, 1827.
92 Freedom’s Journal, May 18, 1827.
93 Freedom’s Journal, August 17, 1827.
94 Bacon, Freedom’s Journal, 192.
strive all in our power to open the eyes of our brethren” to the “motives of all pretended friends.” Russwurm’s comments suggest that even some white abolitionists supported the colonization movement. Black activists viewed this as harmful to their reform movement.

Although the editors provided a front and center stage for the colonization debate, *Freedom’s Journal* devoted itself to numerous other topics that could be discussed from the black perspective. Cornish and Russwurm summed up the paper’s primary purpose in their opening editorial:

> We wish to plead our own cause. Too long others have spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations by things that concern us dearly…for though there are many in society who exercise towards us benevolent feelings, still…there are others who make it their business to enlarge upon us the least trifle, which lends to the discredit of any person of colour…From the press and the pulpit we have suffered much by being incorrectly represented…our vices and our degradation are ever arrayed against us, but our virtues are passed by unnoticed…In the spirit of candor and humility we intend by a simple representation of facts to lay our case before the publick, with a view to arrest the progress of prejudice.96

Black activists had been speaking for themselves for decades by the time *Freedom’s Journal* came into existence. But the publication of the newspaper allowed blacks a new medium through which to more broadly spread their message of reform. Blacks knew the impact that this publication would have on their movement. One black activist commented, “I rejoice that…we have an organ through which we can communicate with each other, and correspond upon all the different subjects which demand our attention in all parts of the free states; yes, and I may say, in the slave states

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95 *Freedom’s Journal*, July 6, 1827 and September 21, 1827.

96 *Freedom’s Journal*, March 16, 1827.
and throughout the world.\footnote{Colored American, November 30, 1840.} The editors noted that there were “FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND free persons of colour, one half of whom might peruse, and the whole be benefited by the publication of the Journal.” Furthermore, the editors stated that “no publication, as yet, has been devoted exclusively to their improvement.”\footnote{Freedom’s Journal, March 16, 1827.} Freedom’s Journal filled that void.

By the time Freedom’s Journal appeared, black activists were still struggling with achieving the goals they set out early in the movement. By 1830 the slave population had actually increased from the late eighteenth century. European immigration had helped strengthen racial discrimination towards blacks. The black community throughout the North was still divided, particularly economically. And there were still significant numbers of uneducated blacks living in America. The reform movement seemed to be failing. Furthermore, the ACS’s membership continued to grow, threatening the existence of blacks in America. But black activists were not deterred in the least. They actually became more motivated, producing greater numbers of works in the post-ACS era. They continued speaking about the same issues that early activists had. Their letters, pamphlets, speeches, and sermons appeared in the pages of black newspapers. Newspapers became the convenient forum for debate on the issues pertinent to the reform movement.

Prince Hall’s “Charge” had started the discussion of racial unity in 1797. By the time Freedom’s Journal appeared in 1827, black leaders still struggled to unite the black race. David Walker criticized his brethren for their lack of unity as a community of
oppressed people. “Do not two hundred and eight years…of intolerable sufferings teach us the actual necessity of a general union among us? Shall we keep slumbering on, with our arms completely folded up, exclaiming every now and then, against our miseries, yet never do the least thing to ameliorate our condition, or that of posterity?” Unity was essential to the elevation of the race. Walker argued that the “primary object…to unite the colored population” was the only way to “ameliorate our miserable condition.”99 But unity remained a difficult task. In his correspondence with Frederick Douglass, James McCune Smith pointed out that “the main reason why we are not united is that we are not equally oppressed…In each one of the free States, and often in different parts of the same State, the laws, or public opinion, mete out to the colored man a different measure of oppression.”100 One example is the issue of black suffrage. In states like Massachusetts, free blacks had the right to vote. But by the 1820s in New York, new property qualifications denied most black men equal suffrage. Black leaders insisted that their shared oppression as members of the black race should have been enough to unite them. Leaders urged all blacks to work together to achieve equality and argued that each member of the black community had something they could contribute to the movement. Thomas Jinnings urged black Americans to “come forward and help us; we want you to display your talents as men” and contribute to the reform movement. Too many blacks, Jinnings argued, buried “their talents in the earth, and are lost to society.” In order to achieve elevated status in America, it was necessary for blacks to unite, and for people to contribute what they could to the movement, so that whites could see that blacks were


100 *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, May 12, 1854.
capable of participating in American life. Blacks, more than whites, realized “the relative uniformity of their social experience” which led them “toward a more highly integrated notion of black identity.” This shared social experience should have been the glue that held the movement together, but throughout the entire movement, it remained a struggle to unite the entire black community in efforts of reform.

Blacks knew that the ideals of American democracy had yet to become a reality. They also realized that very few whites were willing to do anything to help alleviate the situation of black Americans. Blacks were the only people capable of changing this situation. Who better to fight oppression “than those conscious of suffering,” those who had drunk “the dregs of the embittered chalice…the oppressed are ever their own best representatives.” Even the handful of black elites who did not suffer economically had experienced racism. Black leaders did not believe that they should be judged as a race. They were determined to prove that any black American who fed into the stereotype of miscreants and vagrants, were only this way because of the “circumstances of his condition.” Blacks could better their situation of they were given more opportunities.

Black leaders focused a lot on the economic position of African Americans. The majority of free blacks maintained an economic condition in American society that was deplorable. Even though many former slaves had skills that should have benefitted them in the workshops, lumberyards, and shipyards of the Northeast, most whites were

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101 Freedom’s Journal, April 4, 1828.
102 Rael, Black Identity, 25.
103 Freedom’s Journal, March 30, 1827.
unwilling to provide them with the jobs in which to use these skills. The situation worsened in the 1820s when European immigration began to increase. These new immigrants competed for the only jobs that blacks were able to acquire. Blacks in the reform movement placed a great deal of emphasis on their economic situation, mainly because many were finding themselves unable to provide for their families. More importantly in the context of reform, many blacks believed that they needed to show whites that they were capable of providing for themselves once they became free. Perhaps then whites would be willing to allow blacks the freedom to choose the jobs they wished to have, instead of assuming that they were only capable of mediocre positions.

Black leaders called upon whites for economic assistance, asking some white business owners to place African Americans in positions that would allow them to gain some economic independence. However after looking into the economic situation of blacks in New York following the Panic of 1837, the Colored American editors saw very few blacks working in positions that would help elevate the economic status of blacks.\(^\text{104}\) As one delegate of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society noted, “wherever the colored man is connected with the houses of (white men), it is as the lowest drudges.”\(^\text{105}\)

Black leaders frequently discussed economic self-help. For instance, Freedom’s Journal printed a July 1827 speech by businessman and reformer Austin Steward about the importance of economic self-help. His address, originally delivered in

\(^{104}\) The Colored American, July 28, 1838.

Rochester, New York, to celebrate the end of slavery in that state, argued that economic self-improvement would allow blacks to determine their own future. “Remember at all times, that money, even in your hands, is power: with it you may direct as you will the actions of…the pale [white] population of the country.” Not only was the acquisition of money important in securing their own future, he asserted, but black economic progress could also improve whites’ opinions of African Americans. On another occasion, Freedom’s Journal editor John Russwurm argued that by obtaining economic independence the black community would “add much to our respectability in the public estimation.” Russwurm also stressed the importance of managing money, not just acquiring it. “What profit is it, if many engage in business, & make much money thereby, and the whole is wasted as fast as earned.” Rather, blacks should learn money management so that there could be a greater accumulation of wealth within the black community. Black leaders believed that once economic independence was achieved, blacks could prove they were capable of providing for themselves. Whites would no longer be expected to take care of the black community. If provided with support and opportunity, blacks could assimilate themselves into American society as profitable citizens.

Elevation of the race as a means of achieving equality in America was a common theme among black writings. Even though abolition and civil rights were the end goal of the reform movement, black leaders believed they could only be achieved through the elevation of the African American race. Many whites believed that blacks

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107 Freedom’s Journal, March 21, 1829.
lacked the standard for republican virtue and were incapable of being part of a modern, industrializing society.\textsuperscript{108} By trying to become virtuous, black Americans sought to fulfill that crucial republican ideal of virtue. Black leaders emphasized the importance of virtue as a way to “determine right actions and fashion a vision of life as a powerful rebuke to the system that sought to deny them full humanity.” Slavery “was a life devoid of self-possession” while “virtue, on the other hand, held out the promise of a life of self-possession, a life lived in pursuit of actions consistent with a free person’s conceived good end or purpose in life.”\textsuperscript{109}

Black leaders’ determination to elevate their race also reflected the dominant ideology of self-help that was prominent in middle-class white America during the early nineteenth century. By improving one’s self through education, temperance, and the acquisition of skills that would benefit society, blacks could contribute to the overall improvement of the African American people. Improvement of the individual contributed to the elevation of the race as a whole. Jacqueline Bacon argues that “elevation was a form of resistance to slaveholding society.”\textsuperscript{110} Blacks were encouraged to dress modestly, avoid drinking, have obedience to law and to God, be frugal, and obtain other republican qualities that were popular in antebellum America.\textsuperscript{111}

Many black leaders believed that by reforming their morals, educating themselves, and emulating middle-class whites, it was very likely that they could achieve

\textsuperscript{108} Horton and Horton, \textit{In Hope of Liberty}, 165.


\textsuperscript{110} Bacon, \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, 110.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Colored American}, September 30, 1837
equality. Their hope was that if they became equal socially, whites would allow them to participate politically. Furthermore, elevation of the race would instill a confidence in black Americans that would make them want to be active in the movement to reform America. Once an individual achieved elevation, they too would have the means and desire to help others who may have yet to achieve the goal of self-improvement.

In no other aspect of free black life was self-improvement stressed more than in the pursuit of black education. Black activist William Whipper proclaimed that “it shall be our whole duty to instruct and assist each other in the improvement of our minds, as we wish to see the flame of improvement spreading amongst our brethren.” Education had already proved its use within the black community Whipper argued. “We find those men who have ever been instrumental in raising a community into respectability, have devoted their best and happiest years to this important object (education); have lived laborious days, and restless nights, made a sacrifice of ease, health and social joys” all in the pursuit of doing “justice to their fellow-men.” Education had allowed for black leaders to be able to argue publicly the issues that affected African Americans. Therefore, education was necessary to develop resistance among the rest of the African American community.

Throughout the entire movement, blacks remained unhappy with the educational opportunities provided to them by whites. The early black leaders had made black education a priority of the reform movement, but even as late as 1827, blacks were still protesting against the lack of equal education. The Freedom’s Journal editors stated,

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112 *Freedom’s Journal*, December 26, 1928.
“we believe, that it is time for us to be dissatisfied with our former irregular mode of education. The day has been, when if any of us could read it was considered ‘passing strange;’ and we believe this has been unfavourable towards our improvement… Education is so important, that we feel highly interested at all attempts [of obtaining it], however imperfect.” Black leaders were especially upset at the low expectations placed upon black children by whites. “Let our children and youth be but convinced, that as much is expected from them as from other boys of the same standing.”113 Black reformers took up the cause of educating the black community. They established numerous black schools in which many members of the black community were able to take advantage of receiving an education. In addition to publishing articles that spoke about the importance of education, black newspapers also published information on educational opportunities available to the black community. The frequent appearance of calls for black education in black newspapers proves that education was among one of the highest priorities of the reform movement. Obtaining an education was “was itself a form of resistance, an act of defiance against…a society that expected them to rise no higher than was needed for them to serve whites.”114

The establishment of Freedom’s Journal was a monumental achievement and turning point in the black protest movement. Blacks now had their own independent medium through which to express their opinions. After the appearance of Freedom’s Journal numerous other black newspapers began to appear. Freedom’s Journal also helped nurture the black community, something that was crucial to keeping the

113 Freedom’s Journal, May 18, 1827.

114 Bacon, Freedom’s Journal, 114.
movement going. The editors of *Freedom’s Journal* hoped that “the dissemination of useful knowledge among their brethren” would keep intact a community consciousness as African Americans realized there were services available to them within the black community that were impossible to attain within the white community. For example, African-American consumers could find out where to buy clothing, educate their children, and find treatment for illnesses all in one periodical. Never before had access to this variety of information been so convenient for black Americans. Solving these everyday problems for blacks provided another way for black leaders to show that the black community could thrive as its “members developed means for creating autonomy and self-respect.”

Before the appearance of *Freedom’s Journal*, it had been very difficult for black activists “to form and shape a consistent public image.” Access to newspapers provided the forum through which blacks could accurately represent their community. The paper also provided them the opportunity to become involved in the political sphere by presenting their opinions on current issues of the day. And through the use of newspapers, the black community network was strengthened. This strengthening of the black community is probably one of the most important outcomes of the black newspaper endeavor. *Freedom’s Journal* marked the beginning of a new type of print culture, one that included accurate representations of the black community in American society. If they achieved nothing else, black activists had at least brought their opinions into American political discourse through the use of print.

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115 Bacon, *Freedom’s Journal*, 73

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF

FREEDOM’S JOURNAL

By the late 1830s blacks had established the power of the black press as a vehicle of protest and reform. From the time that Absalom Jones and Richard Allen’s “Narrative” became the first black work to receive copyright status from the federal government in 1794, black activists claimed print as their preferred method of protest. Through the use of pamphlets and newspapers black writers incorporated themselves into American politics despite the frequent attempts to shut them out. Black activists worked tirelessly to reform the black community and American society by publishing works that demanded change, so that the black race could enjoy the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution.

Black activists used print as a means of developing independent black communities. The social and economic infrastructure of these communities came to define free black life in America. Furthermore, by focusing on their similarities, black writers brought these individual communities together to create a national community. Even though blacks were scattered throughout the country, they all shared the same oppression and racism. Printed works could reach communities across the nation,

something speeches and sermons were incapable of, and all black Americans could sympathize with their brethren in other communities. Without the use of the press, this would have been a nearly impossible task.\textsuperscript{118} The works of the earlier generations of black reformers also provided inspiration to later activists who read and cited these early works. But most importantly, print “provided a public voice to a politically powerless people.”\textsuperscript{119}

Up until the development of black newspapers, pamphleteering was the preferred method of printing among black activists. Pamphlets were cheap to produce and small which made them easy to carry. The very act of printing pamphlets “announced black independence and control” and “told white audiences that blacks were determined to enter the public sphere.”\textsuperscript{120} But pamphlets limited how much an author could include in his work. Pamphlets could be distributed across community lines, but blacks needed a medium through which they could cover a variety of topics in one publication. Newspapers provided blacks the forum they needed. The appearance of \textit{Freedom’s Journal} in 1827 established the press as the central information medium in the African American communities.\textsuperscript{121} The newspaper became the crucial tool of the reform movement because it allowed for a broad numbers of issues to be spoken about across the nation. From that moment on, black activists tried to always have ownership of a newspaper that they could use as a forum for debate.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[118] Rael, \textit{Black Identity}, 216.
\item[121] Bacon, \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, 251.
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The second black newspaper, *Rights of All*, came into publication May 29, 1829. Edited by Samuel Cornish who had left his position as senior editor for *Freedom’s Journal* in September 1827, *Rights of All* followed the tradition of its predecessor by focusing on opposition to colonization and the pursuit of abolition, civil rights, and education. But the new publication was more than just an extension of the *Freedom’s Journal* that existed in 1829. During his time with *Freedom’s Journal*, John Russwurm had changed his opinions regarding colonization. He had begun running articles showing his support for blacks who wished to leave America. Many people believed that Cornish began his new venture to counter Russwurm’s new found support of colonization. But Cornish insisted that his paper was not founded for this purpose. He stated that his publication was to “promote habits of industry and economy, and to inculcate the importance of an improved education.” Furthermore, Cornish added, the *Rights of All* “will at all times give a correct representation” of African Americans. In this way the new publication had the same goals that the editors had established in the opening editorial of *Freedom’s Journal*.122

The *Rights of All* was financed by blacks businesses in New York. Because of limited backing it was forced to be a monthly publication, as opposed to *Freedom’s Journal* which had been a weekly. Many people were leery to invest in *Rights of All* because of the financial problems experienced in publishing *Freedom’s Journal*. At its highpoint, *Freedom’s Journal* had 800 subscribers. However, that number refers to how many people received the paper, but not all of them regularly paid for their subscriptions.

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122 *Rights of All*, May 29, 1829.
Because of the deterioration of Freedom's Journal by 1829, Rights of All was unable to obtain the funding needed to continue. The publication only managed to make it for six months, publishing its last edition in October 1829.

Cornish and other black activists were determined to create a black newspaper that could sustain itself. For seven years after the demise of the Rights of All, no independent black newspaper existed in America. Finally in 1836, Cornish, along with two other black activists, Philip Bell and Charles B. Ray, published the first edition of the Colored American. The Colored American was the longest-lasting black newspaper up to that point. The Colored American expanded on the information that was provided by its predecessors. Up to this point, black papers tended to focus solely on the social and economic conditions of the North. However, the Colored American expanded its information to include some parts of the South as well. This demonstrates that newspapers, more than any other forum, provided the means by which to connect African American communities throughout the nation. The Colored American ceased publication in 1842. But black activists created more papers, never again being without one in publication.

Throughout the remainder of the antebellum era, numerous black newspapers appeared in the Northern states. In 1837 the Mirror of Liberty was created by activist David Ruggles. Soon after, in 1838, the National Reformer appeared, edited by William Whipper. The same year that saw the end of Colored American, also saw the publication of Northern Star and Freeman's Advocacy and the National Watchman Clarion, both founded in New York. In 1843, black nationalist and activist Martin R. Delany founded the Mystery. In 1847 appeared the Ram’s Horn which was launched by activist Willis A.
Hodges as well as the *North Star*. The *North Star* was the most famous periodical of the antebellum era and was edited by Frederick Douglass. Douglass was also the editor of *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* which appeared in 1851. The *Weekly Anglo-African* appeared in 1859, and was the final publication before the start of the Civil War. It is clear that despite the short duration of most of these papers, blacks were aware of the importance of having an independent periodical. Newspapers, more than any other medium, provided blacks the opportunity to “build a national network for reform and activism.”

All of the black newspapers published in the pre-Civil War era were reminiscent of the declarations made in the opening editorial of *Freedom’s Journal*. Black editors often uttered the words similar to Cornish and Russwurm in their editorials. The editors of the *Weekly Anglo-African*, stated, “We need a Press—a press of our own. We need to know something else of ourselves…Our cause…demands our own advocacy.” By the 1850s, the situation of African Americans had in many ways become worse. An editorial printed in 1859, shows that blacks still believed in the power of the press as the only means of having a voice in America. “The Liberty of Speech is unquestioned and indisputable, and Printing only gives circulation to what might be freely spoken…the triumphant success of our cause depends…upon the tremendous and inconceivable power of the free and independent press.”

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The black reform movement of the early republic and antebellum eras did not bring about freedom and equality for African Americans. Granted, blacks did achieve small successes throughout their movement. The abolition movement, in which blacks were very influential, was in part why America went to war in 1861, as the demand for abolition became stronger in the 1850s. And the black community was stronger by 1860 than it had been immediately following the American Revolution. Furthermore, black literacy rates were higher by the mid-nineteenth century than they had ever been. But it was only because of the Civil War and Reconstruction that all African Americans became legally free and equal. And the reality of equality was not fulfilled until well into the twentieth century. But the importance here is not whether blacks were able to obtain their broad goals of abolition and civil rights through their movement. What is more important is that they established for themselves a voice in America at a time when they were being allowed so little rights as citizens. The use of the press allowed African Americans access to some of the biggest debates in American history, all while they were being pushed farther out of American society. For a politically powerless people, print became a metaphor for black freedom in the early republic.126

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