Learning Freedom: Education, Elevation, and New York's African American Middle Class, 1827-1829

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LEARNING FREEDOM: EDUCATION, ELEVATION, AND NEW YORK’S AFRICAN AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS, 1827-1829

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BY

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For Michael and Teresa
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION – “THE EVILS ACCRUING TO OUR WHOLE COMMUNITY”  
1

CHAPTER TWO: “TO PLEAD OUR OWN CASE” – NEW YORK’S AFRICAN AMERICAN IN THE INTELLECTUAL LANDSCAPE OF THE 1820S  
4

CHAPTER THREE: “IMPROVEMENT IS NOW THE GENERAL CRY!” – THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ELITE AND ELEVATION  
9

CHAPTER FOUR: “THOUGH NOT DESIROUS OF DICTATING…” – *FREEDOM’S JOURNAL* AND ELEVATION  
15

CHAPTER FIVE: “TO REFINE AND SOFTEN THEIR MANNER” – *FREEDOM’S JOURNAL* AND EDUCATION  
21

CHAPTER SIX: “WHY THEN ARE THESE SCHOOLS NOT FILLED?” – CHALLENGES TO AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION IN NEW YORK  
32

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION – “TO PERFORM OUR PART WITH PROPRIETY”  
41

REFERENCE LIST  
42

VITA  
44
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION – “THE EVILS ACCRUING TO OUR WHOLE COMMUNITY”

When considering the state of African American youth in the city of New York, an editorialist in the 1820s (unnamed except for the adopted moniker Philanthropos), offered the opinion that “[t]he evils accruing to our whole community from the loose and depraved habits of the rising generation are incalculable.”\(^1\) Through a lack of proper parental governance, the editorialist stated, “the youths to which we refer are permitted to wander from street to street,” where they were exposed to illicit and dangerous behaviors, and “imbibe habits most pernicious to their future interests.”\(^2\) These habits – idleness, thievery, moral laxity, and a shocking unwillingness to improve their condition – could not but lead to the almshouse, the penitentiary, or the grave.

In Philanthropos’ opinion, spun out over three consecutive editorials for the newspaper \emph{Freedom’s Journal}, the answer was simple. African American parents should give their children over to the noble influence of the city schools, where they would become “glorious to our race.”\(^3\) In Philanthropos’ remarks is a double claim on African American children that has existed for almost two centuries, the claim of family redoubled with responsibility to race. However threatening the consequences for


\(^2\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^3\) \textit{Ibid.}
particular youth might have been, for Philanthropos the greater damage was the risk such children posed to the elevation of the race as a whole, since their idleness would be viewed by outsiders as damning proof of blacks’ already supposed natural inferiority. As Philanthropos wrote, “Do you not behold the children of our affections becoming, through our own neglect, the instruments of our prostration? Do you not consider them the means of binding together the fetters of our enslaved brethren?” For the author, African American children, their education, and their socialization into the broader society were issues that reflected and recast the larger social issues of the period.

The fears expressed by Philanthropos surrounding the education of black youth were part of a larger stream of thought that arose during the early decades of the 19th century. This concern was principally espoused by leaders of a nascent urban black middle class in cities like Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. These men and women of influence saw education as a part of the larger effort for social elevation. Although the development of elevation theories by black leaders during the opening decades of the 19th century has been well mapped in the scholarly literature, the intersection between these theories and specific educational objectives has been fairly vague.

Often, the issues of education and childrearing found expression in the African American press, which acted as the largest public forum for ideas to be widely disseminated and debated among New York’s free population. Freedom’s Journal, the first African American owned and operated news organ in the U.S., which ran weekly for a period of two years beginning in March of 1827 and ending in March of 1829, was

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crucial in this regard. From its offices on Mulberry Street, *Freedom’s Journal* acted as both a forum for various contrasting views of African American education, and as a partisan expressing its support of a decidedly middle class educational ethic based on the doctrines of social and moral elevation approved by the African American elite and white philanthropists.

Using the advertisements, poems, editorials, and articles printed in *Freedom’s Journal*, it is possible to uncover middle class African American views on family, education, and childrearing during the antebellum period. Previous scholarship has concentrated primarily on *Freedom’s Journal’s* place in the history of African American journalism, and its role in the anti-slavery movement of the 1820s and 1830s. More recent scholarship has moved towards illuminating what the paper and its contents reveal about the daily lives and concerns of free African Americans in the North. The present undertaking adds to this knowledge by examining the relationship of *Freedom’s Journal* to African American education for the first time. From the pages of this newspaper there emerges a specific view of African American education, one endorsed from the pulpit and the penny press, but which found little traction among the masses of working class African Americans within the city.
CHAPTER TWO

“TO PLEAD OUR OWN CASE” – NEW YORK’S AFRICAN AMERICAN IN THE INTELLECTUAL LANDSCAPE OF THE 1820s

In order to understand the attitudes towards youth and schooling expressed in *Freedom’s Journal* by New York’s African American elites, it is first necessary to track the main concerns and currents of thought that influenced the development of this group. For the African American community of New York, the 1820s were a decade defined by monumental victories on one hand, and lasting inequities on the other. On July 4, 1827, only three months after the first issue of *Freedom’s Journal* went to press, slavery officially ended in New York. Emancipation had been an arduous process, begun in earnest with the passage of the “Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery” three decades before, in 1799. The bill had granted freedom to any African American born after July 4, 1799, but in concession to slaveholding interests, it had prohibited youth from taking possession of their emancipated status until after they reached maturity, as before such time they were to continue as “the servant of the legal proprietor of his or her mother, until such servant if a male shall arrive at the age of twenty eight years, and if a female at the age of twenty five years.”¹ As painfully slow as gradual emancipation may have been, it nonetheless created an atmosphere in which many owners manumitted slaves

voluntarily, and African Americans negotiated for their freedom and that of family
members with increased regularity. This process succeeded in dramatically increasing the
population of free African Americans in and around the city in the early decades of the
19th century, forming a community capable of supporting a small but vibrant middle
class.

By 1827, when the last slaves were finally manumitted, the free African American community in New York had reached over 10,000, making it the largest single community of free African Americans in the North, second only to New Orleans nationally.2 Although wide-ranging generalizations about this community are difficult to establish, some basic information can be noted. Demographically, the community was diverse, including the descendants of West Africans who had been originally brought to North America by Dutch and British settlers, as well as newer populations from Haiti and other Caribbean islands. The population was also young – with 80% under forty years of age in 1820 – and disproportionately female, with women outnumbering men 6,174 to 4,194.3

Occupationally, African Americans were relegated to the lowest rungs of the economic order. The major source of employment was domestic work for both men and women. Yet, some African Americans had managed to gain employment in skilled trades, and even to own their own businesses. This allowed them to buy and own property, especially in the city’s fifth, sixth, and eight wards. This nascent middle class,

3 Ibid.
composed of artisans, clergy, and skilled laborers, would be the most vocal, often attempting with varying levels of success, to set the direction for their brothers and sisters. It was the hopes, concerns, and fears of this group that found expression in *Freedom’s Journal*, and in the New York of the late 1820s there was still much to fear.

Even though they had gained their freedom, African Americans were regarded by white New Yorkers with intense prejudice and fear. The removal of slavery from the Northern states had raised serious questions about what place African Americans would occupy on the scale of economic and political inclusion. Emancipation was met with disquiet by the white public, especially the working class, who saw their own place in the economic and social order potentially upended. As historian Patrick Rael states, “Coupled with the erosion, throughout the North, of traditional systems of deference politics…the end of slavery’s legitimation of social hierarchies deeply undermined traditional notions of order.”

The white reaction to the anxieties created by gradual manumission was swift and vicious.

If the demise of slavery had opened a door through which Northern whites might have manifested the ideals of their own liberty and natural rights by fully enfranchising African Americans, this hope was short-lived. Even as New York had progressed haltingly towards full emancipation, white citizens refashioned and reasserted arguments for the continued political and economic disenfranchisement of African Americans. New York’s legal code prohibited African Americans from voting, intermarrying with whites, and holding specific jobs and titles. This official denigration was reinforced in the

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popular culture by newspapers, books, speeches, and pamphlets. Broadsides created during these decades, such as those by the cartoonist Edward Clay, for example, that depicted African Americans as ignorant buffoons gained increasing popularity and forming what Rael has called, “the earliest consistent pattern of American racist caricature.” Popular media, public custom, and legal codes thus reasserted the belief that African Americans belonged to a lower class of humanity, and derided and mocked African Americans who had the audacity to aspire beyond their prescribed station.

Even supposed allies of the African American cause, like the African Colonization Society, subscribed to permutations of these views about the degraded and irredeemable character of free African Americans. According to the arguments of prominent supporters of colonization, African Americans had been so morally and intellectually corrupted by the deleterious effects of slavery that their very natures now made them incapable of equality with whites. As the reverend Eliphalet Nott, the president of Union College in New York and an avid supporter of that state’s colonization society, put the matter in 1829, “We have endeavored but endeavored in vain to restore them either to self-respect or to the respect of others… Here therefore, they must be forever debased; more than this they must be forever useless; more even than this they must forever be a nuisance, for which it were a blessing for society to be rid.” In light of these sobering facts, Nott argued, the only reasonable course of action

5 Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest, 162.

was the emigration of the freedmen from the United States to Africa, the one place where “in color, in constitution and in habitude they are suited” and where “they may be blessed, and be a blessing.” Although couched in somewhat less overtly hostile terms, the basic argument of colonization nevertheless rested on the belief that African Americans were by nature, condition, or some admixture of both wholly incapable of gaining the same social and political status as whites. While the vast majority African American leaders rejected arguments for emigration, the success of colonization societies in attracting large numbers of white members, especially in the North, remained a constant reminder of the pervasiveness and broad acceptance of ideas of fixed racial castes.

Against the argument that they were somehow immutably different in character and intellect from their white neighbors, African Americans strove to develop a rhetorical and ideological defense. Although this ideology was a product of African American thinkers, it took as its point of departure two prevalent and intertwined theories circulating in the broader consciousness of the age, the overriding concern with character and self-improvement that marked the turn of the 19th century, and the moral zeal of evangelical Christianity.

CHAPTER THREE

“IMPROVEMENT IS NOW THE GENERAL CRY!” – THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ELITE AND ELEVATION

The last decade of the 18th century saw the rise of a religious reform movement unparalleled in the nation’s short history. The Second Great Awakening, which stretched from the 1790s to the 1840s, with its emphasis on a more broadly based populist form of Christianity expressed in the revival tradition, took hold of American communities from the East Coast to the frontier. As historian Mark Noll states, the “central religious reality for the period from the Revolution to the Civil War was the unprecedented spread of evangelical Christianity.”

African Americans, especially free African Americans in the North, were affected by the growth of new denominations like Methodism that offered opportunities to form their own congregations and define their own worship practices. African Americans endorsed the evangelical message, including its call for social and moral reform through temperance, frugality, and proper conduct. These reform movements became part and parcel of the ideology of African American religious and political leaders, who sought to make their congregations examples of moral perfectionism. In the messages of evangelists like Charles J. Finney, who insisted on a moral perfectibility equally accessible to all, African Americans saw an opportunity to

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participate in an egalitarian vision of America, where faith and moral standing played a more central role than color.

A second, although closely intertwined, theme that found expression in African American theories of social elevation was the wide-ranging concern with respectability prevalent in the early 19th century. The idea of respectability served as what Rael has described as a master value in the early 19th century, a term that connoted a widespread belief that moral worth was shown through proper behavior, work ethic, and business acumen.² This principle was deeply rooted in Protestant beliefs of election and salvation, where worldly success was often seen as a testament to divine grace. Yet respectability was also the product of the rapidly expanding American economy, which seemed to promise limitless opportunities for self-made men, who showed the right outward displays of their internal character, to prove their worth.

Widening opportunities for social mobility in the early years of the Jacksonian era gave Americans of various backgrounds confidence that with the necessary effort, they too could move themselves upward on the economic and social scale of being. African American leaders, again attentive to the rhetoric of the day, chose to endorse this focus on individual merit over immutable traits such as ancestry or breeding. As Rael states, “most black leaders followed white moralists in subscribing to some version of the belief that individuals, through their successes or failures, primarily determined their own

² Rael, Black Identity and Black Protest, 131.
mental and moral status.” This affirmation was the second powerful component in the formation of an African American social and moral doctrine.

The result of the adoption of these currents of thought by African American elites was an ideology widely termed “social elevation” by later historians. It was defined by calls from African American leaders for a focus on moral, religious, and intellectual improvement as the keys for the betterment of their condition. According to the logic of elevation, in order for African Americans to turn the public opinion so hard-set against them, they must make themselves, as historian Frederick Cooper states, “hard working and practical, abstemious and God fearing, obedient to law and self-respecting, frugal and upright.” By providing models of black respectability and propriety, African American reformers hoped to slowly erode the arguments of racists through the weight of their example. They were convinced that the prejudice they experienced was due to their caste more so than their color, and would thus be ameliorated as African Americans proved themselves committed and competent citizens, and contributed to the society at large. In their focus on economic and social advancement as the levers through which racial equality might be achieved, African American reformers expressed a particular offshoot of the broader national optimism surrounding the possibility of social, economic, and character transformation that marked the Jacksonian era.

One of the earliest examples of this line of thought can be found in the address given by the reverend Peter Williams, Jr., to mark end of the importation of slaves by the

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U.S. in 1808. Williams, a prominent figure in New York’s African American community, exhorted his listeners to remember that although they had won a great victory, there were still enemies watching “for every opportunity to injure the cause, [who] will not fail to augment the smallest defects in our lives and conversation; and reproach our benefactors with them, as the fruits of their actions.”⁵ In order to prove themselves worthy of both the efforts of their allies and the respect of those who currently held them in contempt, Williams stressed that African Americans should strive to maintain “a steady and upright deportment, by a strict obedience and respect to the laws of the land,” as such behavior would “form an invulnerable bulwark against the shafts of malice.”⁶ For Williams, as for other African American leaders, the best defense African Americans held against white prejudice was to deny whites the perceived basis of their animosity. Two decades later, the authors of *Freedom’s Journal* would promote the same set of ideals, stating that, “it is for us to convince the world, through uniform propriety of conduct, industry and economy, that we are worthy of esteem and patronage.”⁷

In urging African Americans to look to their own character, intellect, and manner, African American middle class leaders worked to delineate a space in which African Americans could exercise what little agency they possessed in antebellum society. Although legal and political means of amelioration were cut off, middle class African Americans might still use themselves, their own lives and habits, to press the issue of


equality and prove claims of African American racial inferiority false. As Rael states, “it was precisely in offering individual character as a space of uncontested authority and as a basis for changing white minds that the…values of respectability among black leaders consisted.”8 While this psychological agency was important, it was also costly in terms of the social sacrifices African Americans made in the name of social harmony with the dominant white culture.

Scholars have pointed out that one of the limits of the social elevation movement was that its major premise – that whites could be pressed into acknowledging the equal humanity of African Americans through their own good actions – was far from certain. It was a stance that attempted to deal logically with what, at its core, was an illogical and often contradictory system of prejudice and exploitation. What it failed to address, even to acknowledge, was the fact that African Americans themselves might not have any amount of control over the moral conscience of whites. As Cooper states, African American leaders seemed not to realize that “whites might not want to live and work with abstentious blacks anymore than with black drunkards.”9

A second potential shortcoming of social elevation was that the self-effacing character it demanded free African Americans adopt to allay white anxieties often created ruptures within the African American community itself. Some middle class and aspiring middle class African Americans who chose to conform their behavior to white standards began to resent the “lower elements” of their race for impeding racial harmony and progress through their refusal to adhere to the same strict codes of conduct. New York in


9 Cooper, “Elevating the Race,” 624.
particular saw the emergence of a split between African Americans who aspired to middle class status and their working class neighbors over such issues as dress, entertainments, and public celebrations. Conservatively-minded African Americans urged against public displays like parades, all-night revelries, and dancing, convinced that these improprieties would stoke the flames of racist sentiment. A telling example of this shift came in 1827, as African Americans prepared to celebrate the end of slavery in the city. The conservative faction, fearing public displays on July 4th might draw censure or even violence from whites, attempted to set rigid bounds on the celebration by making it a day of church-centered speeches, hymns, and prayers. Some African Americans, however, refused to be pushed out of the city’s public spaces. Eventually the different camps split, leading to two completely separate celebrations. As historian Leslie Harris states, “the conflicts over public displays of free blacks…were the seeds of divergent black middle class and working class political and social cultures.”10 Defined primarily by their adoption and use of emerging white middle class values to prove their social respectability, African American conservatives would clash with the working class of their race on many issues. Education would be another front in this conflict of values and ideals.

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CHAPTER FOUR

“THOUGH NOT DESIROUS OF DICTATING…” – FREEDOM’S JOURNAL AND ELEVATION

From its inception, Freedom’s Journal, like the majority of other African American magazines and periodicals that sprang up during the 1820s and 1830s, was a product of middle class African Americans and their concerns. Its founders, Samuel Cornish and John Brown Russworm, were, in their own ways, both deeply rooted in the rising African American elite. Samuel Cornish, the senior editor, was born in Sussex County, Delaware in 1795, the son of free African American landholders. Educated in Philadelphia, he began his career as a minister to enslaved and free African Americans on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. After relocating to New York, he organized the first congregation of African American Presbyterians in the city’s history in 1821. His position as a clergyman and noted figure in the community gave him credibility, and this influence was only strengthened by his marriage to Jane Livingston, herself a member of an established family of freedmen. Known for his conservative views, the newspaper he helped found would be a reflection of his personal ideals.¹

While Cornish was a product of the African American intellectual milieu of the Northeast, the junior editor of Freedom’s Journal took a much more circuitous route to his place among the African American elite of New York. John B. Russworm had been

born in 1799 in Port Antonio, Jamaica. His father was John R. Russworm, a white man most probably occupied as a merchant, and his mother was a black or mulatto woman described in the only existing sources as a “Creole,” a term which could denote various combinations of African, white, and native ancestry. While it was common practice for the offspring of such interracial relationships to be disavowed, the senior Russworm apparently had no such intentions and according to biographer James Winston, “was unashamed and, given the tenor of the times, remarkably open in his association with and pride in the boy.”

John R. sent his son to Montreal to be educated in 1807, and even moved to the United States himself to be nearer to his son. Although his father died in 1815, John B. continued to live in the United States under the care of his father’s second wife. He attended Bowdoin College, earning the respect of classmates and faculty for his rhetorical flourish and intensity. His commencement speech, an enthusiastic piece entitled “The Condition and Prospects of Hayti,” which praised the revolutionary forces of Toussaint L’Ouverture for overthrowing the yoke of slavery and establishing the first black republic in the New World, would be remembered long after his departure. The speech was a perfect representation of the young Russworm himself, passionate in nature, and global in sensibilities. It was no surprise then, that after college and a short stint in Philadelphia, he decided to settle in New York, the most diverse and eclectic enclave for free African Americans in the United States.

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It is unknown how Cornish and Russworm eventually met, but that their shared status, educational experiences, and sensibilities provided them many mutual acquaintances is beyond doubt. One such acquaintance, Alexander Crummel, the wealthy owner of an oyster house that served both African American and Irish clientele, is recorded as hosting a meeting at his home where Cornish, Russworm, and a few others first conceived of the idea of starting a newspaper. Historians of the African American press such as Charles Simmons have claimed that the impetus for this meeting and the beginning of the publication was the racially-charged writing of Mordecai Noah, a white New York publisher who ran The Enquirer and often featured op-eds defaming the free African American population.4

That Freedom’s Journal addressed and rebutted Noah’s arguments in several of its issues is clear. Yet as Jacqueline Bacon and other modern scholars have pointed out, focusing on Noah makes the formation of the paper seem wholly reactionary and fails to give sufficient weight to conditions within the black community that precipitated the paper’s publication. While Freedom’s Journal printed vigorous refutations of racist sentiments, the vast majority of the material printed was of a decidedly less aggressive nature and included domestic and foreign news, humor columns, and poetry, along with advertisements for theaters, shops, and schools. In this regard, the emergence of Freedom’s Journal can be viewed as a sign of the small but growing community of African Americans who were now well-heeled enough to demand news dedicated to their own communal needs. Though official readership never reached more than 800, even by

conservative estimates, it was circulated in several cities and helped signal the rise of
African American community consciousness that had been building steadily since the late
1700s.\(^5\)

From its outset, *Freedom’s Journal* was dedicated to spreading the doctrine of
social and moral elevation. Its masthead proclaimed “Righteousness Exalteth a Nation,” a
religious and moralistic statement that was changed to “Dedicated to the Improvement of
the Colored Population” in 1828, when the paper fell into Russworm’s sole
proprietorship. Though its editors promised that they were “not desirous of dictating” to
their readers, they nevertheless felt it their duty “to dwell occasionally, on the general
principles and rules of economy” through which they hoped to influence the habits and
morals of their audience.\(^6\) Issues taken up by *Freedom’s Journal* included indictments of
fanciful and expensive dress, strong drink, and frivolous and public forms of
entertainment. Respectability in appearance and manners, temperance, and frugality were
encouraged. In articles with titles like “On Propriety of Conduct,” “On Family
Government,” and “On the Duties of Children,” they urged a conservative manner in
private affairs and public actions. The combined weight of articles and editorials like
these over the two-year run of *Freedom’s Journal* amounts to a process which historian
Frankie Hutton has termed “didactic socialization” in which African Americans were


repeatedly confronted with the conservative bent of the paper’s editors and the wider movement they represented.  

A telling example of Freedom’s Journal’s focus on respectability was an article entitled “Dick the Gentleman,” which caricatured the pretensions of African Americans too concerned with fashion and fad. The protagonist of the tale is Dicky Dash, a laughable character described as having “small hands, a thin face, an idle disposition, and a bushy head,” who, having never been convinced of the necessity of hard work or thrift, takes to the city and proclaims himself a gentleman. Dicky is shown exhibiting each of the habits moral reformers vilified in turn, from purchasing loud and expensive clothes, to carousing into the night in questionable company. These outer pretensions failed, however, to hide his true worth, and when his creditors catch up to him he is forced to “return to the country as he came from it, with a shirt in his pocket and a flea in his ear.”

Although the protagonist of “Dick the Gentleman” is portrayed as an ignorant country bumpkin, the message was clearly meant African Americans of all stripes. How much more embarrassing would it be, the story implied, for someone not new to the illicit temptations of the city to fall victim to such behavior?

Articles on moral improvement left little doubt as to the reasoning that undergirded their calls for elevation. Authors reminded African Americans almost incessantly that their actions were being evaluated by a society largely prejudiced against

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9 Ibid.
them already. As Russworm and Cornish reminded readers, “Constituted as the present state of society is, with many who feel towards our whole body the most violent prejudice…it becomes our imperative duty to do nothing which shall have the least tendency to excite these prejudices…”

Therefore, African Americans who failed to meet the standards of respectability harmed not only themselves, but the African American community as a whole. This emphasis on social elevation in *Freedom’s Journal* would extend to the way in which children and education were conceptualized and discussed.

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CHAPTER FIVE

“TO REFINE AND SOFTEN THEIR MANNER” – FREEDOM’S JOURNAL AND EDUCATION

The editors of Freedom’s Journal argued that the habits and behaviors of African American youth held the promise of ameliorating the condition of their people. As one article stated, “we believe that the future respectability of our people will eventually rest on the education which our children and youth now receive.”¹ By encouraging African American parents to place their children under the direction of the schools, reformers hoped that they would learn to become quiet and lawful adults. As the editors stated in their first issue, education would allow African American youth to learn to play their role in the workings of the world “with propriety” the kind of quiet and accommodating attitude that would serve as an example to African Americans and deflect the hostility of racist whites.²

The most important value that schooling would impart was a work ethic. The editors of Freedom’s Journal supported types of education they felt would inculcate “habits of industry” in the young and make them “useful members of society.”³ In one

article, the editors point to the example laid out by public educators in Scotland, who had
provided their common people with schools that taught them “honesty, sobriety, and
decency.” The author hoped sincerely that schools in the U.S. would similarly teach
African American youth the “prudence and love of order” that the Scottish so readily
exemplified.  

For the reformers, no worse scene could be imagined than “idle” youth, ones who
were allowed to move about on the streets by themselves and seemingly beyond adult
authority. This laxity, reformers feared, would produce adults who were “less disposed to
industry in the pursuit of any vocation in which they may be placed” and “unused to
aspire after elevation of condition.” These negative examples would be immediately
seized upon by the enemies of the race. One article, when speaking of idle children,
threatened that these youth “afford the enemies of our race arguments to prove the futility
of an amelioration of our political existence.” In the minds of reformers, education was
clearly linked to the progress of African Americans as a whole, as it would prove them
worthy of consideration for equality, or unfit for such inclusion.

In addition to a staunch belief in the benefits of hard work, schools were also
looked to as an aid in the moral development of youth. The contributors to Freedom’s
Journal stressed that children were especially prone to negative influences within their
surroundings. As Rev. Peter Williams explained to his congregants in a sermon reprinted

5 Ibid.
April 6, 1827.
7 Ibid.
in Freedom’s Journal, although each person born was presented with equal paths, one leading to prosperity and the other to ruin, the simple fact was that, “the natural perversity of man’s heart that, left to itself, it invariably inclines to the evil way”. Certainly the New York of the 1820s offered many “evil ways” down which children might be led. By 1728, there were at least three street gangs noted in the city, and by the 1800s this list had expanded to include such menaces as the Dead Rabbits, the Vly Boys, and the Plug Uglies. While the majority of these groups were formed by Polish, Irish, Italian, and Jewish boys, African American youth in the notorious Five Points section of the city organized themselves into gangs such as the Fly Boys and the Long Bridge Boys. These gangs often waged what amounted to pitched battles in the streets and alleys of the city, and murder was not unheard of. Parents, the reformers accused, were often all too lax in managing their children, refusing to keep careful watch on their comings and goings. Schools, then, would fill the void of poor parental governance, making students by turns more pliable and more orderly. As one article stated, education would enable youth to “go forth into the world approved of the diseases, and miseries, which inevitably await immoral conduct.” Through schools, proponents of formal education argued, youths could be kept well clear of the almshouses and the prisons.

Beyond the dangers of theft and violence, schools were also charged with saving the young from lesser vices. Reformers thought that many habits displayed by African

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Americans, while not criminal, were injurious to the race because they showed poor taste. The editors of *Freedom’s Journal* reminded their readers both young and old that their actions, however small, were subject to the scrutiny of white society and that, “Many things, which in our estimation are mere trifles, appear not so, in the eyes of a prejudiced community.”11 Thus smoking in the streets, dressing to the full extent of one’s means, and other public displays were discouraged, not because they were objectively wrong but because they elicited negative response from white onlookers. If African American adults needed constant reminding, and sometimes reprimanding, in order to be mindful of the tenuous place they held in society, then their children were also in need of such direction.

Concern for the public conduct of African American children surfaces in a number of articles in *Freedom’s Journal*, but especially in an article on the virtues of Sunday schools, where the author refers to the many vices that children might fall prey to when not otherwise occupied with school work and reflection. These vices included wasting money on nuts and other trivial snacks which are then eaten outside, loitering in the streets, playing ball, swimming, and ice skating. Even though these activities were not destructive, or even especially dangerous, they worried the author. Much like behaviors the editors discouraged in adults, these particular examples were ones through which these African American children claimed the city’s public spaces as their own. The danger was not in the activities themselves, but in the possibility that in the streets, alleys, lots and fields, where African American children were free from adult oversight, they might fail to make themselves at all times exemplars of the virtues of their race.

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The author suggests that the dangers of such indecorous behavior could be curbed by the effect of Sunday schools, which would teach potentially wayward children proper public bearing: “In traversing the streets to and from church on the Sabbath, I have thought I could select all the boys who had been connected with these institutions from among all others, by the difference of deportment they manifest.”

The deportment to which the author refers here is the same referenced in the earlier article “On Propriety of Conduct,” namely a kind of quiet and orderly obeisance that deflected attention instead of drawing it, and minimized the risk of offending white sensibilities. For African American children then, education was to have a double purpose. It would not only teach them subject matter and trade skill, but how to interact with white society. By acting as representatives of African American worth and ability, the editors of *Freedom’s Journal* hoped these children might become “ornamental to society and glorious to our race.”

The focus on pushing children off the streets and into the classroom was not just a matter of easing racial tensions, however. It was also very much in keeping with broader middle class sentiments about childhood and the place of children in the 1820s. The idealized image of the child, who was presented in *Freedom’s Journal* as an innocent in need of constant minding and molding, echoed the vision of a sheltered childhood that was becoming the hallmark of white middle class homes of the period. Childhood and youth are situated in *Freedom’s Journal* as periods of cherished innocence and virtue that must be defended from corruption at all times. Writers in *Freedom’s Journal* establish

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this steady theme both in prose and verse remembrances of childhood. For example, a poem entitled “There Was a Time I Never Sighed” portrays youth as a time when the author was surrounded by loving family members and playmates who were “as brothers tied” and could not “feel the cares of busy men.” He compares this idyllic state to his current circumstances and mourns, “I have lost my tide, my time; cast off my rode of innocence, I’ve nurtur’d pride, encourg’d crime, Ah I flung away my best defense.” The author ends the poem with a lament that “I wish I had died, When my mind was pure and my form was young,” underscoring the improvident way in which he wasted the blessings of his youth. Education’s wholesome effects would ensure that the treasure of childhood innocence was not wasted.

To repel the threat of idleness and promote proper modes of obedience and deportment, Freedom’s Journal heavily advocated for opportunities for African Americans to place their children under the care of the schools. The main source of information about educational opportunities came in the form of advertisements, usually, though not always, found on the last sheet of the four-page publication. The first type of these ads, and the ones which appear the earliest, are announcements of individual instructors looking to gather classes for short lengths of time. One of the most frequent of these was for B.F. Hughes’ school, which met underneath Saint Philip’s Church. There, African American children of both sexes could learn “Writing, Arithmetic, English

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
Grammar, and Geography,” along with “the use of maps and globes, and history.”17

Another instructor advertising under his own name was a Mr. Gold of Connecticut, who publicized his adeptness in the instruction of “a new and improved plan, by which a pupil of ordinary capacity may obtain a correct knowledge of the principals of the English language.”18 Mr. Gold’s sessions lasted for two hours a day and ran six days a week, but he was willing to negotiate on rates and meeting times.

We do not know exactly how many African Americans patronized these fairly informal schooling arrangements. A school master from Philadelphia, John Gloucester, who taught the basic subjects with the addition of needle work for female students, is one story of success. Gloucester took out an ad in Freedom’s Journal on November 2, 1827 to express his gratitude for the support his school has received, stating, “the subscriber wishes to return thanks to his friends, for the liberal encouragement of patronizing his school.”19 Gloucester was heartened enough to assure readers that he “continues to teach in the same place,” and hoped to “merit a share of the public encouragement.”20

Beyond individual teachers, Freedom’s Journal also included advertisements and articles dedicated to more organized and formal modes of instruction. One of these was courses set up through the African Mutual Instruction Society. Mutual Aid Societies had been an important aspect of African American communal life since the late 18th century, allowing African Americans to pool resources and acting as the equivalents of savings


20 Ibid.
banks, workers compensation, and community outreach programs. Eventually, these societies also branched out to support literary societies, lyceums, and discussion groups that provided for the intellectual as well as financial needs of the community. Although the Mutual Instruction Society only offered classes to adults, they most likely worked with churches to help with Sunday schools and other outlets for youth.

The regularity with which advertisements from various schools and school masters appear suggests that they were fairly well patronized. Over the two years *Freedom's Journal* was in print, it ran ads from eight different educators or education groups. Each of these ads ran for a period of over a month, suggesting that those who posted them found them to be a worthy investment. In a single period from November 1827 to April 1828, the midpoint of the paper’s two-year run, *Freedom's Journal* printed some 12 articles and 95 advertisements dealing with education. The number of advertisers and the continuity of the advertisements are even more telling when the price of ad space within the paper is considered. For an ad between 12 and 22 lines, an advertiser could expect to pay 75 cents, or 50 cents for ads running under 12 lines, with fees for reprinting set at 50 and 25 cents accordingly. This was no small expense considering a reader’s yearly subscription to the paper was three dollars.

Although *Freedom’s Journal* carried advertisements for several different educators and schools, Cornish and Russworm only actively advocated for one institution, the New York African Free School. Founded in 1787, the African Free School was the product of the New York Manumission Society. The Manumission Society, originally conceived with the goal of “promoting the manumission of slaves, and protecting such of them as have been or may be liberated,” saw its schools as the natural
outgrowth of its role as the moral and intellectual shepherd of free African Americans within the city.\textsuperscript{21} The goal of moral preparation helped it garner the support of conservative African American reformers like the editors of \textit{Freedom’s Journal}. Similar to the opinions expressed in \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, the Manumission Society stressed the importance of education for respectability. The Free Schools held that education would teach African American children to “be honest… quiet and orderly citizens” and provide them with a “knowledge of the means whereby they may insure their happiness not only in the present, but in the world to come.”\textsuperscript{22} One of the largest accomplishments, of which the school boasted constantly, was that only three of its graduates had ever been brought before the New York criminal courts, proof to both white donors and African American reformers of the industrious and honest citizens it produced.

The New York African Free Schools exhibited the kind of moral education that the editors of \textit{Freedom’s Journal} envisioned. The curriculum was based on the Lancastrian or monitorial method, in which instruction was delegated by the teacher to a series of student monitors, who each, in turn, taught groups of younger or less advanced students. The heart of the monitorial method was the strict discipline used to ensure that the large classrooms, ringing with the din of multiple lessons, managed not to erupt into total discord. One poem describing the monitorial method, altered from an earlier work and presented at a public examination day at the New York African Free School, references the air of discipline, stating, “As soldiers under discipline, we end our work as

\textsuperscript{21} Charles C. Andrew, \textit{The History of the New York African Free Schools, From Their Establishment in 1787 to the Present Time, Embracing a Period of More than Forty Years; Also a Brief Account of the Successful Labors of the New York Manumission Society, with an Appendix}, (New York: Negro Universities, 1969), 10.

\textsuperscript{22} Andrew, \textit{The History of the New York African Free Schools}, 47.
we begin, with regularity pursue, each exercise we have to do, orderly perseverance gains, a good reward for all our pains.”\textsuperscript{23}

Students at the Free Schools studied many subjects – some classical, like history, arithmetic, and English, others more modern, like map making and navigation – yet at the core of the curriculum and the method of instruction was always the moral component based in religion. Bible verses and readings of short fables reinforced this message, as did regular checks for hygiene and cleanliness, connected in the mind of Lancastrian instructors with self-respect and professionalism, which resulted in praise for passing students and public shaming for others. The Free Schools were places where moral inculcation was paramount.

\textit{Freedom’s Journal} and the Society would act as allies throughout the late 1820s. The newspaper published numerous articles about the African Free Schools in its two years, each of them glowinglly positive. The publication was also materially invested in the school. An 1827 letter shows the principal of the schools thanking \textit{Freedom’s Journal} for its contribution of copies of the newspaper to the school’s library. In response to the students’ need for adequate clothing during the winter months, Cornish helped found the African Dorcas Society.\textsuperscript{24} Patronized and run by colored women “of a respectable character,” the group coordinated the efforts of several churches in collecting clothing and “fragments of cloth” and repurposed them to provide “clothing, hats, and shoes as far as our means may enable us, to such children as regularly attend the schools belonging to

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the Manumission Society….”\textsuperscript{25} Through both material assistance and favorable press, \textit{Freedom’s Journal} threw its full weight behind the Free Schools.

Beyond professional support, the editors were also personally invested in the Free Schools. In the fall of 1827, as falling enrollments threatened to shutter the Free Schools, the Manumission Society devised a plan to split the city’s African American neighborhoods into sections, each assigned an agent who would visit homes in an attempt to garner support for the schools. The school agents would visit the home of each African American family in their area and, “beseeching them to send their children to school, at the same time place[ing] before them the great advantages of education….”\textsuperscript{26} Listed among the agents for the 17\textsuperscript{th} district is John Brown Russworm, the junior editor of \textit{Freedom’s Journal}. Not to be outdone, Samuel Cornish also served as a visiting agent for the schools, and is praised in a later article for visiting “upwards of 100 different families, the good fruits of which we already [see], in an increased number of pupils at both schools.”\textsuperscript{27} Clearly Cornish, Russworm, and other conservative reformers believed in the ideals of moral education the Free Schools were founded on. Whether the African American community as a whole reflected these beliefs is another issue altogether.

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\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, vol. 1, “Notice,” February 1, 1828.
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\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, vol. 1, “City Free Schools,” January 11, 1828.
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\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
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CHAPTER SIX

“WHY THEN ARE THESE SCHOOLS NOT FILLED?” – CHALLENGES TO AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION IN NEW YORK

*Freedom’s Journal*, through its support of the New York African Free Schools and similar places of instruction, outlined its dedication to a vision of formal education for African Americans, one that would provide students with what they considered to be necessary academic skills and proper social bearing. The social, political, and economic context in which the majority of African Americans found themselves, however, often made the vision of education proposed by these middle class reformers difficult to achieve.

Even though several schools for African Americans existed in New York, and many were well patronized, the overall attendance rates for African American children within the city remained low throughout the antebellum period. As an editorial in *Freedom’s Journal* criticized, “hundreds of children daily parade the streets, to the disgrace of their parents, and the mortification of our reflecting brethren.”¹ This report is consistent with the accounts of the African Free School compiled by headmaster Charles Andrews who writes, “It is estimated that, in this city, there are 1800 children of color of

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a suitable age to go to school, after allowing for those who are employed at service etc.”

Of this number he concludes that “620 are entered into our school register, and about 100 go to small private schools, leaving ten hundred and eighty, as the remainder, to prowl the streets.” Andrews’ figures would mean that less than 50% of the city’s African American children were enrolled in formal schooling, not accounting for those who were already at work. This number is corroborated by historian Leonard Curry, who puts daily school attendance rates for African American children at 59.6% for children between ages 5 and 14 in the period from 1840-1850, the first we have accurate data for, as compared with some 76.56% of white youths. It is clear that a significant portion of the African American population in the early 1800s received little or no formal education. What is more complicated is why so many African Americans were unable, or chose not to pursue formal education for their children.

According to Cornish and Russworm, the fault lay with African American parents. Editorials in Freedom's Journal repeatedly castigated parents for what the editors saw as inconsistency and ambivalence in matters of education. One such article described parents’ low standards for their children by stating that they were “so prejudiced… that they think a little reading and spelling all that is necessary for them; while others care not whether they acquire even these.” Among the problems cited in


Freedom’s Journal was the reliance of many African Americans on informal methods of education, the fact that many students faced frequent interruptions of their schooling for work or household duties, and frequent changes in parents’ residence and occupation which made it difficult for students to settle into a consistent pattern of school attendance. Cornish and Russworm urged their readers to correct these habits, stating that “it is time for us to be dissatisfied with our former irregular mode of education.” For Cornish and Russworm, the blame lay with African American parents, who were portrayed as either ignorant or insensitive to the value of education.

Russworm and Cornish’s chastisement of the laxity of African American parents with regard to schooling is mirrored in some of the extant materials of the African Free School. One performance put on during examination day when the school was open to the public, and recorded by Charles Andrews, included a mock dialogue between two students on the importance of attendance and timeliness. Written by the white instructors of the school and acted out by the African American students, the small scene positions the children as the victims of parents who fail to realize the importance of schooling. When asked why he is late to school so often, the main character, William, remarks to his schoolmate James that, “I have been teasing my mother for my breakfast for some time and she says, No hurry child, no hurry; and go and sends me to play a little longer.” James encourages William to leave without breakfast, or to exhort his parents to remember the importance of his education, to which William responds, “I can’t hear a

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word against my parents, I can excuse them, because they have but little learning
themselves, and don’t know much the value of it; nor do they know how much time it
takes to make one a good scholar.” 8 The dialogue ends with both James and William
committing to follow the instruction of their teachers, even if this means disobeying the
rude and backwards ways of their parents.

The actors in this scene may have been students, but the perspective and message
was clearly that of the administrators and teachers of the African Free School, who
regarded African American parents as careless in modeling the proper priorities for their
children. As historian Ann Mae Duane has noted, in this scene and others like it, “there
was no way around the moral of the story, black parents, particularly black mothers, were
supposedly simply incapable of providing the transition from slavery that their children
required.” Duane goes on to argue that by the reasoning shown in the skit, black parents
“must be disobeyed and ultimately discarded” in order for black children to advance. 9 In
its identification of African American parents as the source of frustration for both
dedicated teachers and earnest students, the skit echoes and expands on the claims
repeatedly made in Freedom’s Journal.

In many ways, the teachers and administrators of African Free School saw
themselves as working to, as Rury puts it, intervene “between black parents and their


9 Anna Mae Duane, “‘Like a Motherless Child’: Racial Education at the New York African Free School
and in My Bondage and My Freedom,” American Literature, 82(3) (2010), 471.
children, to rescue the latter from the low morality and poor behavior of the former.”

The philanthropists of the Manumission Society believed that black parents sorely needed their aid in order to learn the correct ways to manage their children, including the proper emphasis on schooling. In order to train parents, the African Free School published parenting guides which it then distributed to the families of new students. The booklets, meant to act as a “valuable domestic adviser” covered many topics, such as “attending places of public worship,” “speaking the truth” and “correcting children in a proper state of mind.”

Through skits, pamphlets, and speeches, the staff of the African Free School showed their belief that African American parents needed instruction and prodding in order to see the true worth on education. Yet, while Cornish, Russworm, and some white philanthropists placed the blame for poor school attendance on the deficiencies of African American adults, in truth, economic and social realities may have barred access to schooling even for those who ardently agreed with the moral and social message the editors encouraged.

For many African American children, the reliance on informal modes of schooling, and sporadic attendance, may well have been the result not of parental neglect but of parental care and responsibility. Many of the largest fields of employment for African Americans of the period, including domestic work in which many African Americans stayed at least a portion of the week in the home of their employers, and maritime work where black sailors could regularly be gone for periods of months or even

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years, required ingenuity on the parts of parents. To cope with these realities, African American parents depended on extended networks of family and friends to help shelter and care for children. These informal boarding arrangements would have meant that many African American children moved frequently and had to be ready to serve different roles in different households. Schooling in a fixed place for long stretches of time would have proven extremely difficult for many children who found themselves thus situated.

Even if they did not face the challenges associated with frequent changes in living arrangements, whether and how much formal education an African American child received might still have been constrained by social and economic necessities. Many African American families depended on the labor of their children, whose supplemental income was often the difference between stability and starvation. Children worked in domestic spaces as servants and waiters, as well as in the city streets as hawkers of various goods and food stuffs, and as errand runners. Even children who could not work outside the home were valuable, as they could be set to watch over younger siblings. Overall, the economic value of African American children in the 1820s and 1830s to their families was such that school, which constituted a double loss in terms of potential wages forfeited and the cost of the schooling itself, would have been a very difficult proposition to make workable.

One industry which exemplified the heavy reliance on black child labor in New York was chimney sweeping. Each morning the city’s streets were filled with the cries of chimney sweeps, the vast majority of whom were African American boys between ages four and ten, using distinctive shouts to advertise their business to potential customers. Children were required for chimney sweeping because as scholars Paul A Gilje and
Howard B. Rock describe, the vents on American houses during the period ran “an average of nine by fourteen inches, with some as tiny as six or eight inches square.” As a result young sweeps were given the hard and dangerous work of scaling the roof, and then descending into the chimney, naked except for undergarments and cloth masks. Sweeping was back-breaking labor that exposed the youths to the risks of scrapes and bruises, broken limbs, and the inhalation of soot, which often resulted in high instances of asthma and cancer. Even so, the demand was such that hundreds of families allowed their children to participate in this practice.

In addition to fluid and unpredictable living arrangements and financial pressures, many African Americans may have chosen to forgo formal education for their children because they saw it as an unsuccessful remedy for discrimination and racism. In both the pages of *Freedom’s Journal* and the records of the Manumission Society, there is evidence that the advocates of formal education contended with arguments that formal education failed as a pathway to employment and upward mobility in a racially divided city. In a *Freedom’s Journal* article from March 1827, for example, the author states that he has heard the claim often repeated that, “What avails it that we educate our children, seeing that having bestowed every attention in our power to meet this end we find them excluded from the patronage suited to their attainments?” The author admits that “colour of the skin is now made a sufficient objection to our employment,” but urges his

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readers to persevere, proffering his faith that once African Americans have reached intellectual parity with whites, this prejudice will disappear: “When our too long neglected race shall have become proportionally intelligent and informed with the white community this prejudice will and must sink into insignificance.”\textsuperscript{14} The author urged his readers to think of the potentially powerful effects of education in the future, but to those struggling in the present this may have come as small comfort.

Charles Andrews, the headmaster of the African Free Schools, faced similar responses to his calls for African American parents to turn their children over to the schools. Andrews reasoned that many African American parents failed to take advantage of the schools because they were convinced by practical experience that education was not connected to material advancement. Andrews states that “it is a plausible argument which the ignorant are cunning enough to use, that they can do just as well, in all the stations filled by those whom we educate, and get as much wages as they can, and are as well off without education as with it.”\textsuperscript{15} Again, as with the author of the article in \textit{Freedom’s Journal}, Andrews does not deny the veracity of this claim, admitting his own frustration that when his students seek out employment, “in almost every circumstance, difficulties attend them on account of their color.”\textsuperscript{16} In one telling example of the prejudice that faced the school’s graduates, Andrews relates the story of one young man, Isaac, whose character and intellect were above reproach, yet who could not find


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}
employment because of the “unwillingness of the workmen to pursue their business in company with poor Isaac because he was darker than they.”\textsuperscript{17} Finding all doors in the place of his birth closed to him, Isaac eventually resolved to leave the country altogether for Liberia.

Isaac’s experiences were all too common among the graduates of the African Free Schools. The trades occupied by the vast majority of graduates – waiters, barbers, coachmen, servants, and common laborers – simply did not require a formal education. A few graduates were able to secure work at semi-skilled jobs such as shoe makers, tin smiths, and carpenters, and some escaped the prejudice of the city by signing on to the crews of the many ships that steadily occupied New York’s harbor. Yet when Andrews wrote in 1830, he could only name four graduates in the school’s three-decade-long history who had been able to attain professional status. Taken as a whole, education was far from a guarantee that African Americans would be able to support themselves or rise on the economic scale.

\textsuperscript{17} Andrews, \textit{The History of the New York African Free Schools}, 118.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION – “TO PERFORM OUR PART WITH PROPRIETY”

In its 104 issues, *Freedom’s Journal* offers an incredible window on African American life, and particularly education in antebellum New York. The sheer volume of material in the paper dedicated to education signals its importance for African Americans and their conception of what their participation in a free society entailed. In its poems, articles, and advertisements, it is possible to see the breadth of educational options that presented themselves to the city’s African American community, supported by mutual aid societies and private persons, philanthropists and instructors, churches and community leaders. The paper shows that education was conceived of and carried out differently by each of these various groups. At the same time, *Freedom’s Journal*, through the voice of its editors, characterizes one perspective, socially conservative, rooted in Christian ethics and the hope of social elevation. Cornish and Russworm saw education as a means of helping African Americans realize their fullest potential as individuals and as a race. As their opening statement for the paper stated, “We form a spoke in the human wheel, and it is necessary that we should understand our dependence on the different parts, and theirs on us, in order to perform our part with propriety.”¹ This understanding, the editors hoped, would translate into a more prominent place for African Americans in the city and country as a whole.

REFERENCE LIST


VITA

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