

**Performing, Practicing and Organizing Liberty: New York's African Free Schools and the  
Black Activist Community, 1786-1832**

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# Performing, Practicing and Organizing Liberty: New York's African Free Schools and the Black Activist Community, 1786-1832<sup>1</sup>

*Oh Liberty Thou Pow'r  
Supremely bright,  
Profuse of bliss, and pregnant with delight  
Perpetual pleasures in thy presence reign;  
And smiling plenty leads thy wanton train.  
Eas'd of her load, subjection grows more light;*

*AND POVERTY LOOKS CHEERFUL  
In thy sight*

*Though make's the gloomy face of nature gay;  
Givs't beauty to the sun, and pleasure to the day*

-Nicholas Bartom,  
Copy of Joseph Addison's "On Liberty and Slavery Contrasted"

In the early nineteenth-century, Nicholas Bartom, a free African American student, attended one of New York's African Free Schools, as did thousands of other free black students between 1787 and 1834. By 1820, the year Bartom copied these lines from Addison's "On Liberty and Slavery Contrasted," New York's black community of over 10,000 had, in 1799 and 1817, pushed two gradual emancipation acts through the state legislature with the help of white philanthropists. Black male voting rights had not yet been restricted in New York and, nationally, the federal government had banned the slave trade in 1808. While little record of Nicholas Bartom remains beyond his 1820 copy of Addison's work, Bartom's education and these handwritten lines remain a vestige of the remarkable role these African Free Schools played in advancing black political aims amidst shifting notions of liberty, slavery, citizenship, and race. However, contemporary representations of New York history too often overlook the value of these African Free Schools to the politicization of New York's free black community. In fact, the

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New York African Free Schools mobilized a vibrant political black community in early nineteenth-century New York by enabling students to perform African American citizenship in the public sphere by exercising and enacting black political thought and by catalyzing the formation of black political organizations and communities.

These African Free Schools emerged out of the sweeping rhetoric of liberty and equality that had invigorated the Revolution and left Americans to question how far and to which peoples such liberty would reach. In 1787 the New York Manumission Society opened the first African Free School with the aim of improving both the moral and intellectual character of the growing African American community. These schools expanded steadily, from fifty-six pupils enrolled in 1787 in a single building to, in 1832, over 1,400 students, both female and male, housed in five separate buildings.<sup>2</sup> The Manumission Society, established only a few years prior to the founding of the African Free School, was organized to promote the abolition of slavery; it comprised New York's elite politicians, bankers, merchants, lawyers, and ship owners, including John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, John Murray Sr., and Cadwallader Colden. Motivating many of the members' anti-slavery positions was a nascent Federalist ideology, which envisioned greater social and economic freedom in New York, under the provision that such freedoms would be both granted and closely regulated by white elites.<sup>3</sup>

Many prevalent depictions of New York's African Free Schools have contended that this notion that black freedom should be both granted and monitored by the white elite acted as a

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Duane and Thomas Thurston, "Timeline: African Free School," New York African Free School Collection, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/credits/>.

<sup>3</sup> Although the Federalist Party was not formally created until 1789, led chiefly by Alexander Hamilton, Leslie Harris identifies ideological and political ties between the NYMS leaders, rooted in Hamilton's Federalist ones. Also, Harris notes the economic view shared by many in the Manumission society, propagated by Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, which condemned slavery as a hindrance to future economic growth. See also, Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 61.

severe impediment to any black pursuit of liberty and equality. In his 1985 article “Philanthropy, Self Help, and Social Control: The New York Manumission Society and Free Blacks, 1785-1810,” John Rury claims that the New York Manumission Society intended to function “as moral custodians” for New York’s increasing black population.<sup>4</sup> In 1991, Shane White went as far as to affirm that the Manumission Society’s efforts played no part in the passing of the state’s emancipation acts, asserting that the African Free Schools “reflected also the more general desire ... to order the behavior of New York’s lower classes.”<sup>5</sup> Leslie Harris’ 2003 work acquiesces to White’s argument, and she even qualifies that the white elite’s “assumption that blacks would become free without any agency on their part” ultimately “undermined [blacks’] quest for equality.”<sup>6</sup> This paper does not refute the contentions of Rury, White, or Harris; in fact, I agree that the Manumission Society intended to wield the African Free Schools as a tool of social control over the emergent free black community.

However, my work does seek to complicate these notions by exploring how black students, community leaders, and teachers resisted in some ways the Manumission Society’s underlying intentions and instead advanced their own political goals, despite the society’s aims. Focusing on black agency in the public sphere and in the classroom, I will demonstrate that it was both because of and notwithstanding the Manumission Society’s objectives that the African Free Schools mobilized New York’s active black community of the 1800s. A handful of recent scholars have touched on such agency: David Gellman explains New York’s abolition of slavery as “a product of ... black resistance” and examines changing notions of black citizenship, often

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<sup>4</sup> John L. Rury, “Philanthropy, Self Help, and Social Control: The New York Manumission Society and Free Blacks, 1785-1810.” *Phylon*, 46, no. 3 (1985): 231.

<sup>5</sup> Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 84.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, 63.

ted to displays of education.<sup>7</sup> Robert Swan highlights the influence of John Teasman, the African Free School's first black principal.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, Anna Mae Duane links the work of African Free School students to the literary writings of abolition leader Frederick Douglass to encourage the exploration of these children's voices habitually "excluded" from the "public sphere of influence and authorship."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, no scholar has holistically linked the African Free Schools to the black activist community of the early nineteenth-century. To this end, I contend that by performing citizenship, by exercising black political thought, and by structuring black political organizations, students and teachers at these African Free Schools played a central role in helping mobilize black activism.

Relying on newspapers, student orations, and student papers, as well as the more traditional sources of political history such as records of both black and white civic organizations, and public acts, this paper will explore the role the African Free Schools played in mobilizing New York's black activist community. It is important to note that student documents were undoubtedly conditioned by the teachers' directives and the students' desire for approval. Perhaps it is because of the sources' uncertain and non-conventional origins that previous scholars have neglected this body of documents in their assessments of the schools. However, these documents do provide an important and rare look into student agency. Here I intend to emulate the work of historians Rosemarie Zagarrri and Douglas Egerton, whose rigorous political studies of early American women and African Americans grounded on unconventional sources of political history have evoked the value of such sources in better understanding the past from

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<sup>7</sup> David Nathaniel Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Robert J. Swan, "John Teasman: African-American Educator and the Emergence of Community in Early Black New York City, 1787-1815," *Journal of the Early Republic* 12, no. 3 (Autumn, 1992): 331-356.

<sup>9</sup> 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, no. 3 (September, 2010): 464.

the perspective of those who experienced it.<sup>10</sup> When read in conversation with a variety of other sources on Black activism and agency in New York, these student writings and drawings shed valuable light on the students' ideas, perspectives, and experiences.

### **Emancipation in New York and the Development of African Free Schools**

The African Free Schools emerged in the midst of a turbulent and ongoing debate over emancipation and slavery in New York. After lengthy legislative deliberation, the state failed to pass an emancipation act in 1785 and even strengthened its slave codes in 1784 and 1788. Of the 3,092 New York City blacks counted in the first national census of 1790, around 1,036 were free, an “unprecedented” number in the city’s history, though 2,056 remained in bondage.<sup>11</sup> The black population in New York City had expanded dramatically between the 1770s and 1790s, triggering a widespread fear of slave rebellion, a feeling escalated by the Saint Domingue Rebellion of the 1790s and the resultant influx of both white and black refugees. This fear of rebellion, along with notions of republican citizenship, shaped the vision held by many elite whites, including the Manumission Society, that liberty would need to be granted by white humanitarians.<sup>12</sup>

In May of 1786, the New York Manumission Society passed a proposal to establish and provide funding for an African Free School, with the intentions of giving “early attention” to the “morals” of African American children, free or enslaved, so that “they may be kept from vicious

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xi-xii; Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 7-9.

<sup>11</sup>Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 163.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, 62-64.

courses and that by education, they may be qualified for usefulness in life.”<sup>13</sup> The students, both male and female, received lessons in mathematics, investment, geography, drawing, literature, art, and public speaking, and girls also learned to sew. The “Rules governing the school” dictated that only those students who belonged “to those of families which are most regular and orderly in their department” could be admitted to the school, a standard enforced by committee members who “have personally visited the [child’s] family.”<sup>14</sup> The Manumission Society’s involvement not only in the development of the school’s curriculum, but also in the activities of the students’ families, conveys the significant control the society attempted to wield over the black community, using the school as its means.

Yet enrollment at the African Free Schools continued to increase significantly and the institution simultaneously become ever more rooted in the vibrant black activist community through teachers and principals as black freedom expanded with the first gradual emancipation act. In 1799, over ten years after the establishment of the first African Free School, the state of New York declared freedom to be a birthright under the “Act for the gradual abolition of slavery.” This act granted emancipation to children of the state’s considerable population of enslaved African Americans. Remarkably, the act did not explicitly restrict black voting rights but did stipulate that these children continue to serve their white masters for another twenty-five years.<sup>15</sup> Also in 1799, the Manumission Society’s School Committee hired John Teasman, a former African slave and leader within New York’s free black community, who played a momentous

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<sup>13</sup> New York Manumission Society Minutes, Volume 6, November 15, 1787, <http://cdm15052.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15052coll5>.

<sup>14</sup> New York Manumission Society Minutes, Volume 6, November 15, 1787, <http://cdm15052.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15052coll5>.

<sup>15</sup> "An Act for the gradual abolition of Slavery," March 29, 1799, in *Laws of the State of New-York, Passed at the Twenty-Second Meeting of the Legislature Begun ... the Second Day of January, 1799* (Albany, 1799), 721-723 in D. Gellman and D. Quigley, ed., *Jim Crow New York, A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship 1777-1877* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 52-55, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;idno=heb90019.0001.001;rgn=div2;view=text;cc=acls;node=heb90019.0001.001%3A8.9>.

role in developing the school and also stood as an unprecedented example of black leadership and equal collaboration between white and black interests.<sup>16</sup>

However, in 1809, as relations degraded between Teasman and the Manumission Society following the nationwide abolition of the slave trade in 1808, he was released from his position precisely as the African Free School entered into its most conservative period. The School Committee hired a white replacement, Charles Andrews, though several black teachers intermittently continued to serve as instructors and aides. Initially, some parents withdrew their children from the school in response to Teasman's discharge, but within a few years, enrollment numbers again increased, so much so that by 1814 a second building was erected. By 1827, the African Free Schools occupied five different buildings, spread across Lower Manhattan. In 1821, the state of New York passed an act limiting suffrage to only property-owning blacks, in preparation for 1827's full emancipation across the state. Despite these restrictions, the school remained a central axis of the dynamic black community. In 1832, black leaders even took full control of the school for a brief period, and enrollment rose to a peak of over 1,400, until it was incorporated into the New York Public School system in 1834, ending a period of influence on the city of nearly fifty years.<sup>17</sup>

Several African Free School alumni became leaders of the black activist community, including Peter Williams Jr., an ordained Episcopal priest and co-founder of the African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*; James McCune Smith, the first African American to attend medical school, and later co-founder of the National Council of the Colored People alongside Fredrick Douglass; and Henry Highland Garnet, a radical abolitionist, most famous for

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<sup>16</sup> Swan, 331-356.

<sup>17</sup> Howard Dodson, Christopher Paul Moore, and Roberta Yancy, *The Black New Yorkers: The Schomburg Illustrated Chronology* (New York: John Wiley, 2000), 64-65.



his controversial 1843 *Address to the Slaves of the United States of America*, which encouraged slaves to rebel against their masters.<sup>18</sup> Other graduates include minister and educator Alexander Cromwell; internationally renowned Shakespearian actor, Ira Aldridge; mathematician Charles Reason and his brother, an engraver, Patrick Reason.<sup>19</sup>

### **Performing Citizenship in the Public Sphere**

The question of citizenship within a republican government and whether slaves were prepared for freedom complicated arguments of liberty and equality following the close of the Revolutionary War. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American republic, the notion of citizenship depended not only on voting rights and property ownership, but also on one's ability to participate and contribute to the public polity.<sup>20</sup> Controversy over emancipation in New York, complicated by this understanding of citizenship, hinged on questions of black virtue and intellect presented in newspapers and on the streets. In his 1991 work, *Somewhat More Independent*, Shane White admits that the African Free Schools may have played a role in presenting intellectually and morally developed free black students to the New York public; these schools "helped to negate the argument that blacks were unfit for freedom."<sup>21</sup> Yet White grossly understates the significance of the schools as a public platform not only for student displays of black citizenship but also a rare public outlet for black community leaders. By structuring a respected public outlet for black displays of citizenship, the African Free Schools

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<sup>18</sup> David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet, "Walker's Appeal, with a Brief Sketch of His Life And Also Garnet's Address to the Slaves of the United States of America" (J.H. Tobitt: 1848) [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16516/16516-h/16516-h.htm#ADDRESS\\_TO\\_THE\\_SLAVES\\_OF\\_THE\\_U](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16516/16516-h/16516-h.htm#ADDRESS_TO_THE_SLAVES_OF_THE_U).

<sup>19</sup> Harris, 128, 132. Anna Mae Duane and Thomas Thurston, "Read AFS Bios," New York African Free School Collection, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/bios/>.

<sup>20</sup> Gellman, 6.

<sup>21</sup> White, 84.

mobilized the free black community as one capable of participating in the emergent American polity.<sup>22</sup>

Enabled by the African Free Schools, free black students, alumni, and community leaders challenged conventional newspaper printings of imagined black voices, which often distorted reality. White New Yorkers frequently published garbled black voices, rendered by white authors, which contrived African Americans as immoral and uneducated, unfit for citizenship. Following the defeat of the first New York emancipation act, the *New-York Packet* published “A LETTER from CUFFEE,” a satire of a black man’s imagined reaction to the recent setback. “De Legislaterman,” the letter starts, “no make de poo nega free las Sataday, because dey no make two turd.”<sup>23</sup> This letter exemplifies a garbled black voice, fabricated by a white author, suggesting to the New York public that the African American community was ignorant of legislative proceedings and the workings of politics, a qualification which rendered them unfit for citizenship. Furthermore, near the end of the article, “Cuffee” dreams of attaining citizenship in the future so that “you will alway habbe *two-turds* for makee boon law,” implying to white readers that blacks were not only unsuited for citizenship, but, if given the chance to vote, were capable of endangering political stability.

Later that same year, the *New-York Journal* published another comparable article, in which “Landaff Freeman” writes, “A BE hangd if it is not a badest ting in a world to learn us *black men* to read and rite and to spell.”<sup>24</sup> The white author continues to openly mock the need

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<sup>22</sup> Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). Shane White argues that free black leaders “performed” their freedom on the streets, in the theaters, and in the courts. I use the phrase “performing citizenship,” which I find to be a direct explanation of how students functioned in the African Free Schools.

<sup>23</sup> “A Letter from Cuffee to the Printer, Relative to the Negro-Bill Which Did Not Pass,” *New-York Packet*, March 31, 1785, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>. See also Gellman, 109.

<sup>24</sup> *New-York Journal*, August 11, 1785 quoted in Gellman, 110.

for black education and literacy. Numerous other similar depictions of the black voice, in the form of dialogues, prose, and editorials, dominated public depictions of the black community. Because the question of citizenship hinged on intellect and ability to contribute to the public polity, these pervasive misrepresentations of the black voice as alarmingly ignorant would need to be disrupted in order to demonstrate that blacks were suited for freedom.

The African Free School, and its ties to prominent elite whites, opened up a rare political stage for free black students and community leaders to counter these newspaper articles belittling the African American intellect and marking blacks as unfit for citizenship. Many contemporary scholars have stressed the significance of African American parades and street festivals to the development of free black political involvement, asserting that these parades mark the entrance of the African American community into a more public political realm.<sup>25</sup> While these parades and festivals may have acted as a public demonstration of black political expression, orations given by black leaders during the parades were rarely reprinted in newspapers, restricting the reach of these parades into widespread print culture. In contrast, Peter Williams Jr., a graduate of the African Free School and a high-profile ordained Episcopal priest, gave “An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade” in January 1808 to celebrate the nationwide abolition of the slave trade, a speech which was later printed by a Manumission Society member. In his oration, Williams presents a “history of the slave trade,” calling it a “flagrant violation of human rights” and, after profusely thanking “munificent benefactors,” looks forward to a time when “the sun of

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<sup>25</sup> Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review*, 85 (Feb. 1980): 51-54. See also Shane White, " 'It was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (Jun., 1994): 13-50. Ira Berlin asserts the importance of parades and festivals to black political development, while Shane White posits that this significance of these parades lies in the unification of blacks in a public and political realm.

liberty shall beam resplendent on the whole African race.”<sup>26</sup> Like the other black orations presented on this day, Williams’ overt expression of anti-slavery ideals could have gone unnoticed by New York’s white elite. However, because Peter Williams Jr. had graduated from the African Free School, Manumission Society member Samuel Wood published Williams’ oration, an act that presented Williams’ refined speech as an authentic contradiction to the garbled black voices contrived in newspapers.

Furthermore, the African Free School and its benefactors deliberately authenticated the writings and orations of black authors, helping to dispel contrived black voices published in newspapers. At the end of the printed oration, Williams notes that doubt may arise that the above words were his own, and “thinking it probable that a like sentiment may be entertained by others who may honor this publication with a perusal,” Williams attaches “certificates” validating that he had indeed written this oration. The certificates, authored by members of the New York Manumission Society, including John Murray Jr. and William T. Slocum, not only confirmed Williams’ authorship, but also stressed Williams’ ancestry as “a descendant of the African race.”<sup>27</sup> Not only did these patrons of the African Free School print Williams’ oration because of his ties to the school, but by certifying that Williams did indeed author the eloquent speech, the school’s benefactors explicitly dismissed any accusation that Williams, as a result of his race, was too unintelligent or inhuman to possess such a command of language and speech. Williams’ refined speech, a display of intelligent voice and persuasive language, endowed not just Williams himself but also the black community he represented with the qualities of virtue and intellect required of a republican citizen. By publishing and authenticating Williams’ speech for the

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Williams Jr., “An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade: Delivered in the African Church, in the City of New York, January 1, 1808,” in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writings, 1760-1837* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 345, 347, 352, 353.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Williams Jr., 354.

public, the patrons of the African Free School enabled Williams and the black community to perform these qualities of citizenship in the public sphere, an undertaking that should not be overlooked considering that the question of citizenship remained so central to the debate surrounding slavery.

Beyond creating a space for black community leaders to perform visibly these qualities of citizenship, the African Free School worked to demonstrate publicly that free black students could achieve both the education and ensuing intellectual virtue that were prerequisites for republican citizenship. The founders of the African Free Schools situated the schools as highly public venues and encouraged the New York community, as well as more prominent guests such as General Lafayette in 1824, to assess the abilities of these free black students.<sup>28</sup> Teachers and Manumission Society members “respectfully invited” the “public” to regular examinations and commencement ceremonies in local newspaper advertisements, which provided students the opportunity to display their oratory skills, writing and penmanship abilities, and mathematical knowledge and to perform original works of poetry in front of diverse audiences.<sup>29</sup> Charles Andrews, principal of the schools from 1808 to 1832, even publicized pieces of student work in newspapers. A student-drawn map of the United States “by a lad ten years old” accompanied one examination day advertisement in the *Commercial Advertiser* and the author invited the public to visit the school’s office to examine the map themselves.<sup>30</sup> In 1828, Charles Andrews asked twelve-year-old student George Allen to write poetry on “any subject he pleased,” which

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<sup>28</sup> James McCune, "An Address Delivered by James M. Smith, Aged 11 Years, in the New York African Free School, to General Lafayette, on the Day He Visited the Institution Sept 10th, 1824," New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

<sup>29</sup> "[No headline]" *Commercial Advertiser*, April 12, 1819, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

<sup>30</sup> Duane and Thurston, “Rendering the Land,” New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

Andrews then validated and presented at the American Anti-Slavery Convention, an act which demonstrates how far the students' audience reached.<sup>31</sup>

In these spaces, students were well aware of their public role and worked to demonstrate their readiness for citizenship. Andrew R. Smith, a student of the African Free School, describes these examination days in an original and award-winning poem entitled "On the fair," in which he encourages audiences to view the "fruit of labor, and of mind" so that no student "should [ever] rest an idle fool." Smith ends the poem with a note that these monthly fairs were proposed by the teacher "to encourage an emulation amongst [students]" and required students to produce a "specimen of his or her ingenuity in mechanics, needle work, drawing, Composition, either in prose or poetry &c."<sup>32</sup> Like the printing of Peter Williams Jr.'s oration on abolition, African American children's regular displays of their original compositions and orations proved to the New York public that black students could master intellectual and moral prerequisites to citizenship.

While little documentation exists regarding public attendance or response to these public examinations, what sources are available suggest that these examination days and the students' achievements were compelling to the powerful white audience. A 1786 article praises the students' abilities presented at one examination, stating that the students' "various exercises ... dialogues, speeches, and other select pieces" were performed in "a correct and pleasing manner ... with great spirit and propriety." The writer boldly claims:

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Andrews, *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 Press, 1969) 64, <http://books.google.com/books>.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew R. Smith, "On the Fair," New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

The most prejudiced advocate of African Slavery if present, would have felt his favorite argument weakened; he must have acknowledged that the powers of the mind do not depend on the complexion but that with equal encouragement and equal advantages, the African is capable of the same intellectual improvement as the European.<sup>33</sup>

While it is possible that such an article was authored by a Manumission Society member, the radical opinion expressed is equally influential when published in a city-wide newspaper. This writer's resolute endorsement of the students' abilities and explicit invalidation of the argument that African Americans were incapable of citizenship exemplifies how the public face of the African Free Schools provided free black students the occasion to perform their mastery of citizenship.

It is also interesting to note that the African Free Schools also afforded female students a rare space to perform freedom at a time when even elite white women were not considered citizens. Female students' stitching samplers were regularly shown at examination day performances. Most samplers featured an excerpted verse from a poem focusing on moral virtue, like that of Rosena Disery's presented in 1820, which focused on "truth, whom millions Proudly slight."<sup>34</sup> These samplers acted as public displays of both female literacy and a moral virtue, considered absent in common depictions of the African American woman.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in 1822, Margaret Addle presented a valedictory address to her African Free School peers, in which she boldly asserts that "the African race" is equally "endowed by the same almighty power that made us all, with intellectual capacities, not inferior to any of the greater human family," despite

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<sup>33</sup> "African School," *The Herald: A Gazette for the Country*, November 16, 1796, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

<sup>34</sup> Rosena Disery, "Truth," New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

<sup>35</sup> Duane, "Like a Motherless Child," 467.

a history of enslavement.<sup>36</sup> Though Charles Andrews wrote the speech, Addle's public reading of his words exhibited her mastery of language, literacy, and virtue, all necessary for citizenship, while also publicly displaying a black female's eloquent engagement with political topics of race, slavery, and education. Such a speech, along with numerous other female performances, accent the African Free Schools' role in defying the conventional understanding that both women and African Americans were unfit for citizenship.

The African Free Schools afforded both black community leaders and free black students the rare opportunity to perform citizenship on a public scale. At black parades and in the classrooms alike, members of the free black community proved themselves fit for freedom, making evident the important role the African Free School played in mobilizing a politicized African American population in nineteenth-century New York. It is important to note that the 1799 gradual emancipation act did not restrict black men from voting, a rare and unheard-of liberty which persisted for hundreds of black men until 1821, when the state ultimately limited voting rights based on property ownership. With the question of citizenship lying at the heart of this nationwide slavery debate, such an achievement in New York marks an important triumph for the free black community; an achievement, I would argue, advanced by the work of New York's African Free Schools.

### **Exercising Black Political Thought in New York's African Free Schools**

In his introduction to Henry Highland Garnet's *Memorial Discourse, Delivered in the House of Representatives* in February of 1865, Dr. James McCune Smith details his

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<sup>36</sup> Margaret Addle, "Spoken by Margaret Addle on her leaving School April 1822. Written for the Occasion by C.C.A.," NYAFS records in 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, no. 3 (September, 2010): 467.



schoolmate's early life, having both graduated from the African Free School together in the early 1830s. Before launching into Garnet's schooling at the Free School, McCune Smith reflects, "In all cases, the school-house and the school boy days, settle the permanent characteristics, establish the level, gauge the relative mental and moral power of the man in after life; especially was it so in this school."<sup>37</sup> McCune Smith's salient confidence in the African Free School's formative impact on his own identity and that of his schoolmates communicates a compelling notion: these schools played a central role in shaping black leaders and black political thought of the nineteenth-century. By affording free black students and teachers a place to exercise and enact black political ideology, the African Free Schools mobilized this black political thought into action, demonstrated by both John Teasman's efforts to sculpt the school to advance black objectives and the students' foundational exercise of and engagement with dominant African American activist strategies in their writings. While the Manumission Society may have intended to exert a sphere of social control over the free black community using the African Free Schools, student writings instead suggest that both students and teachers alike deployed the school as a means of mobilizing black political ideology.

In order to interpret more accurately the values and agency imbedded within student writings, these documents must first be framed within the broader context of New York's black activist movements throughout the end of the eighteenth-century and into the nineteenth. Historian Patrick Rael's study of black leaders and activists across the Antebellum north expanded understandings of black identity and political activism by asserting that African American leaders contested inequality and oppression using intentional appeals "to cherished

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<sup>37</sup> Henry Highland Garnet and James McCune Smith, *A Memorial Discourse Delivered in the Hall of the House of Representatives, Washington City, D.C., on Sabbath, February 12, 1865* (Philadelphia: J.M. Wilson, 1865), 20, <http://books.google.com/books?id=CrEEAAAAYAAJ>.

American values” rather than challenging the “American ideological landscape.” Rael’s study established the black community’s embrace of moral elevation, presented by white elites, as an activist “strategy” rather than a “capitulation” to white authority.<sup>38</sup> Rael’s argument presents important ramifications for an understanding of the African Free Schools: rather than representing surrender to white social control, black community leaders and students embodied these schools as a tool of moral uplift to advance activist ideology. Other scholars, such as Leslie Alexander and Gary Nash, have built on Rael’s work to reveal a complex layer of pride in an African identity, which united black activists in advancing the moral uplift strategy.<sup>39</sup> Together, Rael, Nash and Alexander have demonstrated that the free black community in New York, united by an African identity, used education as a vehicle to advance moral uplift, the dominant strategy for black activists working toward equality.

Black principal John Teasman shaped these schools as an institution to further black activist aims both by administrating student instruction and by managing relations between the black community and the Manumission Society. Teasman took on the role of “assistant teacher or usher” in January of 1797.<sup>40</sup> In that same year, Manumission Society delegates to a Convention of Abolition Societies reported that it should “be gratifying to the Convention to learn that the usher . . . is himself of African descent, and discharges the duties of his office with a zeal, fidelity and success, worthy of his character as a man, and his profession as a Christian.”<sup>41</sup> In 1799, the Manumission Society replaced the white school master with John Teasman, in part

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<sup>38</sup> Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>39</sup> Leslie M. Alexander, *African Or American? : Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), xiv. See also Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 79.

<sup>40</sup> New York Manumission Society, Minutes VI, January 1797, New-York Historical Society, <http://cdm15052.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15052coll5>.

<sup>41</sup> ACAS Minutes quoted in Swan, 335.

because of budget troubles. Nonetheless, Teasman's unprecedented title as an African American principle positioned him as the administrator of social and moral instruction in these African Free Schools, a measure which, as historian Robert Swan posits, "ironically undermined" the Manumission Society's goal of obtaining white social control over New York's free blacks.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, such a promotion set Teasman, a leader within the black activist community, in conversation and cooperation with leading politicians such as John Murray Sr., Alexander Hamilton, and Samuel Wood. Teasman's responsibilities, both as the administrator of the schools' curricula and the link between the black community and the Manumission Society, are all indicative of Teasman's influential role in shaping the school environment.

During his tenure as principal, Teasman introduced a number of changes to the African Free School, emboldening the school as a vehicle for both African American children and adults to practice citizenship in the schools. Though Teasman left few documents behind, from Manumission Society Minutes it is clear that Teasman introduced the Lancastrian system into the school, an education method which required older, capable students to help teach the class. Because of the Lancastrian system, Teasman encouraged students to act as leaders within the school and enabled the school to take on a greater number of students.<sup>43</sup> In fact, following Teasman's appointment, attendance increased by thirty percent, an increase which suggests his popularity within the free black community and depicts the school as a sort of expression of black community members' entreaties. Expanding beyond New York's free youth population, Teasman also established an "Evening School" for African American adults early in 1797,

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<sup>42</sup> Swan, 332.

<sup>43</sup> New York Manumission Society, Minutes VI, January 1797, <http://cdm15052.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15052coll5>. Charles Andrews, the white principle who succeeded Teasman, claims in his *History of the African Free Schools*, that Andrews himself was the architect of the Lancastrian system and virtually omits Teasman's tenure as principle. However, minutes from the Convention of Abolition Societies in 1806 make reference to a Lancastrian system established by Teasman.

attended by “36 males and 8 females,” all of whom greatly impressed the Manumission Society Trustees with their “proficiency” and “conduct.”<sup>44</sup> Teasman’s success in using the school to expand and improve upon the black activist community’s moral uplift strategy suggests that the black teacher played a greater role in sculpting the African Free School than previously assumed in Shane White or Leslie Harris’ scholarship. The school, as a rare space in which Teasman could openly enact black activist ideals, served to mobilize New York’s black activist community as a whole.

Teasman was not the only agent in enacting black political thought at the African Free School; the students themselves exercised activist principles in their work, even within the bounds of the curricula conceived by white Manumission Society members. Andrew Smith’s “Valedictory Address,” presented in the early nineteenth-century, most overtly exhibits prevalent black political ideology; in particular, Smith’s address imitates the form and ideas of black poet Jupiter Hammon’s 1787 “Address to the Negroes in the State of New York.” Smith opens his address by graciously thanking both “supporters of this valuable institution” and Charles Andrews, his “much respected teacher.” Smith confidently advocates that his exercises and achievements “be regarded . . . as testimonials in [Smith’s] favor,” as the efforts of the school’s trustees were not “bestowed in vain.” This expression of gratitude to white benefactors reflected a speaking tactic, meant to appease “potential white listeners,” that Leslie Harris has identified in William Hamilton, Joseph Sidney, and Henry Sipkins’ celebratory addresses following abolition in January of 1809, linking Smith’s voice to that of black political leaders.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> New York Manumission Society, Minutes VI, January 1797, New-York Historical Society, <http://cdm15052.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15052coll5>.

<sup>45</sup> Harris, 91. See also Gellman, 198.

Furthermore, Smith's oratory concludes with guidance directed toward his fellow classmates as they enter into a "wild field":

As the various exercises of the day have detained you some time, it requires me to be short: in conclusion, let me remind you my fellow Schoolmates, who are about to leave with me, that we are now entering into a wild field, and that we must be industrious and upright to make respectable members of society, and to be an honor to our parents; We must make such use of our learning as will prove a blessing to ourselves, and to the community with which Providence now calls us to mix.<sup>46</sup>

Smith's direct linking between moral standing, learning, and service to their community echoes black leaders' espousal of moral uplift. More specifically, Smith's address mirrors the voice of acclaimed black poet Jupiter Hammon in his *Address to the Negroes in the State of New York* in 1787, out of which stemmed moral uplift as the most prevalent black political strategy of the early national era. "All those of you, who follow any bad courses," Hammon asserted, "and who do not take care to get an honest living by your labour and industry, are doing more to prevent our being free than anybody else," a statement which is echoed in Andrew Smith's counsel to his peers.<sup>47</sup> Andrew Smith's imitation of Hammon's plea for moral elevation to achieve equality and freedom reveals an exercise of black political thought; Smith urges his peers to "be industrious and upright" in order to contribute to the broader society, a clear espousal of the persuasive moral uplift strategy which guided black activism during the early national period. Smith's public promotion of moral uplift, echoing predominant black leaders of the time period, suggests that the students of the African Free School acted as agents in deploying this black political ideology.

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew R. Smith, "A Valedictory Address," New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

<sup>47</sup> Jupiter Hammon, "An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York, 1787," in Porter, 322-323.

A look into students' work reveals a specific set of skills, from stock trading math to public speaking, which cultivated promising black leaders. Documents in the mathematics collection reveal that the students were taught complex stock trading principles, such as "interest" principles or the rule of fellowship, defined in one student's work as "a rule by which merchants etc. trading in company with a joint stock are enabled to ascertain each person's particular share of the gain or loss."<sup>48</sup> The practice of such complex stock trading math problems represents a level of sophisticated mathematical knowledge common among the white middle or upper class, a skill that would prove useful to these students as the requisite to citizenship began to shift toward property ownership in the 1820s.<sup>49</sup> Beyond these math skills, oratory skills were also a focus of the curriculum. A number of the student documents, such as one piece titled "A Short Account of the Lion," are penned copies of works like Caleb Bingham's *The American Preceptor*. Historians Anna Mae Duane and Thomas Thurston note that Bingham's textbook was used to impart the skill of public speaking on students across the United States during this time period, and Fredrick Douglass even attributes his own oratory skill to one of Bingham's prominent texts.<sup>50</sup> Finally, students fervently practiced penmanship, an important indication of learning, status and literacy. Students embellished copies of literary works with flourishes and emblems, a crucial skill for businessmen trying to avoid forgery. Scrutinizing each student's penmanship became a central focus of the public examination days and a mark of the students' civility and morality. The complex math problems, oratory practice, and penmanship all illustrate important formative skills students like James McCune or Henry Highland Garnet may have

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<sup>48</sup> "Fellowship," New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

<sup>49</sup> Anna Mae Duane and Thomas Thurston, "Mathematical Problems in Stock Trading," The New York African Free School Collection, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

<sup>50</sup> Anna Mae Duane and Thomas Thurston, "A Short Account of the Lion," New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

gained from their experiences at the African Free School. These key skills, marks of learning and civility, elevated African Free School students and future black leaders to a social echelon which enabled widespread influence and leadership.

However, and perhaps more importantly, student work also evidences a level of student engagement with topics such as identity, liberty, race, and freedom, revealing the students' exercise of black political ideals in their writing, poetry, and orations. For example, an original poem composed by William Seaman entitled "On the Lion," proudly describes a lion's roar:

The Lion is a noble creature,  
And has a strong terrifick feature;  
This roaring which is loud as thunder,  
Strikes all around with fear and wonder.<sup>51</sup>

It is difficult to disregard Seaman's expression of a vibrant pride for an African identity in the poem. Seaman's emphasis not only on the lion's physicality, but his specific concentration on the lion's roar as a powerful and fierce voice of an African identity may have proved an inspiring example for these young black students. As Leslie Alexander effectively demonstrates in her portrayal of black political thought in the early nineteenth-century, an African heritage remained central to the formation of a formidable black political ideology in the nineteenth-century. Seaman's poem reflects the bold propagation of such an identity, even within the bounds of an African Free School curriculum designed by New York's white elite.

Beyond this engagement with an African identity, student work also demonstrates an exploration of liberty and race, which equipped free black students to engage politically with these topics. In 1820, Nicholas Bartom, a student at the African Free Schools, copied an excerpt from Joseph Addison's "On Liberty and Slavery Contrasted." Of the ten-line excerpt, Bartom

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<sup>51</sup> William Seaman, "On the Lion," New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool>.

accents the first few lines, “Oh Liberty Thou Pow’r Supremely bright,” and a striking phrase near the end of the poem: “And poverty looks cheerful in thy sight.”<sup>52</sup> Bartom’s lines narrow in on a liberty which is understood not only in terms of emancipation, but also coupled with equal rights. By providing free black students a rare space in which they were encouraged to engage with the concept of liberty through poetry and performance, the African Free School mobilized these students as black community leaders, equipped to engage with these topics on a political level.

A look to some original student work also reveals a discreet rebuff to the Manumission Society’s central notion of white paternalism guiding the struggling black dependent. Adeline Groves, alumna of the African Free School, visited the school during an examination day in 1822 and presented this original poem, in which she mourns the loss of the child of a white family with whom Groves lived as a servant:

The God, who reigns above the sky,  
And bids your body here to lie,  
Commands me here on earth to stay;  
But soon will bear me hence away.  
I’d fondly nurse thee in my arms,  
And guard thee safe from every harm  
And thou should lean upon my breast,  
Or on some downy pillow rest.<sup>53</sup>

The Manumission Society unremittingly imparted students with the notion that black parents were immoral, and therefore, patrons of the African Free School should replace students’ families as paternal guardians; in an address to students’ parents in 1818, Manumission Society member Samuel Wood specifies the school’s responsibility to “implant virtuous and correct

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<sup>52</sup> Nicholas Bartom, “On Liberty Thou Pow’r,” New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool>.

<sup>53</sup> Adeline Groves, “Lines Composed by Adeline Groves, a coloured girl, formerly belonging to the N.Y. African Free School,” New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool>. See also Anna Mae Duane, “Like a Motherless Child,” 476.



principles” in the students’ minds, advising the parents on how to support the schools’ paternalistic purpose.<sup>54</sup> Yet here, Groves places herself, a black woman, as the virtuously maternal figure who mourns by the baby’s side. By replacing a white maternal figure with an African American one, Groves slights the notion of white paternalism. While Groves submitted to such paternalism as a student, as a graduate she returns to dispel tactfully the schools’ guiding principle of paternalism, an act which exemplifies how graduates left the school equipped as black leaders, despite the Manumission Society’s objectives, willing to challenge these inequalities publicly.

Finally, while the school mobilized students to become future leaders of black activism, it is also important to note their compelling leadership even as young students. In an 1852 article published in *Fredrick Douglass’ Paper*, James Mccune Smith recalls a black man who frequently visited the schools to observe examination day performances:

When he saw little boys, with tight heads and dark complexions, stand upon a platform, before a multitude of white people, and read out loud in books, and spell out loud, with closed books, and say geography, and cipher on the black-board, and more than all, “speak pieces” about liberty, and never seem afraid—why, then his eye would glisten and his soul struggle with the past wrong done him in slavery, and the coming glory ...<sup>55</sup>

By fearlessly performing, practicing, and engaging with topics such as liberty in front of powerful white audiences, these African Free School students stood as a profound model of the “coming glory” that the African American community dreamed of. By preparing these free black students to stand up in the face of New York’s white elite, the African Free School mobilized the leaders of a dynamic black activist community in the nineteenth-century American north.

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<sup>54</sup> Samuel Wood, *An Address to the Parents and Guardians of the Children Belonging to the New-York African Free-School* (New York: Samuel Wood & Sons, 1818), 3-13.

<sup>55</sup> James McCune Smith as “Communi paw,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, April 15, 1852 in Anna Mae Duane, “Like a Motherless Child,” 474-475.

By affording free black students and teachers a place to exercise and enact black political activism, the African Free Schools equipped teachers and students alike with the skills to mobilize a nineteenth-century black activist community. John Teasman's endeavors to sculpt the school to advance black objectives and the students' foundational exercise of black political thought in their daily work exhibits the central role the African Free Schools played in developing black activist leaders. Despite the Manumission Society's intentions of gaining social control over the students and their families, it is clear that teachers and students alike deployed the school as a means of advancing and mobilizing black political aims.

### **African Free Schools and the Formation of African American Organizations**

Much of the existing scholarship focusing on black political and benevolent organizations during the early national era perceives these communities through what historian Robert L. Harris Jr. has coined the "reactive model": black independent organizations are seen only in relation to white ones, which "impedes our appreciation of early black benevolent societies as voluntary associations and as the underpinning of black institutional life."<sup>56</sup> More recent work, like that of Craig Steven Wilder, builds on Harris' stance and contends that while white "persecution may have been a catalyst" to the structural formation of black benevolent societies, the culture, organization, and form of these societies grew out of features unique to an African American identity.<sup>57</sup> In linking the African Free Schools, managed by the Manumission Society's white philanthropists, to the rise of black benevolent associations, it is clear that the African Free Schools' attempts to suppress New York's free black community catalyzed the formation of these black organizations. Though these organizations acted independently of the

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<sup>56</sup> Robert L. Harris Jr., "Early Black Benevolent Societies, 1780-1830," *Massachusetts Review* (1979): 603.

<sup>57</sup> Craig Steven Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 4. See also Leslie Alexander, xiv-xxiv.

African Free Schools, the schools and these black benevolent associations remained intricately linked throughout the early nineteenth-century. This nexus between the African Free Schools and these benevolent societies, which “guided and nurtured” dominant black political thought,<sup>58</sup> exhibits the final vein through which the African Free Schools mobilized the free black community’s political ideology and action.

The New York Manumission Society’s harsh paternalistic stance toward students and their parents at the turn of the nineteenth-century triggered the formal organization of an African Society for Mutual Relief in 1808.<sup>59</sup> From Jupiter Hammon’s 1787 address to “the members of the African Society in the city of New York,” it is clear that the Society for Mutual Relief stemmed out of an “African Society” from the late eighteenth century, comprised of the same leaders, William Hamilton and John Teasman, who founded the Mutual Relief association.<sup>60</sup> The Manumission Society even notes the existence of “various associations among the free blacks for mutual support, benefit and improvement” as early as 1797, demonstrating that African societies were active prior to their official organization in the nineteenth-century. In the late 1790s, the Manumission Society members began addressing the parents of free black students, requesting the parents’ “frequent perusal” of the Manumission Society’s “ideas” on topics such as “giving commands to children,” “cleanliness,” and “of cruelty to brutes &c.”<sup>61</sup> In response to these restrictive assumptions, parents withdrew their children from the schools, possibly sending them to smaller, alternative schools in the African Church. The Manumission Society minutes note a drop in attendance in 1805 and 1806, and attributed “very little progress in [students’] learning”

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<sup>58</sup> Robert L. Harris Jr., 4.

<sup>59</sup> Swan, 341.

<sup>60</sup> Hammon, 313; Swan, 341.

<sup>61</sup> Wood, 3-13.

to such absences.<sup>62</sup> These absences suggest that as the Manumission Society attempted to exert greater control over New York's free black community, black parents and leaders sought out other routes, more closely tied to black ideals, to provide their children with an education

Triggered by the Manumission Society's intensifying grip on its students and the need for a more independent black association, Teasman and other black leaders took steps to formally incorporate the African Society as the African Society for Mutual Relief "for the purpose of protecting each other from indigency ... conscious that [black] advancement ... depends much on our being united in social bodies."<sup>63</sup> Recognizing that black advancement could no longer depend on white philanthropy, Teasman and other black leaders formally incorporated the African Society, not only to supplant the African Free School, but also to advance black political objectives. While the paternalism of the African Free School catalyzed the official incorporation of these black benevolent associations, these organizations developed independent of the schools themselves, a step which mobilized the free black community toward greater political independence.

Yet significant relations between the African Free Schools and the African Society for Mutual Relief do not end at the society's establishment. Both in accordance with and in opposition to the desires of the Manumission Society, the African Society for Mutual Relief successfully expanded to advance black political thought independently. From the Mutual Relief Society, a handful of other independent black associations rose to the surface, including the Brooklyn African Woolman Benevolent Society, African Marine Fund, Wilberforce Philanthropic Association and the African Dorcas Society. These associations became the center

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<sup>62</sup> NYMS Minutes, April 8, 1806, <http://cdm15052.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15052coll5>; Swan, 343.

<sup>63</sup> William Hamilton, "An Address to the African Society for Mutual Relief, 1809," in Porter, 37.

of public black political expression, organizing and directing “overtly” political parades.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the Mutual Relief Society opened a school of its own and all the above associations continued to raise funds to assist “poor African children, whose parents are unable to educate them,” in attending schools across New York throughout the nineteenth-century, including the African Free School.<sup>65</sup> This continued monetary support demonstrates that while black political ideology shifted in the 1820s, the African Free School remained central to the ideals of these benevolent associations.

While the Manumission Society had initially demonstrated support for the Mutual Relief Society, black political objectives quickly diverged from that of the Manumission Society. In 1808, former city mayor and Manumission Society member DeWitt Clinton personally delivered the Mutual Relief Society’s application for formal incorporation to the state legislature.<sup>66</sup> Yet by January 1809, Manumission Society members gravely advised black leaders against publically celebrating national abolition of the slave trade and the society’s year anniversary. Teasman and other leaders replied defiantly: “We will go though death stare us in the face.”<sup>67</sup> Such bold rebelliousness to the Manumission Society cost Teasman his teaching position in 1809, ending his nearly twelve years of service to the school, and marks a turning point in relations between the black community and the African Free Schools. More importantly, this defiance demonstrates that although the black community continued to support the moral uplift strategy, in which the African Free School and other education institutions played a central role, black activists were by no means submissive to the white philanthropists who managed the Free School.

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<sup>64</sup> White, “ ‘It was a Proud Day’ : African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-183,” 15.

<sup>65</sup> “Constitution of the African Marine Fund, for the Relief of the Distressed Orphans, and Poor Members of this Fund,” in Porter, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Craig Steven Wilder, “The Rise and Influence of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, 1808-1865,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 22, no. 2 (1998): 3.

<sup>67</sup> Swan, 350.

While the Manumission Society may have intended to wield control over the free black community, a closer look to its relations with black organizations instead reveals a complex link, one defined by black agency.

By catalyzing the formal organization of independent black organizations, which maintained a crucial, yet still independent, relationship with the African Free Schools into the 1820s, these African Free Schools helped to mobilize the free black community into an impressive political entity. In 1821, General Erastus Root commented that that New York's 1813 legislative election was decided by the votes of three hundred united free blacks across the city.<sup>68</sup> It is clear that the African Free Schools, by mobilizing black political organizations, played a part in deciding this election. While this precarious political power diminished with restrictions on the black vote in the 1820s, it is important to understand the unprecedented role the African Free School played in advancing black political aims during the early national era.

## **Conclusion**

Nearly all African Free School students in the early nineteenth-century marked their writings and drawings with a similar signature. "Drawn by Andrew R. Smith, Aged 14 years, New York African Free School," is the label on a careful drawing of an elite European lady.<sup>69</sup> The transcript of Mccune Smith's 1824 address to General Lafayette begins, "An Address Delivered by James M. Smith, Aged 11 years, in the New York African Free School, to General

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<sup>68</sup> Dixon Ryan Fox, "The Negro Vote in Old New York," *Political Science Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Jun., 1917): 257.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew R. Smith, "Drawn by Andrew R. Smith," New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool>.

Lafayette.”<sup>70</sup> The most striking signature, however, can be found on an original poem by Adeline Groves, mourning the death of a white baby boy: “Lines Composed by Adeline Groves, a coloured girl, *formerly* belonging to the N.Y. African Free School.”<sup>71</sup> Groves, a graduate of the African Free Schools, returned to present her poem at an examination day in 1822. Groves’ signature prompts the reader to take note once again of the unprecedented opportunity the African Free School afforded a young “coloured girl.” More importantly, however, Groves’ signature is also a reminder that while the students endured years of paternalism, “belonging” to the Manumission Society, both men and women emerged from the school equipped to act as leaders of the black community. Having performed citizenship, exercised black political thought, and observed autonomous black organizations in the classrooms of the African Free School, former students such as Ira Aldridge, James Mccune Smith, Alexander Crummell and thousands of others emerged, like Adeline Groves, willing to challenge American slavery and oppression.

While dominant scholars such as Shane White and Leslie Harris have deemed these African Free Schools a paternalistic vehicle of white social control, a more holistic look at the schools and the influence of black agency in shaping these institutions unearths the central role New York’s African Free Schools played in mobilizing the black activist community of the nineteenth-century. By performing citizenship, by exercising and enacting black political thought, and by catalyzing the formal organization of black political organizations, free black students and teachers advanced black activists’ objectives, despite, and in some cases because of, the schools’ paternalistic curriculum. Taking note of the African Free Schools’ role in mobilizing

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<sup>70</sup> James Mccune Smith, “An Address Delivered by James M. Smith, Aged 11 years, in the New York African Free School, to General Lafayette,” New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool>.

<sup>71</sup> Adeline Groves, “Lines Composed by Adeline Groves, a coloured girl, formerly belonging to the N.Y. African Free School,” New York African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool>.

black leaders is important not only in revising our understandings of New York's racial history, but also in understanding the role education plays within a republican society, strained by inequality and injustice. The voices of these free black students, typically overlooked in historical portrayals of race, education, and liberty in nineteenth-century New York, ultimately challenge our notion of curriculum as something decided by teachers and administrators alone. Instead, the African Free School and the voices of its students show us how black leaders, teachers, and students shaped a paternalistic curriculum into a powerful vehicle which mobilized a black activist community and advanced black political objectives in the United States.



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