

LIFE, LIBERTY AND PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS:

AFRICAN-AMERICAN INTERPRETATION

OF REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY,

1770-1830

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A Thesis

Presented

to the Faculty of

California State University, Chico

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

History

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by

Elizabeth Fortkamp

Fall 2014

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*DEDICATION*

*To those who continued to fight for their rights against all odds.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to those who have pored over this thesis, to those who instilled a passion for the search of the truth and to those who listened.

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ABSTRACT

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In the age of revolution African Americans fought for emancipation using natural rights. Specifically from 1770 to 1830, the ideals found in natural rights philosophy saturated African-American protest. This thesis will focus on such protest as it was manifested in the North and South and the use of natural rights. Prince Hall, the leader of the protest in Massachusetts, emulated the popular use of natural rights language to argue that blacks were men and deserving

of the rights due humanity. Hall utilized the political and legal systems in Massachusetts as those methods of protest were available to African Americans. This produced a very logical and structured form of protest. Other African Americans, such as Gabriel Prosser in Virginia, did not have such luxury and chose to combat their enslavement with the means left available to them, physical force. Gabriel led a conspiracy against Richmond in 1800 fighting for the freedom denied to slaves which he and his fellow conspirators believed to be their natural rights. In 1829 David Walker startled Americans with his “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World” that called for an acknowledgment of the natural rights denied to African Americans and a renewal of the fight. Though the means and message of protest varied in these examples, African American protest was deeply inspired by natural rights which was not only infused in their language but also crafted their arguments for emancipation.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Black Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mirrored larger cultural trends in their protests against slavery. The theory of natural rights held African-American protest in its grasp for almost sixty years as blacks sought to influence both mainstream American society and the African-American subculture. The idea that all men, including blacks, were created equal with certain rights captivated African-American abolitionists. How natural rights philosophy influenced this movement is the topic of this thesis.

This thesis will examine the methods and purposes of African-American protest using natural rights language. While it is impossible to know how deeply African Americans ingested natural rights ideology, it is clear that they used these principles when asserting their desire for liberty. Natural rights principles inspired African Americans.

The use of natural rights in arguments for freedom is clearly illustrated in the lives of Prince Hall of Massachusetts and Gabriel, sometimes known as Gabriel Prosser, from Virginia. Prince Hall, born a slave, purchased his freedom in 1773, and became the leader of the Boston black community and an Episcopalian minister. Hall is perhaps best known for establishing the first African-American free mason lodge, acquiring a charter from the British in 1780s. Hall led the crusade against slavery in Massachusetts during the late 1770s until his death in 1807.

Natural rights language flooded his petitions and pamphlets as he argued against slavery.<sup>1</sup> Hall

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis will closely examine Prince Hall's 1777 petition to the General Council and House of Representatives of Massachusetts as well as Hall's 1797 "A Charge." Prince Hall was chosen for this study because of his leadership in protesting slavery and for his use of the rather typical natural rights language. Other petitions from other unidentified authors exist and are examined in the course of the second chapter which focuses on



chose, as his course of action, words to combat slavery. Hall flung the Revolutionary leaders' arguments concerning natural rights at the very governments they established claiming African Americans possessed natural rights as human beings.<sup>2</sup>

The foiled 1800 conspiracy to overthrow Richmond and assert black freedom, labeled Gabriel's Rebellion, followed a second alternative means of protest, physical force. Gabriel, an enslaved blacksmith who had acquired a quasi-free status, led other slaves in a rebellion seeking their liberty from a world which allowed them only an occasional taste of freedom. The conspiracy emphasized African Americans' right to freedom. Though no written documents from the conspirators themselves exist, other sources, such as court records and newspapers, recorded the conspirators' motive as a desire for liberty. Driving this decision to act was the belief in natural rights. African Americans, equally with whites, deserved the God-given liberties which all men naturally possessed. Unlike Hall, the conspirators involved in Gabriel's Rebellion sought to claim, support, defend and maintain the rights they believed they inherently possessed, with force. No petitions or appeals to the government exist nor were any generated by the conspirators as this means of protest was not available to the enslaved Virginians. What does exist are the court records, newspaper accounts and other documents written by leading whites discussing the conspiracy and documenting the conspirators'; use of natural rights ideology in their story and defense. Gabriel's strategy to overthrow the government necessitated secrecy. Thus natural rights ideology propelled conspiracy legitimizing, they believed, the use of force just as it had legitimized violent revolution in 1776.<sup>3</sup>

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petitions, pamphlets and court cases which deal heavily in natural rights language.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 26, 202; Loretta J. Williams, *Black Freemasonry and Middle-class Realities* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracy of 1800-1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 3, 8-9.

Prince Hall's and Gabriel's two means of protest raise questions as to the efficiency and legitimacy of each. The primary factor determining whether slaves would strive to gain their rights through legal or lethal channels was the availability of such options. Hall had the luxury of access to legal means while Gabriel, devoid of such opportunity, chose violent protest as other means of emancipation had evaporated during the previous decade. Most in the free African-American elite community acquainted with natural rights ideology adopted protest via words. However, this did not necessitate leniency or mild language while criticizing and condemning slavery as a sin against human nature. Seeking to prove they deserved liberty, advocates for peaceful protest endorsed demonstrating African Americans' merit through righteous living. Improvement societies played a key role in this crusade. Religion likewise played a significant role in the ideas, culture and community of African Americans, slave and free.

Religion, akin to natural rights, established a conviction in the equality of blacks on the basis of their humanity. Religious denominations, predominantly Evangelical sects and the Quakers, crusaded against slavery as a moral ill inflicted both upon the slave and the master. African Americans found a semblance of biracial community and a belief in equality within these churches. Religion influenced both Hall and Gabriel in their mission to end slavery. It provided arguments and illustrated the compatibility of African Americans with white culture.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis will argue that natural rights, reinforced by religion, inspired African Americans to use the means available to them to achieve freedom. Ultimately militant arguments emerged after sixty years where natural rights dominated the legal and political arguments against slavery. Thus, this thesis will first examine natural rights ideology found in the writings

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<sup>4</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 138, 254; Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonia and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 53.

of liberal and republican philosophers and Revolutionary leaders. Secondly, it will delve into Prince Hall's Revolutionary-era, African-American protest, via petitions, and its role in the eventual abolition of slavery in Massachusetts through the court system in 1783. Third, the thesis will study Gabriel's Conspiracy as an example of claiming liberty via force and the importance of natural rights and Evangelical religion on this plotted rebellion. An epilogue will briefly touch on the arguments of the African-American abolitionist movement from 1800 until 1830, and examine both the peaceful and violent segments of that movement. Ultimately, the story of African-American protest from 1770 to 1830 rests on the same natural rights ideology that inspired the American Revolution.

## CHAPTER II

### NATURAL RIGHTS, REPUBLICANISM AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Natural rights became the battle cry of the British colonies in the 1760s. From that time onwards men like James Otis, Samuel and John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson fought to assert the rights they believed they inherently held. Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, claimed that three fundamental rights occurred naturally within all men: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. While other revolutionary leaders claimed property instead of the pursuit of happiness, these three rights became symbolic of natural rights philosophy in the United States. Black leaders would later claim these natural rights using the arguments found in liberal and republican ideologies, which revolutionary leaders popularized.

Liberal philosophy centered primarily on the rights and liberties of the individual. If the state held the rights of the individual as of paramount importance, society would function as intended. Republicanism ranked as the chief competitor to the liberal philosophy's creed of the individual's importance. Republicanism held the good of the whole community as the principal duty of the state in providing a secure environment for its citizens to enjoy their liberties. Necessary for the formation of a republican society was a virtuous and knowledgeable citizenry.<sup>5</sup> Historian Jack Greene argued that by the mid-1700s an increasingly prevalent belief had taken

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (Jun., 1992), 11-38; Rodgers traced the historiographic debate of Republicanism in his essay synthesizing the definitions of republicanism of many historical groups. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I shall adopt Gordon S. Wood and Robert Shalhope's definition of republicanism as it parallels Montesquieu's philosophy with ease. Shalhope defined republicanism as "maintaining public and private virtue, internal unity, social solidarity, and vigilance against the corruptions of power" Robert E. Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (Apr., 1982), 335.

root that “no popular government could long survive without a virtuous citizenry which would eschew vice and luxury and put aside all individual concerns in pursuit of the common good.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, this republican, perhaps more than liberal, conviction about the need for a “virtuous citizenry” free from absolute authority translated over into American political theory.

The colonial leaders drew on the works of Algernon Sydney, Montesquieu and the works of Aristotle, Plato, Livy, Cicero and Harrington as basis of revolutionary principle and ideas.<sup>7</sup> However for the Founding Fathers, liberal philosopher and political theorist John Locke became a key influence in the ideas that shaped their ideas of rights and the form of government they would later adopt.

Locke argued that mankind lived in a state of nature possessing perfect freedom. However, dangers from others in the state of nature caused men to join together to form society and government for their protection. In order to join society, men must give up the state of nature with its ungoverned liberty and yield to the accepted rules of society. Locke’s ideal society was based on laws, made for the individual’s benefit. These laws are held secure by the legislature, to whom individuals must willingly consent. Though laws governed individuals, the natural rights of men, given by God, did not diminish nor disappear. Rather the rights that men naturally possessed remained with them and could not legitimately be alienated by laws or government. The acknowledgment of natural rights proved the determining factor if laws and governments proved legitimate or illegitimate.<sup>8</sup>

The individual played a significant role in Locke’s theory. For Locke, the individual’s

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<sup>6</sup> Jack P. Greene, “Values and Society in Revolutionary America” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 426 (Jul., 1976), 60.

<sup>7</sup> John Adams, “Novanglus, January 23, 1775” in *Tracts of the American Revolution, 1763-1776* ed. Merrill Jensen (1966; repr., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 301.

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (1690; repr., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 8,12, 15, 17, 52, 66.

rights occupied the fundamental place in society as the purpose for government consisted in the protection of these rights. Dismissal of these rights merely illustrated the illegitimacy of the regime. Thus, the key to a rightful government lay in the acknowledgement and protection of men's natural rights. The preservations of individual liberty held a prominent role in ideas driving the American Revolution.<sup>9</sup>

Pivotal to understanding Locke is his concept of compact government. The legitimacy of a government lay in the approval and acceptance of its rule by the people. The violation of the compact by the government, especially the protection of the people's natural rights, ended the legitimacy of the government to rule and allowed the people to form a new government. For Locke the power of any state lay rooted in the people. Without the people's approval that state had violated the purpose of its existence.<sup>10</sup> Thus the individual reigned supreme in Locke's theory.

Algernon Sidney, Locke's contemporary political theorist, also played a significant role in shaping the American revolutionary leaders' ideas of liberty.<sup>11</sup> Sidney's ideas, unlike those of Locke, are categorized under the title of republicanism. Republicanism, as opposed to Locke's liberal or individual-based theory, asserted the true purpose of society as the good of the whole, rather than merely the individual. However, both philosophies used natural rights language to strengthen their arguments. Thomas G. West, editor of the 1990 edition of Sidney's volume *Discourses Concerning Government*, writes "Sidney ... belong[s] to a supposed tradition of 'classical republicanism' stemming from Machiavelli and ultimately the ancients. ... Sidney is as

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography" *The William and Mary Quarterly* 29, no 1 (Jan., 1972), 59.

<sup>10</sup> Locke, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Spelling variations of Algernon Sidney name exist, most predominantly Syndey.

much a natural rights and contract man as Locke.”<sup>12</sup> Revolutionary leaders, including Thomas Jefferson; John Adams; Jonathan Mayhew, a Massachusetts minister; and Arthur Lee, a Virginian politician, frequently cited Sidney in their works.<sup>13</sup> Sidney argued for liberty based on laws, similar to Locke. However, Sidney differed from Locke in his justification of civil disobedience. Locke argued one could challenge the established authorities based on the violation of natural rights or the compact the people made with their leaders. Sidney condoned noncompliance when laws did not align with Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Similar to Locke, Sidney argued for the supremacy of law. Sidney posed a rhetorical question asking:

...if the safety of the people be the supreme law, and this safety extend to, and consist in the preservation of their liberties, goods, lands and lives, that law must necessarily be the root and beginning, as well as the end and limit of all magistrates power, and all laws must be subservient and subordinate to it.<sup>15</sup>

Thus Sidney argued that the foundation of laws lay rooted in the natural rights of the people. It is interesting to note that Sidney referred to these rights or benefits residing in the people whereas Locke refers, almost exclusively, to men not to the people. This emphasis placed on “men” rather than the “people” reveals a key difference between his liberalism and Sidney’s republican ideology. While Locke sometimes used men in a pluralistic sense the very word suggests an emphasis on the individual not society.

The republican thinker Baron Charles de Secondat Montesquieu’s work *Spirit of the Laws* shaped the ideas of government held by the founding fathers. In his political treatise Montesquieu argued the importance and reason for laws. He argued that laws exist because they

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<sup>12</sup> Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, ed. Thomas G. West (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1990), xxiv.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

<sup>14</sup> Locke, 111, 114; Sidney, 428.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

arise “from the nature of things.”<sup>16</sup> Central to Montesquieu’s thesis is a belief in the benefit of a republican and/or democratic government. He argued that the governed should choose their rulers because they possess a natural ability and understanding of what is best for them.<sup>17</sup> This “qualification” came as a result of democracy’s one necessity: virtue. Montesquieu argued that “virtue in a republic is a most simple thing; it is a love of the republic; ....The less we are able to satisfy our private passions, the more we abandon ourselves to those of a general nature.”<sup>18</sup> Montesquieu further asserted that “love of the republic ...is that of equality,” one that “limits ambition ...to the sole happiness, of doing greater services to our country than the rest of our fellow-citizens.”<sup>19</sup> This idea that the country as a whole deserves more than the individual marks Montesquieu as a republican thinker. Because of this Montesquieu defines limits on equality citing that “extreme equality” harmed society and a democratic republic must avoid the two extremes that would destroy it, inequality and extreme equality.<sup>20</sup> Both of these tendencies destroyed the virtue upon the society rested. To protect virtue, liberty, regulated by law, must be guarded. The deprivation of liberty, slavery, extinguished virtue, which corrupted both slave and master.<sup>21</sup> The fact that men are born equal caused Montesquieu to describe slavery as “unnatural.”<sup>22</sup> Slavery must be practiced with caution “for utility ...and not for pleasure” as it easily invited vices opposed to republican virtue.<sup>23</sup> Montesquieu asserted that “nothing more assimilates a man to a beast than living among freedmen, himself a slave. Such people as these

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<sup>16</sup> Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1749; repr., New York: Hafner, 1949), 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 240; Montesquieu interjected a discussion on black slavery arguing that “were I to vindicate our right to make slaves of the negroes, these should be my arguments”: the economics of plantation slavery, the physical appearance of blacks repulsed other men, blacks lacked common sense and were not Christian (238-239).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.



are natural enemies of society; and their number must be dangerous.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, lowering men to brutes in great numbers would incite rebellion and strip a republic of the necessary virtuous citizens. Thus for the good of society slavery offered little and presented a threat to the security of the whole, thereby endangering the whole. Virtue and liberty must be held paramount to protect the republic.

Locke, Sidney and Montesquieu hold similar definitions of freedom. Locke argued that freedom lay rooted in law, without which no freedom exists.<sup>25</sup> He defined an individual’s liberty as freedom of “his person, actions, possessions, and his whole property within the allowance of those laws under which he is, and therein not to be subject to the arbitrary will of another, but freely follow his own.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Sidney’s definition argued that “liberty consist[ed] only in being subject to no man’s will, [as]... nothing denotes a slave but a dependence upon the will of another.”<sup>27</sup> While these political thinkers agreed that liberty consisted in freedom from the domination of arbitrary will Montesquieu defined liberty in narrower terms. He defined two sorts of freedom: philosophical and political liberty. Montesquieu specified these freedoms, where Locke and Sidney did not, as separate and yet simultaneously important. He claimed that “philosophic liberty consists in the free exercise of the will; or ... an opinion that we have the free exercise of our will. Political liberty consists in security, or, at least, on the opinion that we enjoy security.”<sup>28</sup> This separation of philosophical and political liberty came as a result of Montesquieu’s belief in the tenets of republicanism. Historian Gordon S. Wood argues this republicanism necessitated the definition of liberty. Wood notes that:

according to the classical republican tradition, man was by nature a political being, a citizen who achieved his greatest moral fulfillment by participating in a self-governing republic. Public or political

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>25</sup> Locke, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Sidney, 402.

<sup>28</sup> Montesquieu, 183.

liberty...meant participation in government. And this political liberty in turn provided the means by which the personal liberty and private rights of the individual... were protected.<sup>29</sup>

According to Wood's definition Montesquieu falls within republican ideology where Locke would define private not political liberty as the chief necessity and value within a free society. Montesquieu also argued that liberty consisted of the ability to do that which is right and what the law permits, denying the individual "unlimited freedom."<sup>30</sup> Analogously Wood defined liberty within republicanism as achievable only "when the citizens were virtuous - that is, willing to sacrifice their private interests for the sake of the community....Public virtue was the sacrifice of private desires and interests for the public interest. It was devotion to the commonweal."<sup>31</sup> Sacrifice for the good of the whole held a pivotal role in Montesquieu's creed of liberty.

These writers analogously defined liberty as freedom from dependence and the arbitrary will of another while defining liberty as the ability to do as one wishes. Although they also understood that liberty must be constrained within laws so each could be free and unafraid of his neighbor.<sup>32</sup> Also inherent in natural rights thinking lay the idea of property. Locke argued that "every man has a *property* in his own *person*: this no body has any right to but himself."<sup>33</sup> Locke emphasizes property asserting that men have the right to private property. Sidney also asserts the value of property and its centrality in natural rights ideology. Although a key factor, Sidney argued that "property ... is an appendage to liberty; and 'tis as impossible for a man to have a right to lands or goods, if he has no liberty, and enjoys his life only at the pleasure of another, as it is to enjoy either when he is deprived of them."<sup>34</sup> Thus, Sidney clearly placed the principal rights as life and liberty, from which stemmed the right to property.

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<sup>29</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1991), 104.

<sup>30</sup> Montesquieu, 150.

<sup>31</sup> Wood, 104.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 8; Locke, 32; Montesquieu, 151.

<sup>33</sup> Locke, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Sidney, 402-403.

The revolutionary leaders in the colonies took the ideas of the natural rights movement and modeled their actions and form of government after the ideas of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence asserted that "the primary purpose of government, according to the Declaration, was to secure man's inalienable rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>35</sup> For the colonial leaders the driving factor of the protests and rebellion against Britain was the fight to ensure their political freedoms that protected their private liberties. These leaders approached government with a "common set of assumptions" mistrusting the government because of corruption and the potential for unchecked authority.<sup>36</sup>

The revolutionary leaders argued that the government's power had limits and needed checks to balance that power. Representation and the three branches of government recommended by Montesquieu would help to limit the government as would a constitution. However, the best check against the encroachment of the government on the rights of the people was responsibility to and regulation by the people themselves.<sup>37</sup> These checks formed the basis of the federal government the revolutionary leaders instituted after the Revolution. But the reason for rebellion lay in the belief that Britain threatened the rights of the colonists, especially the political rights, which guaranteed private or individual rights.

One of the first men to protest the restrictions on the public or political liberty of the colonists was James Otis, who, in his *Rights of the British Colonies* of 1764, argued for the essential rights central to the later Declaration of Independence. Otis defined life as the original right granted to men, one that cajoled them into forming society for the protection of this right.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Greene, 53.

<sup>36</sup> Shalhope, "Towards a Republican Synthesis," 65.

<sup>37</sup> Greene, 53.

<sup>38</sup> James Otis, "The Right of the British Colonies," in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776*

The violation of natural rights, seen in the domination of one man's will over another's life, called into question the validity of the society.<sup>39</sup>

Otis' concern about the rights of the colonists stemmed from the power of the government exercising its prerogative over the colonists. Otis argued that when the British government deprived the colonists of their rights, without their consent, it had made the colonists slaves.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Samuel Adams argued that "it is the greatest absurdity to suppose it in the power ... of men ... to renounce their essential natural rights, ... when the great end of civil government ... is for the ... protection ... of those very rights: the principal of which... is ... life, liberty and property."<sup>41</sup> Therefore enslavement of the citizenry occurred when the government stripped the people of the means to protect these rights themselves. Otis, Adams, and other revolutionary leaders likened their situation to that of slavery. This language would have profound effects on the truly enslaved population of the colonies.

John Dickinson likewise argued that liberty, seen most vividly when lost, was central to life and happiness. Dickinson stressed the word slavery and painted a vivid picture of the most abject form of slavery, which he characterized as a government independent of its citizens and people forced to be dependent on their government. For Dickinson, this dependence constituted the most "miserable" and "disgraceful" form of slavery.<sup>42</sup> Historian Robert Webking summarized Dickinson's argument for the inherency of liberty which imparts a "special dignity" stemming from the rational capability of humanity. The capacity for this allowed men to decide

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ed. Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 425.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Adams, "A State of the Rights of the Colonists" (1772), in *Tracts of the American Revolution*, ed. Jensen, 237.

<sup>42</sup> John Dickinson, "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies," 1768, Letter IX, in *Tracts of the American Revolution*, ed. Jensen, 154-155.

for themselves their actions and lives.<sup>43</sup> This rationality requires liberty and allows men freedom from dependence on another person. Thus without this reliance slavery becomes null and void as slavery is the complete dependency of one upon another.

Though freedom, liberty and slavery were buzzwords in natural rights' rhetoric, this did not end slavery in America. Leaders used the concept of dependence synonymous with slavery, although some argued that the utter denial of the rights of blacks though chattel slavery benefited the public good, thereby making it acceptable. In *Novanglus* John Adams asserted that slavery caused the free to place higher value on liberty as those living in slavery saw the full manifestation of tyranny displayed in slavery. Adams defined freedom and slavery as opposites, asserting "the very definition of a freeman, is one who is bound by no law to which he has not consented."<sup>44</sup> Thus subjection to laws created by another instituted slavery for those who submitted.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly some revolutionary leaders did not include slaves when arguing that rational thought allowed liberty and self-government. As the new states began forming their state constitutions the question arose who "all men" were in regards to natural rights. George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776 asserted that "all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent natural rights, of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; among which are, the enjoyment of life and liberty."<sup>46</sup> This inevitably raised the question who "all men" were and if that included slaves and free blacks. The Revolution raised, not answered, this question. The axiom that human beings possessed

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<sup>43</sup> Robert H. Webking, *The American Revolution and the Politics of Liberty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 46.

<sup>44</sup> John Adams, "Novanglus, January 30, 1775" in *Tracts of the American Revolution, 1763-1776*, ed. Jensen, 315.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 315-316.

<sup>46</sup> Virginia Declaration of Rights, 1776, as quoted in Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy in the Struggle to Create America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 211.

liberty as a natural right abruptly ended at the color line in the predominant culture in the late eighteenth century.

Many revolutionary leaders actually acknowledged blacks' right to liberty and denounced slavery as an evil. Arthur Lee of Virginia asserted that "freedom is unquestionably the birth-right of all mankind, of Africans as well as Europeans, to keep the former in a State of slavery is a constant violation of that right, and therefore of Justice."<sup>47</sup> Similarly Luther Martin of Maryland later argued against slavery on ideological grounds. Martin declared that "*slavery is inconsistent with the genius of republicanism, and has a tendency to destroy those principles on which it is supported, as it lessens the sense of the equal rights of mankind, and habituates us to tyranny and oppression.*"<sup>48</sup> He cautioned against slavery because of its incompatibility with natural rights. He argued that slavery would harm the colonists themselves by degrading their morals and making them unfit for the republic. Thomas Jefferson in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* complained of the evils the slave trade had brought to the colonies. Jefferson claimed the slave trade as a source of British tyranny against the colonies, though this did not shift to the slaves themselves.<sup>49</sup> James Otis declared that blacks were no less human because of their differences from whites and they were equally entitled to natural rights as whites. Otis asserted the idea of black equality with a rhetorical question:

does it follow that 'tis right to enslave a man because he is black? Will short curled hair like wool ... help this argument? Can any logical inference in favor of slavery be drawn from a flat nose, a long or short face? Nothing better can be said in favor of a trade that is the most shocking violation of liberty....It is a clear truth that those who everyday barter away other men's liberty will soon care little for their own.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Arthur Lee "Address on Slavery," Rind's *Virginia Gazette*, March 19, 1767, in Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), 92.

<sup>48</sup> Luther Martin, "Genuine Information," Baltimore, *Maryland Gazette*, Jan. 22, 1788 as quoted in Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 26.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Jefferson "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" (1774), in *Tracts of the American Revolution*, ed. Jensen, 269.

<sup>50</sup> Otis, "Rights of the British Colonies" in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, ed. Bailyn, 439.

At least in the northern colonies the general sentiment shifted towards emancipation. Inspired in part by men like Otis, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, with Benjamin Franklin sitting as president, sent Congress abolitionist petitions that declared the equality and rights of all mankind.<sup>51</sup> By the efforts of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Pennsylvania state legislature adopted a gradual emancipation law in 1780 illustrating the plausibility of abolitionists' methods and the weakened foothold of slavery in Pennsylvania and the northern states.<sup>52</sup>

Historians Gary Nash and David Brion Davis have argued that America during the 1770s and 1780s had a strong abolitionist tendency, making that a prime time to abolish slavery. Full abolition failed to occur because of the great problem facing the revolutionary generation: implementation of ideals at personal cost.<sup>53</sup> The failure involved both economic and social complications: Interstate slave-based trade fueled the northern economy, and many whites feared black integration into white society. Thus, widespread northern unwillingness to confront these matters maimed the abolitionist movement during the Revolution.<sup>54</sup>

The prevailing theme in the revolutionary leaders' writings concerned the purpose of government as securing the liberties of the people and the collective good, not just the individual's liberties. The end of government lay in the indemnity of the three core rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Historian Greene asserts that the "security of each of these three rights was certainly among the most fundamental values of the Revolutionary generation."<sup>55</sup> These rights of life, from which all other rights sprang; of liberty, both the political and private; and the pursuit of happiness, whether property or the literal pursuit of an

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<sup>51</sup> Dumond, 43.

<sup>52</sup> Newman, 22, 29.

<sup>53</sup> Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 6, 17, 20, 31, 35.

<sup>54</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 86.

<sup>55</sup> Greene, 62.

individual's desired life encapsulated the core revolutionary principles.<sup>56</sup>

John Adams boldly declared in 1775 that the people could never lose the fight for freedom “because, if they live, they can be but slaves, ... slaves they would have been, if they had not resisted.... If they die, they cannot be said to lose, for death is better than slavery. If they succeed, their gains are immense. They preserve their liberties.”<sup>57</sup> Thus Adams issued the call to revolution, to the fight. The defense of their freedom brought to the fore the ideas of the revolutionary principles of natural rights, the republican ideal of the good of the whole and the sacrifice of individual rights to guarantee the rights of the whole. The ideas of the equality of all men, the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness invaded the colonies, filled the talk in the streets and in taverns, flooded the presses and made its way to all men, including those free and enslaved blacks whose lack of liberty, both political and personal, caused revolutionary arguments to resonate to their core. Blacks now had well-articulated arguments to use to fight for their liberty. Natural rights, liberal and republican ideals alike, would fill their arguments for liberty exposing the hypocrisy of the revolutionary leaders. The model of the American Revolution inspired black dissent in the form of political and intellectual arguments as well as in physical force.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>57</sup> John Adam, “Novanglus, no. 1” in Charles Francis Adams, ed. *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* Vol. IV (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 17.



## CHAPTER III

### PETITIONS, THE COURTS, AND THE “RHETORIC OF EMANICIPATION” IN MASSACHUSETTS

Natural rights language filled the pages of gazettes and pamphlets and echoed in the streets of the colonies at the beginning of the age of revolution. Boston, Massachusetts, resonated with republican and liberal language from the 1760s onward. Unsurprisingly, these ideas lucidly, and vehemently, expressed by leading revolutionary thinkers such as James Otis, and Samuel and John Adams trickled their way down to the lowest class of Boston society, African Americans. Blacks adapted their natural rights rhetoric and arguments to urge emancipation. Thus, with the example of the revolutionary leaders, African Americans fought for liberty using natural rights as a key staple in their rhetoric in petitions and eventually pamphlets and court cases.

Slavery in New England, especially focusing on Massachusetts, remained relatively insignificant though did exist throughout the eighteenth century. Historian Thomas Davis argued that the “lack of currency, its predominate pattern of small-scale agriculture, and the region’s marked hostility to all foreigner-black and white- served to keep its slave populations small.”<sup>58</sup> For these reasons slavery left only a minor mark on life in Massachusetts. In New England as a whole only one in eight households owned a slave and the slave population never exceeded sixteen thousand. More specifically, slaves in Massachusetts composed a mere two percent of the population or just over five thousand two hundred in 1776.<sup>59</sup> Though the number of slaves may

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<sup>58</sup> Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 3.

<sup>59</sup> “The Journals of each Provincial congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775, and the Committee of safety (Boston, 1838, 755),” *The Library of Congress*, <https://archive.org/details/journasloreach177417mass>.

have been limited, the colony still felt the pangs of the push towards emancipation.<sup>60</sup>

Slavery was mainly situated in urban settings such as Boston. This urbanization benefited slaves with exposure to new ideas and contacts. This exposure allowed greater education and knowledge of the world around them, unlike more isolated plantation slaves, in the South. Slaves in the urban North “were more likely to have a great deal more freedom of movement and therefore more opportunity for association” with both whites and free blacks.<sup>61</sup> Though masters attempted to isolate urban slaves, the metropolitan setting allowed an almost quasi-freedom for these slaves, who arguably “were often treated as part of the family.”<sup>62</sup> Through the mobility and accessibility of ideas urban slaves enjoyed a taste of freedom, creating a fervent desire for more. Unlike many other slaves, enslaved blacks in the North had a better chance of maintaining a family. Difficulties, such as separation, abounded but family life was possible.<sup>63</sup> This, too, caused Northern slaves to desire freedom for an unhindered family experience. Under Puritan law slaves had rights to the court system.<sup>64</sup> Because of the exposure to ideas, the taste of freedom and “slaves’ [use of] any kind of knowledge to their advantage,” it is no wonder that slavery in Massachusetts teetered on the brink of eradication at the end of the eighteenth century.

Though numbers remain vague and ambiguous, slavery held at least two percent of the population in bondage in Massachusetts during the eighteenth century. However, the black population was not composed exclusively of slaves; free people of African descent also lived and worked in the North. The numbers of African Americans in New England as a whole are as follows. In 1790, eight percent of African Americans were free, numbering around 766. In 1800

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>61</sup> James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25.

<sup>62</sup> Zilversmit, 31.

<sup>63</sup> Horton, 27; Zilversmit, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 19.

that number rose to 1,174, and, in 1810 the proportion of free blacks rose from eight to thirteen percent, or around 1,300.<sup>65</sup> This rise in the number of free blacks occurred as a result of a number of circumstances. In the eighteenth century Massachusetts, specifically, the increase of free blacks stemmed from: the ideals of the revolution, the low demand for slave labor and, more importantly, the actions taken by African Americans to secure their freedom. These actions represented in petitions to the government, court suits against individual masters for freedom, and service during the Revolutionary War slowly depleted Massachusetts of slave labor. Massachusetts freed itself in 1783 of slave labor when the courts ruled violated the state constitution.

As the Revolution's war of words intensified, Bostonian slaves just three years after the Boston Massacre of 1770 followed suit and petitioned for freedom. The uproar over the Massacre did not limit itself to the boundaries of the color line as the rebels mourned the death of Crispus Attucks, a presumed runaway slave.<sup>66</sup> In the aftermath of the Boston Massacre, Samuel Adams and the Sons of Liberty painted the deaths of the victims in the colors of martyrdom, a deliberate sign of British tyranny quelling the cries for liberty. Thus, because of the inclusion of Attucks, slaves could easily conclude that they too were included in the great mass of humanity pining for liberty as could whites.

Historian Sidney Kaplan links the aftermath of the Boston Massacre, the death of Attucks and the four petitions submitted by Bostonian African Americans requesting their freedom. Kaplan asserts that "the blood of Attucks nourished the tree of liberty" and caused blacks "to

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<sup>65</sup> Loretta J. Williams, *Black Freemasonry and Middle-class Realities* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 26, 29; Richard Newman, "Prince Hall, Richard Allen, and Daniel Coker: Revolutionary Black Founders, Revolutionary Black Communities," in *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*, ed. Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash and Ray Raphael (New York: Knopf, 2011), 308.

<sup>66</sup> Kaplan, *The Black Presence*, 7-9.

question the anomaly of human bondage in a nation about to be born and fighting for its independence under the slogan of ‘Liberty or Death!’”<sup>67</sup> The four petitions bridging the years 1773 to 1777 “echo” James Otis’ argument about natural rights “with a new intensity.”<sup>68</sup> Such phrases as “give us that ample relief which, as *men*, we have a natural right to” and “that your Petitioners apprehend we have in common with all other men a naturel right to our freedoms without Being depriv’d of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever” obviously illustrate an understanding of natural rights.<sup>69</sup> This language not only represents an understanding of natural rights but also the discrepancy between their position in society and such language. Indeed, Kaplan argues that “the mood is one of exasperation, even anger, although the phraseology is sometimes cautious. Freedom is their impassioned theme.”<sup>70</sup>

It can be argued that the significance of these petitions lies in the fact that they aroused debate in the legislature. Though this did occur, the significance lies in something greater. Historian Roy Finkenbine suggests that it was the understanding of the legal process and use of natural rights language that translated over into the arguments found in court appeals which would end slavery in Massachusetts in 1783.<sup>71</sup> Natural rights ideology, though perhaps not the key to emancipation in Massachusetts, certainly lay behind all the factors that propelled abolition forward. Blacks applied the ideas of the leading thinkers of the day to argue for freedom. African

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> “April 20, 1773 Petition” in Aptheker’s *A Documentary History of the Negro people in the United States*, 8; “Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty’s Council, and the House of Representatives, 25 May 1774” *Massachusetts Historical Society*, [http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?old=1&ft=End+of+Slavery&from=%2Fendofslavery%2Findex.php%3Fid%3D55&item\\_id=589](http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?old=1&ft=End+of+Slavery&from=%2Fendofslavery%2Findex.php%3Fid%3D55&item_id=589) and Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro people in the United States*, 8-9.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Roy E. Finkenbine, “Belinda’s Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62, no.1 (Jan., 2007), 99-100.

American use of the same ideas and language illustrates their acute understanding of the time and the true implications of the revolutionary leaders' arguments.

Implementing natural rights philosophy, African Americans in Boston, in January 1773, sent a petition to the General Court, which tabled the measure three days later in order to wait for the new session. They were turned down by Governor Hutchinson who informed them of his inability to help. Historian Thomas Davis states that the petition addressed the Massachusetts legislative General Court, Governor Hutchinson and the colony's Council simultaneously. Though the petition did not cause any sudden change it paved the way for future petitions.

The author of the first petition is forever known to history as Felix, presumably Felix Holbrook, who on behalf of the slaves of Boston, penned the January 1773 petition asserting slaves' rights as human beings. The petition of January 1773 commenced in great humility with an acknowledgement of white virtue but argued that, despite the fact of evil within the black community, the majority consisted of upstanding individuals. The petition claimed loyalty to God and listed a few grievances. Felix launched into a homily of the right most denied to the slaves of Boston. He asserts that these slaves:

...have had every Day of their Lives embittered with this most intolerable Reflection, That, let their Behaviour be what it will, neither they, nor their Children to all Generations, shall ever be able to do, or to possess and enjoy any Thing, no not even *Life itself*, but in a Manner as the *Beasts that perish*.<sup>72</sup>

Felix argues for the right to life and in declaratory language asserts the denial of this right. There is no philosophical discussion or grand argument as to whether or not slaves were entitled to life, rather Felix boldly asserts that right as self-evident through his dismissal of any counterargument.

Although Felix did not contend whether or not slaves were entitled to the right of life, he

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<sup>72</sup> Felix, "Petitions of New England Slaves for Freedom (1773)," found in Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (New York: Madison House Publishers, 1990), 172.

does provide evidence of specific things denied to them. Where James Otis and other republican thinkers defined life as primarily self-preservation, Felix viewed life through the lens of the things denied to slaves that others possessed naturally. Like Felix, economist and philosopher Adam Smith defined the slave by what he lacks as essentially “a person who can acquire no property...” and freedom in terms of the privileges of property, marriage and children.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, Felix contends that life was denied because slaves “have no Property! We have no Wives! No Children! We have no City! No Country!”<sup>74</sup> While Otis and the other revolutionary leaders charged Great Britain with enslaving the colonies through taxation as stripping them of their property without consent, Felix merely begins with property in his list of aspects of life denied to slaves. In this Felix clearly asserts the greater denial of life and natural rights to the slave rather than the colonists.

Because the offspring of the right to life and liberty is the ability to own property Felix obviously acknowledges this concept found in the revolutionary thinking. Going beyond this Felix unambiguously specifies the liberties denied slaves that were inherent in life. The liberty or right to have a family was foremost among these. A slave, being at the mercy and whim of his master’s will, could not protect himself, his family or their interests. This definition bolsters Felix’s claim and maintains the illegitimacy of denying slaves these rights and privileges.

A slave could not, as Locke maintained, enjoy the rights and power of a parent over a child. Slavery stripped a man of this basic right by placing that power in the hands of the slave-owner, who possessed no natural right to it. The power granted to the parent over the child remained only until the child came of age to act responsibly and enter society. However, the

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<sup>73</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, (originally published in 1776, reprint based on the fifth edition printed in 1904, New York: Bantam Publishers, 2003), 493, 507.

<sup>74</sup> Felix, 170.

slave was denied the power over his offspring and the right to enter into society no matter how responsible.<sup>75</sup>

Further still the petition claimed the right to a city and country as inherently part of the right to life. This claim is not found elsewhere in revolutionary ideology, unless Felix interpreted the Lockean idea of society versus the state of nature to mean the right to a city and country. This could appear logical if Felix intended that slaves were kept out of the state of society and thrust into a perpetual state of nature with its dangers, left to the mercy of other men yet without the ability to defend themselves. However, this would require a deep knowledge of Lockean philosophy. Felix could also have been arguing that slaves were denied the rights and privileges of a citizen to any country or city.

Felix concludes the petition asking for “relief” from slavery which he claims “will to us be as Life from the dead.”<sup>76</sup> In so doing Felix invokes the imagery and symbolism of the right to life and of the Revolution. Obviously Felix does not suggest life as only physical existence but rather something else. Life entailed property, family, belonging, and even religion, all things denied to a slave; things Felix and the slaves of Boston claimed to be natural rights extending even to blacks.

On April 20, 1773, Felix and three others submitted a second petition to the proper authorities. According to the April 20<sup>th</sup> petition the slaves intended to follow the legal procedures while claiming their freedom. They “determine[d] to behave in such a manner, as that we may have reason to expect the divine approbation of, and assistance in, our peaceable and lawful attempts to gain our freedom. WE are willing to submit to such regulations and laws, as may be

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 171.

made relative to us.”<sup>77</sup> Not only does the petition recognize the legitimate authority of those above them but more importantly the petition viewed God as the ultimate authority. The petition asserted that their submission to slavery directly stemmed from their conviction that God had allowed their enslavement. They expected that their good behavior or submission to God would result in the “divine approbation of, and assistance in, our peaceable and lawful attempts to gain our freedom.”<sup>78</sup> Thus Felix, on behalf of the slaves of Massachusetts, asserted that the slaves would follow the law and legally fight for their freedom which would honor God, who would fight for them while also acknowledging yet another commonality in religion between white and black. These claims asserted the conviction that liberty would come following the procedures and regulations of the government.

The impasse of both the tabling of the petition and Governor Hutchinson’s denial of aid halted the petition and similar ones until May of 1774, when the slaves sent a petition to General Thomas Gage.<sup>79</sup> The May 1774 petition again incorporated natural rights ideology and religion. Essentially a combination of the two previous petitions, this petition joined religious and natural rights appeals while also modifying the tone from the April 1773 petition. The petition consisted of a list of questions, which asked how a slave could perform his duties to God, his family and country.

Natural rights ideology jumps from the pages of the petition. Questioning how slaves

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<sup>77</sup> “April 20, 1773 Petition” in Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro people in the United States*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> “Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty’s Council, and the House of Representatives, 25 May 1774” *Massachusetts Historical Society*, [http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?old=1&ft=End+of+Slavery&from=%2Fendofslavery%2Findex.php%3Fid%3D55&item\\_id=589](http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?old=1&ft=End+of+Slavery&from=%2Fendofslavery%2Findex.php%3Fid%3D55&item_id=589) and Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro people in the United States*, 8-9. Interestingly, this petition shows proof of the conviction of following the laws and obeying the government in regards to slavery and emancipation as the Slaves addressed the petition to the leading authority of Boston, General Thomas Gage. The addressing of the petition to General Gage shows the imposition of the Coercive Acts on the colony and the Slaves willingness to follow the proper procedures as they previously declared.



could fulfill their moral and civic duties while in slavery dominate the pages. The petition asked how they could “obtain our Natural right our freedoms” and rights to perform their duties towards their families, wives and children.<sup>80</sup> Beyond this the slaves begin the petition arguing:

That your Petitioners apprehend we have in common With all other men in naturel right to our freedoms without Being depriv'd of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever.<sup>81</sup>

This selection contains heavy natural rights inferences and explicit natural rights terminology. In this May 1774 petition, like the January 1773 petition, the authors do not question whether or not they are entitled to these natural rights. Nor do they question if they are part of humanity; that is assumed to be self-evident. These petitions boldly assert the slave’s equality with white men in regards to natural rights. Declaring that equality subtly though evidently charges the petition with an almost audacious boldness.

The most explicit natural rights language comes in the phrase “being depriv’d of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever.”<sup>82</sup> This language more than echoes Lockean ideology while also lucidly and succinctly lays out liberal ideology. They argue that they were freeborn, thus not hereditary slaves, and did not sell themselves but were stolen. Natural rights thinkers argued that men could not legitimately sell themselves as that would violate their natural rights that God placed inside them. Slavery could not be legitimate because no one had more right over a particular person than that individual himself and even the individual did not have it in his power to “by compact, or his own consent, *enslave himself*.”<sup>83</sup> These rights, if stolen, according to Locke’s theory, put them into a state of war with their captors, who committed a severe form of

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.; original spelling.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* (reprint edition, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 17.

tyranny.<sup>84</sup> Although the slaves claimed this injustice pertained to their situation, they willingly submitted themselves to the rules of the land and petitioned the government as legitimate citizens. This argument “charged that slavery was inconsistent with the vaunted tradition of English civil liberty” striking especially “to the concept of equality under the law.”<sup>85</sup>

In addition to secular arguments, the petitions employed religious ideas. They asked how anyone could show his “obedience to Almighty God” and how slaves could “live in love” or fulfill the commandments found in the Bible, while enslaved.<sup>86</sup> This religious appeal certainly carried weight in a society arguing morality based in Biblical understanding. Perhaps going further in the arena of religion than natural rights, the May petition questioned the legitimacy of slaveholders’ religion, and asserted that slavery prevented the enslaved from full obedience to God.

Again, the May 1774 petition did not obtain a clear answer from political authorities. The African Americans in Boston, slave and free, found themselves back at the beginning, yet again.<sup>87</sup> Generally speaking, the outbreak of actual war between the colonies and Great Britain hampered the antislavery cause. While the war restricted governmental action regarding slavery, a growing sentiment against slavery rose as people saw the similarity between the white and black fight for freedom. In 1774 several colonies took measures against the slave trade.<sup>88</sup>

According to Historian Benjamin Quarles, “sympathy for the Negro was enlivened by the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 17, 21, 45-46, 91.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas J. Davis, “Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773-1777” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 62, no.2. (Jun., 1989), 259.

<sup>86</sup> “Petition May 25, 1774,”

[http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?old=1&ft=End+of+Slavery&from=%2Fendofslavery%2Findex.php%3Fid%3D55&item\\_id=589](http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?old=1&ft=End+of+Slavery&from=%2Fendofslavery%2Findex.php%3Fid%3D55&item_id=589).

<sup>87</sup> Davis, 260; Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro people in the United States*, 8-9; “Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Gage, His Majesty’s Council, and the House of Representatives, June 1774,” *Massachusetts Historical Society*,

[http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item\\_id=550&img\\_step=1&br=1&mode=transcript#page1](http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=550&img_step=1&br=1&mode=transcript#page1).

<sup>88</sup> Quarles, 40-41.

moving prose of the Declaration of Independence, and the wartime fruits of that enlivened sentiment were the curtailment of the slave trade and a movement towards slave manumission, particularly above the Mason-Dixon line.”<sup>89</sup>

Later in January 1777, six months after the issuance of the Declaration of Independence, some African Americans living in Massachusetts drafted yet another petition. Signed by eight free men, the petition began by noting the denial of natural rights to slaves. The signature of Prince Hall, “Boston’s most prominent black in the era of the revolution” and organizer of the African Lodge of Freemasons, is found on the document.<sup>90</sup> Hall, according to historian Richard Newman, “secur[ed] a manumission agreement from his master” in 1770 a month after the Boston Massacre.<sup>91</sup> By 1773 records list him as a property holder, taxpayer and voter and by 1774 a Methodist preacher. Hall had addressed the authorities previously when he urged the Massachusetts Committee of Safety in 1775 to enlist blacks in the fight against the British. Just weeks before the clash of arms at Lexington and Concord, Hall, along with several other free blacks, “became members of an army lodge of Free and Accepted Masons” headed by the British military lodge.<sup>92</sup> During the war Hall, who helped and fought for the patriot cause, saw the inconsistencies of the patriots’ actions versus language in regards to slavery. Hall’s cognizance

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>90</sup> Kaplan, 26, 202; Williams, 12; The Massachusetts Committee of Safety rejected Hall’s advice to enlist blacks against the British.

<sup>91</sup> Newman, “Prince Hall, Richard Allen, and Daniel Coker: Revolutionary Black Founders, Revolutionary Black Communities,” 307.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 18, 19; Kaplan, 203; The significance of Hall’s use of Masonry should not be overlooked. Loretta Williams declares that “Masonic membership indicated that a man was free-thinking and philanthropic; membership was also a sign of respectability...the Masonic way embodied gentility, a code of values and manners reflecting a higher inner quality- This genteel aura created an appealing lure for the colonial upward mobile, the more status conscious of the new American breed of community leaders.” (10, 11-12) These principles translated over onto Hall’s frame of reference. He employed Masonic ideas and images to form an image of himself and the other free blacks of Boston. Employing Masonic ideas Hall gave himself respectability and a preformed image of himself and his convictions, ideas he worked for years to convince the revolutionary leaders. It would show his commitment to his community, the authorities and the ideas of order and yet simultaneously freedom. This desire to convince whites of free black ability to think and their similar code of values remained the theme of Hall’s life’s work. The evidence of this manifests itself clearly in his use of natural rights language seen in the petitions and sermons Hall penned.

of the discrepancies in the language and actions of revolutionary leaders in regards to slavery caused him to speak out against the violation of republican ideals. However, in order to legitimately speak out against the incongruity, Hall made “a conscious decision to use legal processes to fight for the rights of all blacks, and he preached to blacks the virtue of solidarity and collective action. To the powers that controlled the colonies he stressed the words and assumptions of the revolutionary doctrines.”<sup>93</sup> This action resonated with the language of the time but also showed the legitimacy of their cause by using proper channels and acknowledging the authority of the government in place, first the British and then the rebel. Thus Prince Hall and seven other free black men, the first four of whom were members of Hall’s Masonic lodge, drafted, signed and submitted a petition addressed to the General Council and House of Representatives of Massachusetts in 1777.<sup>94</sup>

The almost mirrored beginning of the 1774 and 1777 petitions at the minimum proves that the inspiration of the January 1777 petition originated in the May 1774 forerunner. This, the last of the four major petitions, took on a harsher tone and challenged the legitimacy of slavery in more strident language than before. Graphic, powerful language seizes the reader as the petition narrates the violation of natural rights and lists the grievances incurred by slavery. Historian Thomas Davis argues that this petition clearly turns “the rhetoric of the Revolution back on white patriots, blacks appealed to ‘be Restored to the Enjoyments that which is the Naturel Right of all men’ and to have freedom for ‘their Children who wher born in this Land of Liberty.’”<sup>95</sup>

The petition, addressed to the Honorable Council and House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts, acknowledges the independence of the United States and again turns

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<sup>93</sup> Williams, 19.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 203-204; Newman, “Prince Hall, Richard Allen, and Daniel Coker: Revolutionary Black Founders, Revolutionary Black Communities,” 301; Quarles, 47.

<sup>95</sup> Davis, 262.

their grievances to the proper and legitimate authority. Natural rights remain central to the black's core argument. The petition declared: "your Petitioners Apprehend that They have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe [Universe] hath Bestowed equalley on all mankind and which they have never forfeited Any Compact or Agreement whatever."<sup>96</sup> Though remarkably similar to the May 1774 petition, the January 1777 petition contained noticeable differences. The change of the addressee exemplified the petitioners' understanding of the social order and the proper procedures of a free government. Besides this change, perhaps the most striking difference in this petition is the clause stating that in:

[Inimita]tion of [the] Lawdable Example of the Good People of these States your petitioners have Long and Patiently waited the Event of petition after petition By them presented to the Legislative Body of this state And cannot but with Grief Reflect that their Success hath ben but too similar they Cannot but express their Astonishment that It have Never Bin Considered that Every Principle from which America has Acted in the Cours Of their unhappy Difficultes with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favours of Your petitioners thay therfor humble Beseech your Honours to give this petition its due weight & consideration.<sup>97</sup>

This declaration poignantly accuses the revolutionary leaders of ignoring the previous petitions and argues the justice of their cause and right to be heard. The inclusion of their patience and endurance, surely meant to remind the leaders of the previous petitions, must have struck a chord with the revolutionary leaders. Painting a picture of their patience must have conjured up similar memories of waiting for Great Britain to acknowledge the petitions and rights of the colonists. However, the petition failed to draw enough empathy from the revolutionary leaders to acknowledge this petition. Natural rights, religion and similarities failed to stimulate the birth of emancipation.

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<sup>96</sup> "Petition for freedom (manuscript copy) to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives, [13] January 1777" *Massachusetts Historical Society*, [http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item\\_id=557&img\\_step=1&br=1&mode=transcript#page1](http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=557&img_step=1&br=1&mode=transcript#page1)

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

The 1777 petition stirred interest in the legislature to the point that it drafted a bill asking the Continental Congress for advice. Nothing came of this effort as members of the government, notably John Adams, believed such a bill would endanger the union of the colonies and threaten the war effort. Adams wrote that ““We have Causes enough of Jealousy Discord and Division, and this Bill will certainly add to the Number.””<sup>98</sup> Killed in committee, the bill did nothing.

These petitions illustrate that African Americans “had drunk deeply of the Revolution’s rhetoric and were fully capable of spitting it back in the face of whites who persisted in giving only lip service to the universality of Natural Rights.”<sup>99</sup> If this was so, then from where did the petitioners attain knowledge of natural rights ideology? Historian Sidney Kaplan inferred that slaves and free blacks acquired such knowledge from listening to the ideas discussed around them.<sup>100</sup> With the colonies, especially Massachusetts, as a hotbed of natural rights ideology and cries for liberty resounding in the streets, Kaplan’s argument logically fits into the historical atmosphere. Gary Nash, author of *The Forgotten Fifth*, underscored this idea declaring:

White defenses of “natural rights” in protests against English policies, and street and tavern talk about the “immutable laws of nature” and the legitimacy of defying tyranny, were like so much cognitive shrapnel exploding in the kitchens, stables, barns, fields, and docksides where slaves toiled from morning to night.<sup>101</sup>

Through this “street and tavern talk,” even illiterate white colonists probably became well versed in the natural rights and republican ideologies. Thus, with this “cognitive shrapnel” exploding everywhere it is hazardous to argue that slaves, simply because of literacy factors, were not hit by the detonation of revolutionary ideas that spoke to their needs.

Literacy, though a significant factor in the ignition of the revolutionary flame, did not wholly cause it. The question of literacy raises a crucial question. If illiteracy held slaves

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<sup>98</sup> John Adams as quoted in Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 47.

<sup>99</sup> Davis, 262-263.

<sup>100</sup> Kaplan, 245.

<sup>101</sup> Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 15-16.

chained to slavery then how could the production of petitions, containing obvious references to natural rights ideology, happen? Two possibilities include, first, the help of a literate white in drafting the petitions. There is nothing in the historical record, however, to suggest that whites had a hand in the petitions. A second more probable explanation is the presence and work of literate, free blacks. The self-educated Prince Hall, a free black, taxpayer, founder of the Masonic African lodge and the most prominent black in Boston during the Revolution, is the presumed author of two of the petitions. At a minimum, Hall clearly signed the 1777 petition as his name and mark appears at the bottom of the page. This raises an important question as to the classes among the black community and if the upper class of slaves and free blacks were those utilizing the legislative system and their ideology. If so, then were these petitions representative of this upper class of African Americans? Though this question is not readily answered, Prince Hall and the other petitioners certainly claimed they represented the whole of the black population. Assertions to this effect begin the petitions which claimed, “on behalf of the slaves of Boston” that the educated blacks believed themselves to represent the whole. But did they?

This question cannot be answered, though the atmosphere certainly lent itself to the absorption of the revolutionary language by simply listening. The pamphlets and editorials that inundated the newspapers were inaccessible to illiterate blacks but the discussion and debate of those radical ideas coming off the presses filled the taverns, dinner tables and streets. It is infeasible to imagine that the revolutionary ideas were isolated from the African-American community. Access did not inoculate slaves from the ideas of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, rather, these ideas stimulated the desire for freedom by giving voice to the desires they declared lay embedded in the heart of every man.

Using Boston as an example of this idea, Nash argued that slaves “could hardly have

overlooked James Otis’s frontal assault on slavery in 1764.”<sup>102</sup> The “inescapable” “language of politics” in the revolution bombarded blacks hungry for the hope of freedom.<sup>103</sup> It is bewildering and certainly amusing that whites had difficulty comprehending how blacks understood and ingested the ideas shaping the world around them. Nash continues this theme declaring that through this “street or tavern talk” blacks chose between “two strategies: suing their masters individually to gain freedom or petitioning legislatures to abolish slavery altogether.”<sup>104</sup> Evidence of these options is seen in the petitions previously discussed and court cases.

The story of Elizabeth Freeman neatly illustrates how slaves acquired knowledge of natural rights via the atmosphere of the times. Also known as Mum Bett, Elizabeth Freeman in 1781 maneuvered the Massachusetts court system to sue her way to freedom. Freeman, a “woman without compare of great worth,” lived enslaved in Sheffield, Massachusetts, until she sued for her freedom in 1781.<sup>105</sup> Freeman was able to do this because in Massachusetts slaves had the right to appeal to the courts as they were considered persons, not only property, under the law.<sup>106</sup>

In her defense Freeman used natural rights ideology. According to the sources “Mum Bett called on Mr. Sedgwick [a local lawyer], and asked him if she could not claim her liberty under the law. He inquired what could put such an idea into her head. She replied that the “Bill o’ Rights” said that all were born free and equal, and that, as she was not a dumb beast, she was certainly one of the nation.”<sup>107</sup> Freeman used the Bill of Rights found within the Massachusetts State Constitution to bolster her claim to freedom arguing that the phrase “all men born free and

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<sup>102</sup> Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth*, 16.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 235.

<sup>104</sup> Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth*, 17.

<sup>105</sup> Kaplan, 246-7; Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth*, 20-22.

<sup>106</sup> Elaine MacEacheren “Emancipation of Slavery in Massachusetts: A Reexamination 1770-1790” *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 55, No. 4 (Oct., 1970), 295.

<sup>107</sup> Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth*, 17.



equal” also pertained to her.<sup>108</sup>

When asked where she acquired her knowledge of such ideas, Freeman stated that she heard it everywhere, “by keeping still and minding things.”<sup>109</sup> An excellent example, Elizabeth Freeman proved her natural right to be free and independent to the courts. Although the State Constitution contained language stating that liberty and equality pertained to all men it never abolished slavery. Rather the courts ruled that slavery was a violation of natural rights and against the principles of freedom, thus essentially ending slavery in Massachusetts.<sup>110</sup>

Elizabeth Freeman’s court case was only one of many court cases where blacks sued for their freedom. A key argument favoring slaves, including Freeman, came from the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights in the 1780 Constitution. Article I of the Massachusetts State Constitution claimed:

All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberty; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.<sup>111</sup>

Because of this inclusion of natural rights language and ideology in the state constitution enslaved African Americans now could argue, mostly successfully, that they had the right to liberty.

This argument played a prominent role in the *Jennison* cases regarding the enslavement of a man known as Quock Walker.<sup>112</sup> The three cases, *Walker v. Jenison*, *Jennison v. Caldwell* and *Commonwealth v. Jennison*, addressed the legality of slavery, in regards to Walker

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>109</sup> Kaplan, 246-7.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 22; The Massachusetts legislature opted to allow the court system to set the government’s opinion on the legality of slavery in Massachusetts. The deferment by the legislature to consider and take action on the issue of slavery thereby indirectly transferring the issue to the judicial branch proved a safe political move.

<sup>111</sup> Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Article I, <http://malegislature.gov/laws/constitution> (Accessed March 1, 2014).

<sup>112</sup> Robert M. Spector, “The Quock Walker Cases (1781-83)-- Slavery, Its abolition, and Negro Citizenship in Early Massachusetts,” *The Journal of Negro History* 53, no. 1 (Jan., 1968), 4; spelling varies between Jenison and Jennison so for the purpose of continuity I have chosen to use Jennison.

specifically and, more broadly, to slavery in general. The enslaved Quock Walker sued his master's widow Isabell Caldwell Jennison, and her new husband, Nathaniel Jennison, for his freedom. The legal battle surrounding the Walker's freedom resulted in the three court cases that rank among the key court cases in the Massachusetts abolition of slavery.<sup>113</sup> Walker's protectors and employers, John and Seth Caldwell, hired lawyer Levi Lincoln, who advocated for Walker's freedom using natural rights language and philosophy to renounce slavery.<sup>114</sup> Lincoln asserted:

This Quock is our brother, We all had one common origin, descended from the same kind of flesh, had the same breath of life... Is it not a law of nature that all men are equal and free. Is not the laws of nature the laws of God. Is not the law of God, then, against slavery.<sup>115</sup>

Obviously Lincoln charged that Article I of the state Constitution held all men to mean all men regardless of color. This radical abolitionist idea of "one blood" or a common ancestry between the races mingled with natural rights effectively argued Lincoln's point of the equality of all men. Beyond just Lincoln's use of natural rights, Chief Justice William Cushing, presiding over *Commonwealth v. Jennison* (1783) in the Walker-Jennison series, asserted:

Sentiments more favorable to the natural rights of mankind,... Have prevailed since the glorious struggle for our rights began...slavery, is in my judgment as effectively abolished as it can be by granting of rights and privileges wholly incompatible and repugnant to its existence. The court are therefore fully of the opinion that perpetual servitude can no longer be tolerated in our government.<sup>116</sup>

Cushing's statement intended to clarify Article I of the Massachusetts Constitution succinctly elucidated the controversy of the Court's interpretation of the state's constitutional position on slavery. In essence Chief Justice Cushing used the "free and equal clause" to declare slavery unconstitutional in Massachusetts.<sup>117</sup> Lincoln "raised the tenor of the entire hearing above the plane of common litigation by basing his own contentions squarely on natural law and reason,

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<sup>113</sup> Among the emancipation court cases heard by the Massachusetts courts during the early 1780s those cases of Elizabeth Freeman and Quock Walker rank as crucial cases in eradication of slavery in Massachusetts.

<sup>114</sup> John and Seth Caldwell were the younger brothers of James Caldwell, Quock Walker's original owner.

<sup>115</sup> Levi Lincoln as quoted in MacEacheren, 290.

<sup>116</sup> Article 1. Chief Justice Cushing in the *Walker V. Jennison* 1783 case as quoted in MacEacheren, 303.

<sup>117</sup> John D. Cushing, "The Cushing Court and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts: More Notes on the 'Quock Walker Case'" *The American Journal of Legal History* 5, no 2. (Apr., 1961), 119.

the great political idioms of the day.”<sup>118</sup> This appeal to the grander ideas of the time brought about the end that merely appealing to the facts would not have accomplished.

The Court did not officially end slavery in Massachusetts in the Quock Walker cases, rather the implications of the rulings in these cases and others like them eradicated slavery.<sup>119</sup> As opposed to directly ending slavery, the cases “exercised some type of indirect influence which eventually brought about ‘the desired effect.’”<sup>120</sup> Historian Elaine MacEacheren asserts that the emancipation so long anticipated by the slaves in Massachusetts resulted from three:

...avenues of action: (1) local governmental action in which the town outlawed slavery, (2) judicial actions in which individual slaves sued their masters for their freedom, and (3) individual action either by masters who emancipated their slaves or by slaves who simply took their freedom.<sup>121</sup>

Slaves were freed in Massachusetts using all three “avenues.” The courts theoretically denied the legitimacy of slavery thus issuing the official abolitionist statement among the branches of government and thereby freeing the slaves in Massachusetts in the early 1780s.

The courts may have freed the slaves but treatment of blacks was far from equal. Prince Hall had not finished his campaign for liberty and equality in Boston. Once again Hall displayed his belief in the legal process writing a petition to the state legislature in 1788 asking for help for kidnapped blacks.<sup>122</sup> In the petition Hall asked the Massachusetts legislature what rights do blacks have if they can be stolen at any moment? Hall asked “what then are our lives and Lebeties worth if they may be taken away in shuch a cruel & unjust manner?” This question, to be sure, was intended to haunt the readers.<sup>123</sup> His emotionally laden description of the “stolen”

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>119</sup> Spector, 27.

<sup>120</sup> MacEacheren, 292.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 293-294; MacEacheren uses the town of Braintree to illustrate her first sort of emancipation, the court cases of Mumbett, Quock and the Caldwell v. Jennison case for her second proposal and Jeremy Belknap’s notes on how some slaves “simply took their freedom” for her third option.

<sup>122</sup> “Protest Against Kidnapping and the Slave Trade, 1788,” in Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, 20; Williams, 40.

<sup>123</sup> Aptheker, 20.

men and women rings in the ears of the reader. Hall described the passage to America and slavery as “sporting with the Lives and Lebeties” of the Africans. This, he charged, was inconsistent with the Christianity they claimed to follow. The most vivid picture Hall drew for his readers was that of the slave market, likening the condition of slaves to “sheep for the slarter.” Thus, in emotionally charged language Hall argued for high-minded ideals which he believed applied to all men.<sup>124</sup>

Though Hall does not explicitly use natural rights language, beside the reference to life and liberty, he based his argument on the premise that the kidnappers possess no right to “steal” men and women for their own profit. The very use of the word steal implies that these men had no right to the lives of others to sell them “like sheep for the slarter.”<sup>125</sup>

In 1797 Hall wrote a pamphlet, “A Charge,” which described the plight of the blacks in America and includes references to Masonic themes but heavily relies on Biblical passages to indicate the suffering of blacks and yet the need for endurance and change.<sup>126</sup> This is evident in his declaration “when I endeavoured to shew you the duty of a Mason to a Mason, and charity or love to all mankind, as the mark and image of the great God, and the Father of all the human race.”<sup>127</sup> Hall’s pamphlet does not contain heavily stressed natural rights language as the intended target of his pamphlet was not the leaders of the day but rather the blacks whom he hoped to encourage. However, it does contain both Masonic and republican language. Hall charged his listeners to:

Live and act as Masons... let those despisers see, altho’ many of us cannot not read, yet by our searches

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Prince Hall, “A Charge (1797)” in *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* ed. Richard Newman, Partick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 45-50. “A Charge” can also be found under the title “Pray God Give Us the Strength to Bear Up Under All Our Troubles,” in *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900*, Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham eds., (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998) 45-50.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 45.

and researches into men and things, we have supplied that defect; ... be always ready to have an answer to those that ask you a question; give the right hand of affection and fellowship to whom it justly belongs; let their colour and complexion be what it will, let their nations be what it may, for they are your brethren, and it is your indispensable duty so to do.<sup>128</sup>

Hall's admonition here echoes what his life and previous works already asserted, that through good deeds and living respectable lives as Masons, blacks could prove that they not only had worth but deserved the rights denied to them. "A Charge" shows Hall's understanding of the worlds he lived in and how to communicate in both. This understanding made him the prominent black leader in the Boston area until his death.

The evidence of Hall's strategy on how to maneuver the political situation to beseech the revolutionary leaders to end slavery fills the pages of his writings. His philosophy of thrusting the natural rights language of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness back in the faces of the revolutionary leaders comes across in the petitions he authored and signed. However, Hall also understood that more than language was needed to convince whites that blacks were capable of freedom. This led him into Masonic lodges and an unequivocal stance on upholding authority and respecting the rule of law. Hall believed that an illustration of the credibility of black respectability would persuade the revolutionary leaders. Blacks could accomplish this while using natural rights language to appeal to those in authority. This conviction radically shaped the course of black protest in Massachusetts from the Revolution until his death in 1807.

The petitions, pamphlets, court case records and letters authored by African Americans, specifically in Boston, contain significant amounts of natural rights language. This occurrence begs the question: did blacks absorb and believe in this ideology, or did they merely employ the language of the times to bolster their pleas for liberty? Some have argued that natural rights language found in the works of African Americans merely shows blacks thrusting the hypocrisy

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 49.

of whites back into their faces. However, this argument does not explain why blacks, such as Prince Hall, went to great lengths to urge African Americans prove by their conduct that they deserved the rights denied to them. Hall's emphasis on the lives of African Americans as the best witness that blacks were worthy of natural rights clearly echoes republican ideals of a virtuous citizenry. Had Hall merely used republican language and natural rights ideology to throw back at whites, then his argument using these philosophies would prove worthless. African Americans adapted their rhetoric of emancipation and protest including natural rights and republican ideologies to convince whites that they too deserved life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

## CHAPTER IV

### GABRIEL'S REBELLION—A FIGHT FOR NATURAL RIGHTS

Gabriel's uprising, set for August 30, 1800, ignited a powder keg of fear and suspicion in Virginia in the midst of a partisan presidential election. The rebellion, reportedly encompassing 1,000 slaves, led to massive governmental action. Making suppression difficult for the Virginia state government was the conspirators' use of natural rights language and the parallels between the revolutionary leaders' and their actions. These similarities frightened the government more than the actual conspiracy.

Though most whites did not include slaves among those deserving liberty, the slaves themselves believed that, as human beings, they did. The understanding of natural rights, minimal though it may have been, certainly prompted Gabriel and the other conspirators to fight for their freedom. Court records of the trials testify that the understanding of natural rights and the conspirators' knowledge of political events motivated their reason for talking up arms. An understanding of the language of liberty and the increasing restrictions on emancipation in Virginia combined with the inspiration of the Haitian revolution led the slaves to act. Newspapers recorded the ideas and reactions about the conspiracy revealing a desire for liberty and a firm conviction in the justness to possess their God-given right. The conspirators did not view the insurrection as illegitimate, but rather as a revolution for freedom, like that of 1776.

Gabriel presented a different option in the fight for freedom compared to Prince Hall. Gabriel's lethal method bypassed the legal approach Hall took when fighting for freedom, though both used and were motivated by the ideals found in natural rights ideology. Clearly,

Gabriel chose a more radical option that natural rights sanctioned while fighting for denied rights. Much of the reason for Gabriel's lethal approach lies in the fact that for several years prior to the 1800 revolt the abolitionist sentiment in Virginia began to evaporate as the state took measures to protect slavery.<sup>129</sup> The influencing factors on the rebellion stemmed from secular republican ideology as well as Evangelical theology. Slaves found equality in Evangelical theology and thus understood that if equality could be achieved in religion, God's realm, then surely Christians would follow suit in society. While these dreams did not come to fruition artisan slaves acquired a stronger taste for freedom as they began secretly plotting to force liberation using any and all means. Gabriel's rebellion presents a radically different use of natural rights than that of Prince Hall in Massachusetts or of other northern abolitionists. Gabriel and his followers interpreted both natural rights and religion through the lens of force. It is this new interpretation of natural rights, infused with religion, this chapter will examine in depth.

The year Thomas Jefferson ran for the presidency on the image of his famous Declaration of Independence, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, his home state executed close to thirty slaves for conspiracy.<sup>130</sup> The presidential campaign, known for its mudslinging, slander and partisan politics, saturated the news in 1800. Whites, especially those in authority, found themselves consumed by the election, paying less attention to normal concerns. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson led their parties in a struggle to ensure their respective visions of America succeeded. Thus, in 1800 Virginia, a rhetorical cloud encompassed the state with Jeffersonian ideals.

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<sup>129</sup> Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800-1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 187; The evidence for the actual number of slaves executed is not exactly known. Douglas Egerton used the number twenty-seven after cross-examination of the documents as the documents themselves contained vague or unclear details and factual errors.



In and around Richmond two trends greatly influenced the slave population in 1800. First, in the newly urbanized city of Richmond slaves enjoyed a greater sense of freedom. Highly-skilled artisan slaves sought out employment opportunities in a “self-hire” system where these slaves arranged to lease themselves out to employers in Richmond. This system allowed slaves to gain greater access to ideas and information. However, this mobility also allowed for quasi-free, artisan slaves to form a community within the slave community creating a sort of hierarchy. The independence and knowledge gained by slaves in the “self-leasing” system worried Virginian lawmakers who in 1792 passed a law outlawing the system with a punishment of imprisonment for the slave.<sup>131</sup> Despite the attempt to restrict the practice the law did not curb the practice largely because of Virginia’s labor shortage.<sup>132</sup>

The transience allowed slaves to gain access to information of the Santo Domingo slave rebellion in Haiti. This information emboldened slaves, much to the chagrin of their masters. This fear stemming from the Haitian revolution combined with “Gabriel’s Revolt in Virginia, ...aroused new interest in colonizing free blacks, who now appeared a growing threat to white security.”<sup>133</sup> Thus, the Haitian revolution impacted both whites and blacks and changed the course of American slavery.

Religion was the second factor influencing slaves. By the 1750s the Quakers established abolition as a core doctrine.<sup>134</sup> Despite this Quaker antislavery drew few black converts and

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<sup>131</sup> Egerton, 26 as quoted from “An Act Concerning Slaves, Free Negroes, and Mulattoes,” December 17, 1792, in Samuel Shepherd, ed., *The Statutes at Large of Virginia, 1792-1806*, 11 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1970 reprint), 1:127.

<sup>132</sup> Egerton, 26.

<sup>133</sup> Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 15.

<sup>134</sup> Richard S. Newman. *The Transformation of American Abolition: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 16; Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 16-17.

lacked a “coherent plan to systematically attack slavery throughout American society.”<sup>135</sup>

Evangelicals had a much more profound impact on the slave culture. Whereas the churches had previously largely ignored blacks, evangelicals sought black converts whose conversions were fostered by evangelical theology of individual worth and salvation.<sup>136</sup> The Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations infiltrated the South during the 1770s and claimed a number of black converts in the “Great Revival” from 1785 to 1801.<sup>137</sup> As a whole “by 1790, about 14 percent of southern whites and nearly 4 percent of blacks belonged to Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian churches.”<sup>138</sup>

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Baptists and Methodists preached the equality of men. Such theology caused blacks, free and slave, to join their churches, internalizing the theology of liberty and equality, while also drawing suspicion from the prevailing white society. Evangelical denominations drew African Americans primarily because the emphasis on freedom from “degradation and despair to salvation and hope.”<sup>139</sup> Evangelical churches also drew upon natural rights and republican morality as arguments against slavery during the era of the “Great Revival.”<sup>140</sup> Though the antislavery fervor subsided during the nineteenth century African Americans had already come to faith and countered the growing prejudice by establishing independent denominations.<sup>141</sup> Thus, the evangelical movement laid the foundation

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<sup>135</sup> Newman, 17.

<sup>136</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 19, 23; Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonia and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 25, 40; Donald G. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 13, 19.

<sup>137</sup> Irons, 52; Matthews, 49.

<sup>138</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 69, 72, 221.

<sup>141</sup> Heyrman, 46; Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen to which is annexed the rise and progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833), 12, 22-23 on *Documenting the America South*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000, docsouth.unc.edu/neh/allen/allen.html.; Daniel Coker, “The Negro Church Achieves

for new, convincing and accepted arguments for liberty which African Americans accepted and utilized in their quest for freedom.

The year 1796 marked a shift in Virginia's abolitionist sentiment. That year St. George Tucker's *A Dissertation Concerning Slavery* was tabled by the Virginia Assembly and thereafter the state government took "steps...toward restoring the slave controls that had been allowed to lapse in the wake of the Revolution and the evangelical challenge."<sup>142</sup> A rise of "freedom suits" in the courts and thereby the swelling ranks of the free black population, about ten percent by 1800, and the apparent freedom of many skilled slaves via the "self-lease" system worried many whites, including those in the government. Not only a rise in the free black population worried whites but also the increase of the black population as African Americans numbered over half of the Richmond population by 1800. Henrico County, site of Richmond, boasted 4,600 slaves and more than 500 free blacks.<sup>143</sup> The ruling white class, who found themselves an increasing minority, took steps to limit the dangers posed to whites by free and "quasi-free" blacks by restrictions and enforcement of laws already established to control the African-American population.<sup>144</sup> However, these steps only further endangered the white population as African Americans "emboldened by Revolutionary theory and radical Christianity, ... had tasted just enough freedom to want more, and if after 1796 it was clear that the Assembly would not give it to them, some among them dared take it for themselves."<sup>145</sup> It is within this framework that Gabriel and his fellow conspirators lived and their plan was hatched.

August 30, 1800, marked the date for the planned conspiracy engineered by a literate

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Independence, 1816," in *A Documentary History of The Negro People in the United States*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: Citadel Press Book, 1951), 69.

<sup>142</sup> Egerton, 15.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 13-15.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 17.

slave, Gabriel. Believed to be born in 1776, Gabriel, a blacksmith by trade, stood six foot three or four inches. Finely built, with his two front teeth missing and scars marking his head, he had a reputation as an active man with a thirst for freedom.<sup>146</sup> Historian Douglas Egerton described him as possessing “the strength in his chest and arms [that] betrayed nearly a decade in the forge. ... a long and ‘bony face, well made’ ... his hair was cut short and was as dark as his complexion. Whites as well as blacks regarded him as ‘a fellow of courage and [possessing an] intellect above his rank in life.’”<sup>147</sup> From all accounts Gabriel, in both his bearing and skills, commanded the respect and attention of those around him.

Gabriel had shown himself to be an unusual man in the fall of 1799. Caught hog-stealing with his brother Solomon and another slave, Gabriel resisted arrest. He was charged with wrestling Absolam Johnson to the ground and “biting off a considerable part of his left Ear.”<sup>148</sup> For this assault he faced possible death, yet maneuvered the courts by using the benefit of the clergy to spare his life.<sup>149</sup> Though he bypassed the gallows, Gabriel had used his only lifeline. Branded on the hand as an offender and set on probation in the custody of his master, Thomas Prosser, Gabriel intensified his fight against bondage.<sup>150</sup>

While whites argued over the coming election and the issues of the quasi-war with France, blacks free and enslaved alike found themselves conspiring against the status quo. Arguments of liberty and rights swirled around accusations of tyranny and the infamous

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 3; James Monroe, “A Proclamation” September 9, 1800, in Phillip J. Schwarz, ed., *Gabriel’s Conspiracy: A Documentary History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2012), 49.

<sup>147</sup> Egerton, 21-22.

<sup>148</sup> “First Trail of Gabriel, Monday, October 7, 1799,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 5.

<sup>149</sup> Bert M. Mutersbaugh, “The Background of Gabriel’s Insurrection” *The Journal of Negro History* 68, No. 2 (Spring 1983), 209; According to Mutersbaugh benefit of the clergy had been abolished for free people, though was still an available plea for slaves, thus proving Gabriel’s legal status as a slave.

<sup>150</sup> “Resolution of First Complaint against Gabriel, Tuesday, November 5, 1799,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 7; In return for getting custody of Gabriel Thomas Prosser promised Gabriel’s good behavior and that he would live at ‘peace towards all the good people of this Commonwealth....for the spaces of twelve months.’ (same page as cited).

mudslinging election atmosphere took hold of candidate Thomas Jefferson's home state.

Historian James Sidbury notes the leniency of whites towards slaves as they were absorbed with the election and the laxity with which they patrolled the roads.<sup>151</sup> Sidbury argues that Gabriel and his fellow conspirators determined that whites' distractions made the summer of 1800 ripe for rebellion.

Even before being elected their captain, Gabriel numbered in the top group of conspirators and set about acquiring weapons, gunpowder and men. Solomon claimed that Gabriel commissioned him to make swords from scythes and that "every Sunday he [Gabriel] came to Richmond to provide ammunition, & to find where the military stores were deposited."<sup>152</sup> These weapons were important in the practical working of the insurrection and also in the ideological and symbolic aspects of the plan. This transformation of scythes to swords is an obvious connection to the Biblical prophecy found in the book of Joel calling the Gentiles to turn their scythes into weapons.<sup>153</sup> Sidbury asserts that the symbolism stretched further that when the slave conspirators "used their skills to transform scythes into swords, they transformed symbols of Black oppression into weapons with which slaves could demand freedom and respect."<sup>154</sup> This transformation must have motivated these blacksmiths to transform not only their tools but also themselves.

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<sup>151</sup> James Sidbury, *Plowshares into swords: Race, rebellion, and identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> "Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong." Joel 3:9-10 (KJV). These verses conjure up the image of an impending battle where everything available was used to fight. The conspirators took this literally by beating scythes into swords. This verse is also at odds with the almost identical verses found in Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3 speaking of the last times when Christ would return and war will no longer ravage the world and so men "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2.4, KJV). The complete reversal of this call signals an understanding that the world had not reached the millennial state and there were still battles to be fought and won.

<sup>154</sup> Sidbury, 69.

Recruitment was selective and took place throughout the entire the summer. Enlistment occurred in numerous places including private meetings, at outdoor preaching, places of business, church and along the road.<sup>155</sup> Gabriel and his conspirators limited recruitment mainly to skilled slaves and did not share the plan with slaves with possible connections to whites, particularly female house-slaves. These slaves typically had closer ties to whites, which allowed greater opportunity to give away the plan. The leadership excluded field hands almost entirely. Planners withheld knowledge of the conspiracy itself, not just the details, from those “suspected had not genius or strength enough to support the plan.”<sup>156</sup> The conspirators operated within the culture of the quasi-free slaves who dominated the Richmond workforce and congested the roads conducting their business. Sidbury claims this occurred primarily because of the camaraderie and culture skilled slaves found themselves developing.

On the first of July the insurrectionists met at Gabriel’s home to pledge an oath of allegiance and listen to Martin, Gabriel’s older brother, preach about the similarities of the children of Israel to their current condition.<sup>157</sup> The conspirators also agreed on a date for the uprising: Saturday, the thirtieth of August. George, one of the leaders, preferred Sunday because slaves could travel without suspicion on Sunday. Gabriel insisted upon Saturday because the conspirators would not draw attention to themselves heading out of the city in the normal throng of artisan slaves headed home to see their families in the outlying plantations. The date was set, and by the beginning of August “whispers” of the rebellion, though ignored, leaked into the white community.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> “Trial of Jack Bowler” in Schwarz, *Gabriel Conspiracy*, 181; “Trial of Frank” in Schwarz, *Gabriel Conspiracy*, 46; Sidbury, 245.

<sup>156</sup> *Virginia Argus Article* in Schwarz, *Gabriel Conspiracy*, 170.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> “John Grammer to Augustine Davis, August 9, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel Conspiracy*, 8.

With the day in reach on August 29 clouds rolled in and rain showers fell in the evening.<sup>159</sup> The storm intensified with a “great fall of rain” so that by Saturday evening the creek and bridge between Henrico County and Richmond was impassable.<sup>160</sup> The Virginia *Argus* stated that the:

...night on which the thunderstorm discovered the plot by dispersing the conspirators, 100 men were to depart from the Brook (the planned rendezvous, six miles from Richmond) in 3 columns. They would have set off at midnight: the right wing directing its march for the penitentiary house, where all the arms of the state were deposited, without any other guard but the keepers: and the left for the powder house. These two columns were not united. The centre, well protected with cutlasses, knives, pikes and muskets would have entered the town at both ends, and would have begun the carnage.<sup>161</sup>

Once Richmond was under the insurrectionists’ control, Gabriel planned to kill the white population unless they agreed to free the blacks. The rebels planned to unite around “a flag on which they would have written *death or liberty*, and they would kill all except as before excepted unless they agreed to the freedom of the Blacks, in which case they would cut off one of their Arms.”<sup>162</sup> One reason the bloody plan never occurred was the heavy rains sinking the elaborate scheme and preventing the march on Richmond. Had the rains not prevented this, the prevailing consensus held that the slaves could have overrun the poorly equipped and ill trained militia and taken Richmond.

While the rains prevented the execution of the plot on August 30 the conspiracy ultimately failed through the betrayal of their plans. Instead of the bloodbath of slaves killing their masters and anyone opposing their claim to freedom, Pharaoh, a slave, informed his master Mosby Sheppard of the intended uprising. Sheppard’s slave girl later reconfirmed the information. Sheppard investigated the information but nothing seemed amiss on the Prosser

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<sup>159</sup> “James DuVal Diary Entry, Friday, August 29, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel Conspiracy*, 9.

<sup>160</sup> “James DuVal Diary Entry, Sunday, August 31, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel Conspiracy*, 11.

<sup>161</sup> Virginia *Argus Article* in Schwarz, *Gabriel Conspiracy*, 170-171.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 153; those “excepted” had been outlined a few lines previously and included Quakers, Methodists and French people according to Ben Woolfolk’s testimony.

plantation and he returned home, reporting to Governor James Monroe what he learned. Sidbury interprets the betrayal of the plot by Pharaoh as a self-interested scheme not a fearful confession. Sidbury asserts that “if Gabriel was successful, Pharaoh could have joined his triumphant brethren in Richmond as if he had supported them all along. Had the conspiracy failed, he could have looked forward to being rewarded for surreptitiously revealing the rebellion as in the works.”<sup>163</sup> Thus, with an act of betrayal, the rebellion ended before it began.

But story does not end there. To the contrary, all information concerning the conspiracy emanates from the trials, newspaper stories and correspondence in the aftermath of the failed event. By September 10, 1800, sixteen men were either arrested or suspected, while the leaders of the conspiracy remained at large.<sup>164</sup> On September 11, 1800, the trial of Solomon, Gabriel’s blacksmith brother, took place. He pleaded not guilty. The court transcript contains his statement that “*he was in no wise guilty of the crime with which he stands accused.*”<sup>165</sup> Despite this statement, the court found Solomon and 15 other slaves, all charged on September 11, guilty. Their executions occurred the next day, except that of Solomon, who was hanged a short time later.<sup>166</sup> By the end of September between thirty to forty slaves, charged with conspiracy, awaited trial and twenty-seven had been hanged from the gallows.<sup>167</sup> On September 20, Thomas Jefferson questioned Monroe about the extreme measures the state had taken in quelling the insurrection. Jefferson warned of a growing “strong sentiment that there has been hanging enough. the other states & the world at large will for ever condemn us if we indulge a principle of revenge, or go one step beyond absolute necessity.”<sup>168</sup> Governor Monroe justified the state’s

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<sup>163</sup> Sidbury, 111.

<sup>164</sup> “Insurrection Suspects,” in Schwarz *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 29-30.

<sup>165</sup> “Trial of Solomon, First Copy,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 33.

<sup>166</sup> Schwarz, 30.

<sup>167</sup> Egerton, 93, 187.

<sup>168</sup> “Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, September 20, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 89.



actions in his reply to Jefferson: “This business of the insurrection Increases my anxiety. The danger has doubtless passed but yet it woud. be unwise to make no provision angst.

possibilities.”<sup>169</sup> Monroe’s justification illustrates the fears of the white population concerning their slaves and the potential of an uprising of which they would be the primary targets. The trials persisted, despite Jefferson’s warning, though more frequently the verdict of not guilty dismissed potential conspirators.

After nearly a month at large Gabriel was yet again betrayed by a slave and taken by the authorities. His capture aroused great excitement in Richmond and the surrounding area when he arrived on September 30, 1800. Newspapers described him as “[manifesting] the greatest marks of firmness and composure, showing not the least disposition to equivocate, or screen himself from justice” and later termed him a “hardened miscreant.”<sup>170</sup> Gabriel refused to testify or give any statements regarding the conspiracy, except to Governor Monroe, who, absorbed by the death of his son, did not meet with the rebel leader. By October 3, 1800, Monroe disbanded the militia as the two main leaders, Gabriel and Jack Ditcher, had either been apprehended or surrendered.<sup>171</sup> Jack Ditcher, who had been hiding in the home of a free black, Peter Smith, surrendered two days after Gabriel’s arrest.<sup>172</sup> Gabriel’s trial commenced one day after Ditcher’s surrender, on October 6. Found guilty, unsurprisingly, the insurrectionist leader was sentenced to hang on October 20, 1800.<sup>173</sup> Ditcher, also found guilty, along with a few other slaves escaped the noose but was transported to the New Orleans slave market by the end of that year.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> “James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, September 22, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 95.

<sup>170</sup> “Virginia Gazette Article” in Schwarz’s *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 135.

<sup>171</sup> “James Monroe to Major Robert Quarles, October 3, 1800,” in Schwarz’s *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 145-146.

<sup>172</sup> Egerton, 110: Interestingly, Peter Smith later petitioned for the reward on Ditcher’s head but only received \$50 of the \$300.

<sup>173</sup> “Trial of Gabriel, October 6, 1800,” in Schwarz’s *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 151-153.

<sup>174</sup> Egerton, 147, 150-51.

With Gabriel's execution, talk of the conspiracy should have ended but official documents continued to discuss the revolt until December. The memory of the rebellion and what it stood for did not die as easily as a man but persevered in the minds of both white and black. Gabriel and his fellow insurrectionists achieved part of what they hoped to do. They shook the social system to the core, perhaps creating a more receptive audience than if bloodshed had taken place.

Though the revolt failed, the importance of the event does not diminish with time for historians nor does the question of what motivated the conspirators. As written evidence from the insurrectionists themselves does not exist, the question of motive and intention has only been handed down through records kept by white leaders, the intended targets of the conspiracy. Despite the lack of solid evidence, two primary motives for the rebellion seem clear. The motive of a general revenge against slavery is evident in the court records, though more prominent in the correspondence of whites. William Mosby recounted to Governor Monroe that the slaves "intended to rise, kill and destroy the white people."<sup>175</sup> This fear pervaded the atmosphere, which influenced newspapers and letters, including their authors.

While the documents show the whites' realization of how close they came to obliteration, they also provide another explanation for the uprising, the drive for freedom. Liberation from their bondage inspired highly trained, successful slaves with a relatively high degree of freedom to desire more. For example, according to the testimony of Prosser's Ben, Isaac, one of the slaves executed September 18, joined the cause as "he was determined not to serve a white man another year."<sup>176</sup> The trial of King, found guilty of "conspiracy and insurrection" and hanged on October

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<sup>175</sup> "William Mosby to James Monroe, Monday, November 10, 1800," in Schwarz's *Gabriel's Conspiracy*, 189.

<sup>176</sup> "Trial of Isaac," in Schwarz's *Gabriel's Conspiracy*, 67.

3, likewise revealed that the insurrectionists were fighting for liberty while simultaneously seeking revenge. Ben Woolfolk, a conspirator turned informer, testified:

the prisoner [King] spoke contemptuously of his master and of the white people. His language and deportment encouraged the witness ... [and he told him] 'The negroes are about to fight the white people for their freedom.' Prisoner- 'I was never was so glad to hear anything in my life; they ought to have taken that consideration a long time ago. I am and will be ready to join them at any moment. I could slay the white people like sheep.'<sup>177</sup>

This testimony contains both ideas of freedom and revenge. Though King himself appeared motivated by revenge, the language used by Woolfolk in recruiting King emphasized the desire for liberty. Similar to the testimony at the trial of King, John Randolph's letter to Joseph Nicholson suggested that the foundation of the uprising lay on the dual motives of freedom, or natural rights, and revenge. Randolph's letter stated: "the accused have exhibited a spirit, which, if it becomes general, must deluge the Southern country in blood. They manifested a sense of their rights, and contempt of danger, and a thirst for revenge which portend the most unhappy consequences."<sup>178</sup> Thus the combination of the natural rights argument and the desire for revenge created a powerful motivating force.

Natural rights appeared much to the chagrin of the white leaders. The language of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness would not stay within the color barrier. Historian Simon Newman describes Gabriel as "a deeply politicized man" whose motivation lay not in merely racial but also class or economic equality.<sup>179</sup> Possibilities of liberty for enslaved blacks seemed within their grasp since the American, French and Haitian Revolutions. Both Egerton and Sidbury argue that the relative freedom of Richmond's urban slavery instilled a thirst for complete freedom in skilled, artisan slaves. However, in 1793 the federal government passed the

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<sup>177</sup> "Trial of King, Thursday, September 25, 1800," in Schwarz, *Gabriel's Conspiracy*, 108-109.

<sup>178</sup> "John Randolph to Joseph Nicholson, September 36, 1800," in Schwarz, *Gabriel's Conspiracy*, 112.

<sup>179</sup> Simon Newman, "The World Turned Upside Down: Revolutionary Politics, Fries' and Gabriel's Rebellions, and the Fears of the Federalists" *Pennsylvania History* 67, no. 1(Winter 2000), 6-7.

Fugitive Slave law prohibiting assisting runaway slaves and in 1796 Virginia established legal barriers to manumission. The situation gave “black Virginians ... just enough freedom to want more, and ... after 1796 it was clear that the Assembly would not give it to them, some among them dared take it for themselves.”<sup>180</sup> As the “pervasive language of liberty and equality” had “reached its rhetorical peak,” black laborers working in a sort of quasi-freedom listened to the message of natural rights, incorporating that in their arsenal of weapons to combat their situation.<sup>181</sup> Egerton argues that “most urban bondmen lacked a sophisticated understanding of the political issues they overheard, but that is hardly the point; popular revolutions often arise from conjunctions between the aspirations of the disenfranchised majority and the demands of the politically conscious minority.”<sup>182</sup> With this in mind Egerton asserts that natural rights ideology drove a militant-artisan revolution to break the chains society placed upon them. Though “never fully elaborated” natural rights ideology clearly influenced these slaves.<sup>183</sup> If so, then how and to what extent?

Natural rights ideology assuredly influenced the slaves, evidence of which lies scattered throughout the testimonies left in trial documents, the main body of evidence left by the conspirators themselves. However, the conspirators did not have sole claim to natural rights ideology. The press and whites took up the discussion of natural rights in their relation to the enslaved residents of their communities.

Natural rights ideology could not help but enter into the discussion surrounding “Gabriel’s Rebellion.” The *Virginia Argus* ran a letter to the editor on the sixteenth of September which cited a letter written to Charles Purcell warning that though the authorities had quelled the

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<sup>180</sup> Egerton, 17.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Sidbury, 88.

uprising “this shall not prevent the cause of liberty.”<sup>184</sup> These fears persisted throughout the remainder of the year, and on October 14, the *Virginia Argus* ran an article recounting the events of the attempted insurrection. The *Argus* did not fail to mention that the slaves “assembled to obtain their liberty, and to render themselves master of the country.”<sup>185</sup> This account that identified liberty as the driving motive in the insurrection is subject to scrutiny. The *Argus* may have identified liberty as the force which impelled the slaves to take up arms because of the repetition of natural rights language that flooded their testimonies. However, the inclusion of such wording may have had a twofold purpose with the incorporation of said language to prove a political point or lay blame on certain groups within the white community, primarily the French and Abolitionist-prone religious groups.

Also on September 16 the *Virginia Gazette* likewise ran an article arguing that the motivating factor in the conspiracy lay in the “French principle of Liberty and Equality...introduced to the minds of negroes, and that the incautious use of these words by some whites among us, have inspired them with hopes of success.”<sup>186</sup> This argument simultaneously shifted responsibility onto the French thereby not allowing blame to fall on local whites for the spread of these ideas to slaves and took a partisan stab at Jeffersonians. Again the *Gazette* blamed the French in a letter to the editor on September 19, declaring that “the French principle of liberty and equality is the sole cause of the late alarms.”<sup>187</sup>

Fear of the uprising caused other citizens to see danger in the propagation of liberty. The *Virginia Herald* ran a letter to the editor on September 23, 1800, narrating the story of the insurrection in excited language. The letter asserted that the conspiracy “expected that every

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<sup>184</sup> “*Virginia Argus Letter to the Editor*, September 16, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 72.

<sup>185</sup> “*Virginia Argus*, October 14, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 170.

<sup>186</sup> “*Virginia Gazette* ‘Article,’ September 16, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 71.

<sup>187</sup> “*Virginia Gazette* ‘Letter to the Editor,’ September 19, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 87.

Frenchman would join them, every free negro and mulatto.”<sup>188</sup> Beyond the excitement over the extent of the conspiracy and accusations against the “French Jacobins,” the letter asserted that:

Liberty and equality have brought the evil upon us. A doctrine which, however intelligible, and admissible, in a land of freemen, is not only unintelligible, and inadmissible, but dangerous and extremely wicked in this country, where every white man is a master, and every black man is a slave. This doctrine, in this country, and in every country like it this (as the horrors of St. Domingo have already proved) cannot fail of producing either a general insurrection, or a general emancipation. It has been most imprudently propagated at many of our tables, while our servants have been standing behind our chairs, for several years past. It has been, and is still preached by the Methodists, Baptists and others, from the pulpit, without any sort of reserve. What else then could we expect than what has happened?<sup>189</sup>

Despite the plethora of fallacies, this ode to the dangers of liberty warned of talk of natural rights. The author considered the public discussion of unrestricted natural rights as the primary mistake that led to the insurrection. Perhaps, then, Gabriel and the other Prosser slaves learned of natural rights from Thomas Prosser’s discussions with his friend Patrick Henry.

The fear of blacks using the language of liberty, or understanding the concepts of liberty, clearly shines through. For if slaves had used natural rights language they were capable of understanding and not the dumb beasts as slaveholders wished. If slaves could argue using natural rights for their freedom then slave would transform from dumb beasts into “a ferocious...[and] the most horrible of monsters.”<sup>190</sup> This proves the fear that slavery and natural rights would prove a fatal combination.

The court records primarily contain the testimonies of Prosser’s Ben and Ben Woolfolk. Although these two men testified against their fellow conspirators and were not high ranking members of the insurrection their testimonies contain a smattering of natural rights language. Statements about recruitment often contain references to fighting the whites *for* their liberty.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> “Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg) *Letter to the Editor*, September 23, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 96.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> “Trial of Frank, Friday, September 12, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 46; “Trial of James, Tuesday, September 30, 1800,” in Schwarz’ *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 129; “Trial of Jack Bowler, Wednesday, October 29, 1800,” in Schwarz’ *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 182; Emphasis mine.

This idea runs throughout the records. Towards the beginning of September it appeared that the authorities did not wish to make known the fact that the conspirators incorporated natural rights as justification for the failed insurrection. In the transcript of Thomas Prosser's Frank, a discrepancy appears in the record. While the record found in Henrico County Court Order Book 1799-1801 contains the statement "he [Frank] agreed to join Gabriel to fight the white people for their liberty," the last three words do not appear in the House of Delegates transcript.<sup>192</sup> This omission suggests political leaders chopped the words to deny a link between the rebellion and natural rights. Similarly, late in September William Prentis, troubled by the trials, informed James Monroe of an unusual incident in the trial of Frank. He recounted that "one of the Negroes, after being found guilty, was going on with a confession, but the Court thought proper to stop him."<sup>193</sup> Prentis mentioned that the testimony related to two free black men but did not know why the confession was stopped by the Court. These two unrelated episodes in the trials display the bias, or unwillingness, of the Court to embrace the complete truth.

The Court record does contain a strong declaration of natural rights in the trial of Jack Bowler. The Court record reported that Jack Bowler has "enquired of the Deponent, if he had heard that the Negroes were going to rise in Arms and fight for their Liberty... [and Bowler] said We have as much right to fight for our Liberty as any Men."<sup>194</sup> This telling statement suggests that enslaved blacks understood the ideas of liberty and equality beloved and propagated in Virginia. This idea that the right to life and liberty extended to slaves shows that blacks did not have a thorough or intricate understanding of the nuances, debates and complications in republican or liberal ideology, but rather that they accepted the language at face value. But

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<sup>192</sup> "Trial of Frank, Friday, September 12, 1800," in Schwarz, *Gabriel's Conspiracy*, 46.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> "Trial of Jack Bowler, Wednesday, October 29, 1800," in Schwarz, *Gabriel's Conspiracy*, 182.

despite the lack of “sophisticated understanding” the danger that threatened white Virginians on August 30, 1800, lay rooted in their own actions.<sup>195</sup> The combination of natural rights ideology with the enslavement of men who understood the simple meaning of the words life and liberty had potential for lethal action.

Natural rights played an obvious role in the conspiracy as did Evangelical theology. New doctrine coming from the Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist denominations espoused equality for all men and reinforced the ideas inherent in republican ideology. Egerton argued that “reduced to its purest form, Christianity carried a subtle political message that was at odds with a class-based society...[for] Christianity freed their souls and told them they were worthy of physical freedom as well.”<sup>196</sup> This concept in evangelical theology produced “radical” doctrine within the slave culture. The darkening “religious complexion of the South” exemplified the impact of evangelical theology on blacks.<sup>197</sup>

Religion provided the backdrop necessary for the conspiracy. Martin, Gabriel’s brother and an enslaved itinerant preacher, proved useful in providing the Biblical references needed in stirring up the rebellion. Woolfolk’s testimony cited Martin’s preaching about the identification of African-American slaves with the children of Israel enslaved in Egypt. This identification became a powerful theme in the conspiracy, as it would in black writings in the years to come. Ben Woolfolk testified that Martin used Biblical references to support his claim that God would bring peace in their land and cause them to triumph over great odds.<sup>198</sup> Gabriel also used the Exodus theme. Sidbury argues that Gabriel’s own familiarity with Christianity and its principles facilitated the conspiracy:

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<sup>195</sup> Egerton, x.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 8- 9.

<sup>197</sup> Raboteau, 25.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*



Gabriel's ability to invoke such an appropriate and resonate biblical analogy, ... bespeaks a remarkable familiarity with the Bible. ... Gabriel's allusion to Daniel, Martin's facility with scriptural quotation, and the seamless movement from secular to sacred during Martin's debate with Ben Woolfolk attest to the ways that such discussion could foster a sense that enslaved African Americans were God's chosen people and that he would lead them to the promised land.<sup>199</sup>

The evidence certainly supports this view. The *Virginia Argus* explicitly mentioned both Gabriel's and Martin's use of religion to motivate the conspirators and show the justness of their cause.<sup>200</sup> Not only does this demonstrate Gabriel's ability to use Biblical references to justify his cause but also illustrated his literacy. For "reading also provided access to God's word. Christianity lay at the heart of antebellum slaves' worldview."<sup>201</sup> Thus his ability to use both his literacy and scripture proved his ability as a leader. New evangelical denominations, stimulated by the "Great Revival," featured a belief in the incorporation of blacks in their churches as well as freedom and the kinship of all men.<sup>202</sup>

Recruitment for the conspiracy took place at an integrated church, the Hungary Baptist Meeting House, where many of the conspirators, including Gabriel, worshiped.<sup>203</sup> This church played a prominent role in the lives of the conspirators, suggesting a community tied together by their enslavement and religious bonds. The Evangelical community was biracial as "the Great Awakening was a 'period of intensive mass interaction' between White and Black Virginians, during which White new-light divines expressed their opposition to slavery and worked hard to convert slaves."<sup>204</sup>

The gulf between the free and enslaved, however, manifested itself at various times, especially during the plotting of the insurrection. Although the slaves belonged to the church

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<sup>199</sup> Sidbury, 79.

<sup>200</sup> "Virginia Argus Article, October 14, 1800," in Schwarz, *Gabriel's Conspiracy*, 170.

<sup>201</sup> Sidbury, 73.

<sup>202</sup> Raboteau, 21; Matthews, 13, 19.

<sup>203</sup> Sidbury, 74.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

community, “nonetheless, they withdrew from their White co-religiosity to plan the conspiracy, and when planning they spoke of Black Virginians as God’s chosen people.”<sup>205</sup> The withdrawal of the conspirators from their fellow white parishioners evidently had to occur as plotting the deaths of white masters to gain freedom would not have enjoyed the support of other whites, even if they were fellow parishioners and thus likely to be spared. The theology of freedom, equality and the kinship of all men spoke deeply to slaves who were obviously moved by such ideas to the point of revolution. This message of freedom also appealed to “people who were dissatisfied with conventional society.”<sup>206</sup>

Another indicator of religious influence in the conspiracy lay in the instructions of whom to spare during the invasion of Richmond. According to Ben Woolfolk the goal of the conspiracy was to exterminate the white population except “the Quakers, the Methodists, & the French men.”<sup>207</sup> Woolfolk asserts they “were to be spared on account as they conceived of their being friendly to liberty” and a belief that the French, both citizens in America and potentially the French government, might support their cause.<sup>208</sup>

Not only did the conspirators believe that the Quakers, Methodists, French and Baptists would support the conspiracy, but whites also believed this. Though Woolfolk did not mention Baptists in the protected groups, whites during the trials typically linked Baptists with the Quakers, Methodists and French. The accusations found in newspapers to that effect reveal a surprising amount of hostility and suspicion toward these groups because of their message of freedom and equality. Antislavery religion and religious fanatics posed a threat to the society as

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Raboteau, 37; Sidbury, 38.

<sup>207</sup> “Ben Woodfork [Woolfolk] Affidavit” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 76.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.,77.

they preached a radical form of equality that undermined the established social caste.<sup>209</sup> Thus, with a history of preaching freedom and an inclusion of slaves within their denominations, these groups found themselves blamed for inciting rebellion. James Callender wrote to Thomas Jefferson that “much blame has been cast, . . . upon the Baptists, for having put impracticable notions of liberty in the heads of these fellows.”<sup>210</sup> The *Virginia Gazette* declared “that the French principle of liberty and equality is the sole cause of the late alarms.”<sup>211</sup> Thus blame on these groups show that whites too assumed that these groups would support, at least in theory, the ideas of the insurrection.

Perhaps the key to understanding why the slaves in Virginia did not seek legal methods, rather choosing lethal means, is the idea found in the trial of Isaac Prosser’s Ben testified that Isaac declared his willingness to join the insurrection because “he was determined not to serve a white man another year.”<sup>212</sup> The desire to destroy slavery swiftly seems essential to the core idea of the insurrection. The artisan slaves in Virginia sought to end slavery through force as they had been subjected by force. Prince Hall’s method of slowly proving to whites black capability of freedom through education, good living and petitioning the government had proved successful in Massachusetts. Where blacks in Massachusetts had the opportunity and means of petitioning against the slowly dying institution of slavery in the North, slaves in Virginia had no such luxury as time saw slavery becoming more entrenched in their state. And while Virginia increasingly became a slave society African Americans lost what little opportunity and hope they had of

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<sup>209</sup> Sidbury, 129.

<sup>210</sup> “James T. Callender to Thomas Jefferson, September 18, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 83. This is the same James Thomas Callender who was prosecuted under the Sedition Act in 1800. He was indicted for publishing libel against the president, fined and imprisoned. Harming his chances in the trial was his reputation as a muckraker. Perhaps his correspondence with Jefferson at the time of his candidacy for the Presidency is understandable in 1800 (Farber, 326).

<sup>211</sup> “*Virginia Gazette* Letter to the Editor, September 19, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 87.

<sup>212</sup> “Trial of Isaac, Tuesday, September 16, 1800,” in Schwarz, *Gabriel’s Conspiracy*, 67.

legally fighting for freedom. However, Gabriel's audacious aspiration led to further restrictions and the death of twenty-seven highly trained slaves, not the so desired freedom.

A speech attributed to Gabriel manifests the idea of a sacrificial, almost patriotic, fight to obtain black natural rights. This unidentified speech from the conspirator's trial began:

...in a manly tone of voice: 'I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer, had he been taken by the British and put to trial by them. I have adventured my life in endeavoring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause: and I beg, as a favour, that I may be immediately led to execution. I know that you have pre-determined to shed my blood, why then all this mockery of a trial?'<sup>213</sup>

This speech asserts an understanding of the risks and dangers of the insurrection and also a belief in the validity of the cause, likening it to Washington's in the American Revolution.

Through Gabriel and the conspirators, many of whom lost their lives before they had a chance to begin fighting, their message could not help but be heard. Whites may have tried to overshadow the message of a desire for freedom with fear of bloodshed and carnage but the message still came through. Within the debates and conversations of whites in Virginia questions about the legitimacy of natural rights and fears about black liberty arose. The real significance, for this thesis, lies not in the details of the plotted insurrection but in the idea motivating the slaves to attempt to overthrow their society. The ideas of liberty and equality enabled Prince Hall to urge blacks to use their liberty to show whites their capacity for freedom. These ideals also drove Gabriel to urge his fellow slaves to overthrow the shackles of slavery. These two responses show the seemingly opposite reactions to the same ideal of liberty. These responses differed primarily because of the situational opportunities open to the men who promoted action in Massachusetts and Virginia and their legal status.

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<sup>213</sup> "Observations of Robert Sutcliff, Tuesday, September 25, 1804," in Schwarz, *Gabriel's Conspiracy*, 238; Egerton attributed this speech to either William or Sam Graham, whereas Schwarz leads the reader to believe that Gabriel said this. Egerton's most convincing argument against the author being Gabriel is the fact that Gabriel refused to testify during the ordeal. However, the speech itself asserts a similar attitude, thus causing the authorship to remain undeterminable.

The insurrection had not succeeded and in many ways created an atmosphere opposed to liberty by leading whites to draw harsh lines against the quasi-freedom of urban slaves. Unlike the successful American Revolution, Gabriel's conspiracy failed to reach its objective. It did succeed in demonstrating that natural rights philosophy did not end with words but extended to action. Gabriel's conspiracy proved that African Americans were inspired by the American Revolutionary ideals and were willing to take action to secure their rights. The uprising demonstrated the different interpretations African Americans derived from natural rights ideology and the measures they were willing to go to obtain the rights denied to them. For, as they claimed, they too were men deserving of the liberty God gave them.

## EPILOGUE

### PROTEST AFTER GABRIEL'S REBELLION

The aftermath of Gabriel's rebellion did little to stir revolutionary fervor among blacks. The failure of this attempt limited black action against their captors though the rebellion kindled white fears of blacks, both slave and free. Uprisings, whether merely plotted such as Denmark Vesey's revolt or staged like the Louisiana 1811 uprising, occurred but did little to alter the position of African Americans. Violent action then simmered for thirty years while the abolitionist movement struggled to obtain an identity.

During these thirty years, natural rights continued to anchor abolitionists' claims although emotionalism replaced rationality as the leading method or style of arguing for natural rights. The abolitionist movement and those fighting for their own freedom were inspired by natural rights ideology and sought, both by legal and occasionally lethal means, to obtain the freedom they naturally possessed. Neither side edged out the other or presented a viable means of ending slavery nationally. While Gabriel could beat plowshares into swords, he could not do so on a large enough scale to supply the army needed to liberate the nation from slavery. Likewise, words and legal means did not solve the problem of slavery nor rid the nation of its curse. Words influenced and contributed to the end of slavery where feasible. Gradual emancipation dominated the history of abolition and flourished in the north because of northern society's disregard for the institution and the arguments made by black and white abolitionists. Success depended not merely on words but also on the regional dependence on the system, or lack thereof; the difference between a slave society and a society with slaves. Force and words

separately did little to shape abolition into a viable movement.

From 1800 to 1830, the African-American community continued to choose between the two options presented in natural rights philosophy: words or action. Questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of both options occurred during this period. Natural rights condoned both methods and the examples of Revolutionary era leaders demonstrated the validity of both means of obtaining freedom. Primarily the black community followed the course set by Prince Hall in his fight for emancipation through legal methods. Hall's legacy extended not only to petitions and pamphlets but also to the establishment of improvement societies. These societies, headed by both white and black, sought to better the conditions of African Americans and prove to whites the capacity of blacks for freedom and equality. Improvement societies were established on the belief that while waiting for equality blacks could demonstrate their worth through education, aid societies and demonstrating respect for the law. These societies promoted virtue and excellence in order to procure society's favor and lay grounded on the conviction of equality, intellectual and moral, between the races. Improvement societies promoted virtue and excellence in attempts to achieve the goal of proving black eligibility to their natural rights. By their actions blacks sought to both better themselves and procure favor with whites.<sup>214</sup>

Abolitionist societies, such as the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society (founded 1775) and the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (officially founded in 1831 though it had become active in the late 1820s), fought for emancipation, education and equal rights using natural rights as their core argument.<sup>215</sup> From 1800 to 1830 abolitionists' style of protest shifted from rational,

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<sup>214</sup> Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 6, 87, 90-91, 93.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 37; David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 258-59; Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 172-73, 188.

theoretically-based arguments to emotional and personal narratives, mirroring the changing trends of the era.<sup>216</sup> Historian Richard Newman neatly categorizes the shift in the abolitionist movement with the rise and fall of the Pennsylvania and Massachusetts Abolitionists societies. The change in tactics occurred because of the shift in popular culture. Newman asserts that because “the PAS’s [Pennsylvania Abolition Society] republican style of reform was outdated in an increasingly egalitarian and romantic age, modern abolitionists emphasized the power of nonelites to halt slavery.”<sup>217</sup> Romanticism in the early American republic, which emphasized emotion over rationality, enabled the abolitionist movement to become more stridently militant and demanding stylistically.<sup>218</sup> This shift in style forever changed the face of abolition and signaled an end of the Revolutionary era in America.<sup>219</sup> Historian David Brion Davis argues that “as the principles of the Revolution became more hollow and abstract, racial fears and prejudices could acquire all the symbolic connotations of ‘reality.’”<sup>220</sup> Essentially, Davis asserts that the value of the ideals of the American Revolution lessened over time as new ideas and methods rose in popularity. Abolitionists, of both races, shifted with the times to express their message.

A major obstacle immediate abolitionists groups sought to combat was the more popular colonization movement. The American Colonization Society, formed in 1816-1817 by “an eclectic group of politicians, lawyers, ministers, and businessmen,” endorsed the relocation of free blacks and the purchase followed by the transportation of slaves outside the United States. This massive project was only possible with government aid and support.<sup>221</sup> Colonization

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<sup>216</sup> Newman., 9.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>219</sup> Davis, 308.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>221</sup> Eric Burin, “The Slave Trade Act of 1819: A New Look at Colonization and the Politics of Slavery” *American Nineteenth Century History* 13, no.1 (March 2012), 5; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 16.



became highly popular especially among educated Americans as it supported the belief in the inability of blacks to adapt to white culture and not only because of racial prejudice but also because of the degradation faced in slavery.<sup>222</sup> Another factor causing the popularity of colonization was its promise to end slavery peacefully, “without altering the structure of American politics” thus causing little damage to the status quo.<sup>223</sup> Colonization arguments rested on the conviction that “racial prejudice and racial differences were simply too strong in the United States for whites and blacks to live together as equals.”<sup>224</sup> As the number of free blacks grew this belief was reinforced by uprisings such as Gabriel’s Rebellion in 1800 and demanded a solution which colonization advocates saw as the removal of African Americans.<sup>225</sup> The American Colonization Society promised colonization would “ensure sectional harmony” by simply “removing the onus of slavery from the shoulders of Southerners.” Though this intent was stated colonization in essence crippled the more radical immediate abolition groups within the antislavery movement insisting upon sensitivity to slaveholders and the peculiar institution itself lest anyone become offended.<sup>226</sup>

Colonization, thus, sought to rid America of blacks on racial grounds by asserting that blacks would degrade white society, and yet help the continent of Africa. Some antislavery advocates pointed out the inconsistencies of colonization, a flawed system that sought to export free and freed persons simply because of their color. Despite the stated good intentions “defamation of black character ... emerged as a central theme in colonization discourse.”<sup>227</sup> Some

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<sup>222</sup> Nicholas Guyatt, ““The Outskirts of Our Happiness”: Race and the Lure of Colonization in the Early Republic” *The Journal of American History* (March 2009), 1000.

<sup>223</sup> Davis, 334.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>225</sup> Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 560-561; Burin, 3; Goodman, 15.

<sup>226</sup> Goodman, 18-19.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

free blacks supported the movement while others, including those within the elite black circle, challenged colonization's legitimacy by posing the rhetorical question "Am I not a man?" This question asserted their humanity and laid the burden of proof on pro-slavery advocates who ironically sought to lay the blame for the curse of slavery on the slave.<sup>228</sup>

However, religious institutions, improvement societies and the black intellectual-elite, known as Essayists who "voiced the concerns of their people- free and unfree," did not possess sole claim to African American protest as violence also found its way into black dissent.<sup>229</sup> Violence and force found their way into black protest as some claimed the necessity of action and the legitimacy of fighting for the freedoms they naturally possessed but were denied. Virginia's Sancho's conspiracy of 1802, inspired by Gabriel's rebellion, the Louisiana slave revolt of 1811 and Denmark Vesey's uprising in South Carolina in 1822 all exemplify African American's willingness to fight for freedom.

Inspired by Gabriel's conspiracy an enslaved ferryman, Sancho, plotted an uprising for Easter morning 1802, on the city of Petersburg, Virginia. Although the Easter morning plot failed it manifested both the ineffectiveness of revolt and its lingering appeal.<sup>230</sup> In January 1811, thirty-six miles north of New Orleans, a mulatto slave from Santo Domingo named Charles Deslondes led an uprising. Deslondes, joined by neighboring slaves, and "maroons," fugitive slaves living in the woods, succeeded in attacking and killing whites en route to New Orleans while inciting panic among whites in the surrounding area.<sup>231</sup> Within twenty-four hours the

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 97-98, 100; *Emancipator*, April 30, 1820, 1, 8-9; Peter Williams, Jr. "Slavery & Colonization, 1830" in *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory 1787-1900*, Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham, eds. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 116.

<sup>229</sup> Newman, 90-91.

<sup>230</sup> Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 119-140.

<sup>231</sup> James H. Dormon, "The Persistent Specter: Slave Rebellion in Territorial Louisiana," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 18, no. 4 (Autumn, 1977), 394; Thomas Marshall Thompson, "National Newspaper and Legislative Reactions to Louisiana's Deslondes Slave Revolt of 1811," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 33, no. 1 (Winter, 1992), 5, 7.

militia in New Orleans formed, attacked, and disbanded the insurrectionists with greater firepower. At Louisiana's request, U.S. troops joined local militia to overcome the rebels by January 11, 1811.<sup>232</sup>

The court found twenty-one slaves guilty of conspiracy and sentenced them to death. Little is known about the insurrectionists or their motives, despite the numerous speculations of newspapers at the time blaming the Spanish, French and natives of Santo Domingo. The insurrectionists' actions prove their willingness to die for the freedoms denied to them.<sup>233</sup> The Deslondes revolt stirred national interest, appearing in ninety-percent of national newspapers at the time, and prompted the passage of restrictive laws not only in Louisiana, but also Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia.<sup>234</sup> Although the tightened laws attempted to quell future uprisings Denmark Vesey alongside other Charlestonian slaves conspired to fight for their freedom just eleven year later.<sup>235</sup>

In 1822, Denmark Vesey and thirty-four of his co-conspirators were hanged from the gallows in Charleston, South Carolina, convicted of designing a “diabolical plot” to seize their freedom by setting fire to Charleston, killing the whites and sailing for Haiti.<sup>236</sup> The primary suspects were “skilled, literate, and privileged slaves” and members of Charleston's African Methodist Episcopal Church, whose growing numbers alarmed whites as they gained more access to ideas and information.<sup>237</sup> In December, 1822, the South Carolina state legislature responded to the Vesey conspiracy by “[prohibiting] private manumissions” and allowing slaves to be freed only “by an act of the state legislature” and by barring free blacks from moving into

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<sup>232</sup> Dormon, 396-97; Thompson, 6-7.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 19-21.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>236</sup> Robert L. Paquette and Douglas Egerton, “Of Facts and Fables: New Light on the Denmark Vesey Affair,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 105, no.1, (Jan., 2004), 8.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 8, 23.

South Carolina.

These three post-Gabriel rebellions suggest that some blacks believed freedom could be taken back by force. Not only did these uprisings reveal a belief that slavery violated their rights as men but also manifested an anger and resentment against the authorities who kept them enslaved. Thus, the ideas and convictions that inspired Gabriel's rebellion did not remain isolated but influenced slaves from Virginia to South Carolina to Louisiana. Arguments for improvement, respecting the legitimacy of the laws and of gradual methods did little to secure emancipation in the Deep South, creating a greater need for action and not words. The closure of Charleston's African Church in 1821 certainly prompted blacks under Vesey's command to use physical violence to gain independence.<sup>238</sup> A petition sent to the South Carolina legislature, complained that abolitionists controlled the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The petition also asserted that abolitionists came to Charleston "with the 'avowed purpose of educating our Negroes.'" <sup>239</sup> Further, the petition claimed that education would prove to Southern blacks that words and improvement societies would not eradicate slavery in the South and thus propel them towards the Haitian example.<sup>240</sup>

These slave revolts did not benefit the slaves the leaders sought to emancipate, rather the uprisings resulted in stricter regulations. Where religion and improvement societies caused apprehension and wariness among whites, rebellion brought the wrath of white society on the heads of the insurrectionists and suspicion on the entire black population. In the South arguments and rhetorical emotionalism did not move society as it had in the North. African Americans' use of refined natural rights argument caused southerners to defend their peculiar institution and

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<sup>238</sup> Rubio, 54.

<sup>239</sup> Petition no. 143, October 16, 1820, series no. S165015, Petitions to the General Assembly in Robert L. Paquette and Douglas Egerton, "Of Facts and Fables: New Light on the Denmark Vesey Affair," 31-32.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

blame the ideas of missionary abolitionists for invading the minds of their slaves.

Although neither words nor force convinced most white Americans that blacks too possessed natural right to life, liberty and even the pursuit of happiness, the radical ideas found in David Walker's "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World" stimulated a transformation of the abolitionist movement. A resident of Boston, born free in North Carolina, David Walker was one of the best known abolitionists of the 1820s. Walker held a post as a correspondent for *Freedom's Journal*, owned a used-clothing business and led Boston's General Colored Association before his death in 1830.<sup>241</sup>

Walker's "Appeal" combined natural rights, religion and violence in a dynamic trio to oppose white tyranny. Arguably the "most important pamphlet of the antebellum era," Walker's "Appeal" ended the transition period between the Revolutionary era's intellectually dominated abolition to a more militant and active abolitionist movement.<sup>242</sup> Arguing that slavery should not be tolerated, Walker radically proposed that blacks should "rise up" and take their freedom.

Walker primarily directed his "Appeal" to a black audience, though his pamphlet was intermixed with warnings for white society. His accusations directed toward the institution of slavery are harsh and passionate. Walker posed a rhetorical question, "Can our condition be any worse? - Can it be more mean and abject? .... Can they get us any lower? .... They are afraid to treat us worse, for they know well, the day they do it they are gone."<sup>243</sup> Such passion and anger filled his pamphlet, urging blacks to act and inciting fear in whites. Walker declared "my motive in writing... is, if possible, to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering

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<sup>241</sup> Young, *Revolutionary Founders*, 90.

<sup>242</sup> Newman, 90.

<sup>243</sup> David Walker, "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World," in Herbert Aptheker, *One Continual Cry; David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829-1830, its setting & its meaning, together with the full text of the third and last edition of the Appeal* (New York: A.I.M.S. by Humanities Press, 1965), 4-5.

brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this *Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!!*”<sup>244</sup> Walker succeeded in arousing others by labeling slavery as an “inhuman system” and “that *curse of nations*” while scribing to it the evils of brutalization and violence.<sup>245</sup> More radical than these strongly-worded, though redundant, accusations was Walker’s battle cry. Walker’s identified whites as “those enemies who have for hundreds of years stolen our *rights*, and kept us ignorant of Him [God] and His divine worship.”<sup>246</sup>

Walker repeatedly declared the humanity of African Americans and inquired how whites did not recognize the fact. Walker dramatically highlighted “how the American people treat us” and asked “have we souls in our bodies? Are we men who have any spirits at all?”<sup>247</sup> The idea of the humanity of blacks that Walker emphasized became a central tenet of the abolitionist movement thereafter. Walker’s key argument centered on the issue of equality. Walker developed this idea probing society with a radical question:

Are we men!!- I ask you, O my brethren! Are we MEN? Did our Creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? Are they not dying worms as well as we? Have they not to make their appearance before the tribunal of Heaven, to answer for the deeds done in the body, as well as we? Have we any other Master but Jesus Christ alone? Is he not their Master as well as ours? - What right then, have we to obey and call any other Master, but Himself?<sup>248</sup>

Walker addressed his question to African Americans though the passage reverberates with his consciousness of white readers. Radical passages such as this served dual purposes. They inspired African Americans and provided reasons to argue against the validity of slavery.

Walker used religious arguments to strengthen his logic-based rationale. Employing one of his favorite techniques, Walker asked his readers if one person should find fault with another based on physical appearance. He challenged the reader with the question: “did not God make us

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 5, 7, 9.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

all as it seemed best to himself? What right, then, has one of us, to despise another, and to treat him cruel, on account of his colour, which none, but the God who made it can alter? Can there be a greater absurdity in nature, and particularly in a free republican country?”<sup>249</sup> Walker based his question on both religion and natural rights. The reference to republican government may have been used to tarnish the ideas whites endorsed that excluded African Americans. Walker’s evocation of God is twofold. First, he sought to prove African-American humanity. For Walker asserted that “man is a peculiar creature- he is the image of his God, though he may be subjected to the most wretched condition upon earth, yet the spirit and feeling which constitute the creature, man, can never be entirely erased from his breast, because the God who made him after his own image, planted it in his heart; he cannot get rid of it.”<sup>250</sup> Secondly, Walker used God as a contrast between white behavior and the God they claimed to serve.

Walker’s “Appeal,” replete with references to natural rights, religion and the argument of black humanity, concluded after his struggle with the ideas of inferiority, colonization, the brutalization of slavery and the submission of African Americans to these conditions. His “Appeal” contained graphic descriptions of the cruelty of slavery. He claimed death more preferable than slavery to a “tyrant, who takes not only my own, but my wife and children’s lives by the inches.”<sup>251</sup> Walker’s pamphlet called African Americans to action and also warned whites to seriously consider their actions before suffering the consequences. Walker dared whites to “treat us like men” asserting that then “there is no danger but we all live in peace and happiness together.”<sup>252</sup>

The era from 1770 to 1830 concluded as Walker’s “Appeal” firmly implanted militant

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 73.

language in the abolitionist movement. Walker's "Appeal" did not seek to answer the question as to whether or not African Americans would use arguments or action to fight for freedom. Instead Walker sought to incite action. Language for Walker became a form of action as his words sought to motivate blacks. He encouraged blacks to lift their voices against the cruelty of their situation. Walker's militant and violent language had potential to lead to widespread action though his death three months after the third edition of his "Appeal" does not allow history to know what Walker would have supported had he lived.

Tactics, methods, and styles had changed during the early years of the American Republic. The militant words used by abolitionists absorbed the two forms of protest forming a synthesis of Prince Hall's and Gabriel's methods. The synthesis sought to combine the methods that had failed using the combination nationally in hopes of total emancipation. Walker's "Appeal" and the prominence of the Massachusetts Anti-slavery Society, promoting mass involvement and relied on emotional appeals to public sentiment, gave abolition a new face. While Prince Hall urged submission to the law while fighting through legal procedures to obtain freedom, Gabriel bypassed legal means and plunged directly into armed conflict, for which he paid with his and his friends lives.

With these two examples the weak abolitionist movement of the early nineteenth century struggled to find the method it would pursue. Largely frozen out of political methods, blacks primarily utilized the open market of the public sphere to make their case.<sup>253</sup> The failed uprisings led by Gabriel and then later Denmark Vesey did little to help the abolitionist movement. However, David Walker's "Appeal" reawakened the movement driving it away from its sixty year reliance on natural rights and religious arguments while channeling the expression of protest

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<sup>253</sup> Newman, 89.



through emotionalism and violent language.

The impact of Walker's "Appeal" came as a result of the combination of natural rights and violence in a clarion call thrusting abolition into a new approach. The failed insurrections, beginning with Gabriel's conspiracy in 1800 through the Vesey rebellion twenty-two years later, proved that slavery could not be dealt with as a local issue but had to be dealt with as a national issue. Abolition could not rely on methods that work in regional areas but needed a national solution as neither words nor force alone could solve a problem facing the entire country. Individuals, white or black, must be recognized as fully deserving of their humanity throughout the United States and not in a handful of states. The nation needed to be purged of slavery or slavery would continue to divide the fragile union.

The country founded on Thomas Jefferson's immortal creed that all men are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness had to face the reality that slavery undermined the credibility of that belief. Not only did the nation face a philosophical conundrum but also a group of ardent abolitionists, fighting for the rights of all men, mirrored the political trends of the day in their quest to end the "peculiar institution." This would not occur until the nation had been reborn and "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" in years to follow.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Facsimile of Gettysburg address in Lincoln's hand on an envelope," found on Library of Congress, *Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana* [www.loc.gov/resouces/lprbscsm.scsm07171/#seq-1](http://www.loc.gov/resouces/lprbscsm.scsm07171/#seq-1) (accessed June, 2014).

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