

A “class of Citizens”: The Earliest Black Petitioners to Congress and Their Quaker Allies

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MOSES fled from bondage under the cover of darkness around 4:00 a.m. on October 29, 1785. His irate North Carolina master, William Skinner, promptly drafted a runaway advertisement offering a reward of “Ten Silver Dollars” for Moses’s return—or “five times the sum to any person that will make due proof of his being killed.”¹ A decade later, one of Skinner’s agents tracked the fugitive down in Philadelphia. By that time Moses had adopted the surname Gordon, was married with four children, and likely attended St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, founded by the Reverend Absalom Jones, another former slave.² Black and white activists rallied to Gordon’s defense, leaving Skinner

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¹ For the advertisement, see “Advertisement. Ten Silver Dollars Reward,” in John Parrish, *Remarks on the Slavery of the Black People: Addressed to the Citizens of the United States*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1806), 53 (quotations). For a later advertisement, see William Skinner, “Twenty Pounds Reward,” [Richmond] *Virginia Gazette; or the American Advertiser*, Feb. 22, 1786, [4].

² For the surname Gordon, see Opinion of William Rawle in regard to Moses Gordon, Nov. 2, 1795 (misidentified as 1799 and filed with the papers of the American Abolition Convention of 1800), Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers (PASP), Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), Philadelphia. For his wife and children, see the 1797 petition discussed below and cited in III n. 7. Membership data for St. Thomas is

to grumble mockingly about “the Interposition of that quiet inoffensive people called Quakers.”³ Skinner persisted in his efforts, however, and by 1797 Gordon had been recaptured and jailed.

This would have been the second time Gordon faced reenslavement. His first master, a North Carolina Quaker named Caleb Trueblood, had liberated him in November 1776. Although Trueblood believed that “no Law, Moral or Divine” could justify slavery, North Carolina law had sharply restricted manumissions since 1723.⁴ A 1741 statute forbade masters from liberating their slaves “upon any Pretence whatsoever, except for meritorious Services, to be adjudged and allowed of by the County Court.” Even if the court granted a manumission license, the freed person had to “depart this Province within Six Months.” The law also empowered church wardens to “take up . . . and sell” anyone who had been manumitted illegally or who remained in the colony after the grace period. In April 1777 the new state legislature reiterated the colonial restrictions on manumissions and black freedom. Gordon was among scores of black North Carolinians who were liberated by Quaker slaveholders but then re-enslaved by county courts and sold by sheriffs during and after the American Revolution.⁵ Skinner, a brigadier general in the North Carolina militia, had purchased Gordon at such an auction in July 1779. Gordon’s two and a half years of freedom were thus followed by six years of a second period of enslavement in North Carolina before he escaped to Pennsylvania. After living free in the North, he refused to go back into slavery. One of Gordon’s Quaker allies in Philadelphia recorded that he chose to “drown himself rather than [*sic*] being Sold from his Connections.”⁶

very limited, but in 1809 Absalom Jones baptized an infant named Joseph Gordon, son of another Moses Gordon (and perhaps the grandson of the North Carolina fugitive); St. Thomas Original Absalom Jones Rector Register, 1796–1837, June 25, 1809, African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas (AECST), Philadelphia.

³ [William Skinner], “Letter to a North Carolina Assemblyman urging him to resist the Quaker scheme of emancipation,” Nov. 10, 1796, copy, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, box 18, Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa. (quotation). This manuscript copy of the letter is missing the last page(s), but comparing the substance of the letter with Skinner’s runaway ads makes it clear that he was the author.

⁴ Caleb Trueblood, manumission of Moses, Pasquotank, N.C., Nov. 4, 1776, copy by Zachariah Nixon, June 20, 1789, Cox-Parrish-Wharton Papers (CPW), box 15, folder 45, HSP (quotation), repr. in Parrish, *Remarks on Slavery*, 52–53 (quotation, 52). The Quaker manuscripts cited throughout use the Quaker dating system of numbering rather than naming months, which I have modernized.

⁵ Gabriel Johnston, William Smith, and John Hodgson, “An Act Concerning Servants and Slaves,” 1741, in *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina: Acts of the North Carolina General Assembly, 1715–1716* (Goldsboro, N.C. 1905), 23: 191–204 (“Pretence,” 23: 203, “take up,” 23: 204). For an overview of the manumission controversy and many relevant primary sources, see Michael J. Crawford, ed., *The Having of Negroes Is Become a Burden: The Quaker Struggle to Free Slaves in Revolutionary North Carolina* (Gainesville, Fla., 2010).

⁶ John Parrish made the notation about Moses Gordon’s death on the back of his manuscript copy of Moses’s manumission document; see Trueblood, manumission of

Before his final tragic act of self-determination, Gordon helped inspire the first petition to Congress from African Americans. Four other men who had also been born enslaved in North Carolina petitioned the House of Representatives in January 1797. Job Albert, Jacob Nicholson, Jupiter Nicholson, and Thomas Pritchett (or Pritchard) had been manumitted by Quaker masters in North Carolina but then “hunted day and night, like beasts of the forest, by armed men with dogs.” To escape reenslavement they fled to Philadelphia, but they remained vulnerable under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. They recounted the plight of another “fellow-black now confined in the jail of this city,” who must have been Gordon. Drawing on the language of the First Amendment, they asked Congress “for redress of our grievances.”⁷ Their petition sparked heated sectional debate. In the end, Congress declined to grant their requests, but the black activists persisted. At the turn of the century, Albert and Jacob Nicholson joined the Reverends Jones and Richard Allen, along with sixty-seven other subscribers, in the second petition presented by African Americans to Congress. Claiming petitioning rights as a “class of Citizens,” they again asked Congress to redress their grievances.⁸

Although scholars have long recognized the symbolic importance of these petitions, their background, creation, and reception remain poorly understood. Few sources produced by black activists survive from this era, and the papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) fail to reference either petition, leading scholars to speculate that Jones led both efforts while

Moses, Nov. 4, 1776, CPW, box 15, folder 45, HSP (quotation). On slave suicide, see Richard Bell, “Slave Suicide, Abolition and the Problem of Resistance,” *Slavery and Abolition* 33, no. 4 (December 2012): 525–49; Terri L. Snyder, *The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America* (Chicago, 2015).

⁷ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., esp. 2015–18 (“hunted,” 2016, “fellow-black,” 2017, “redress,” 2015). No scholar has previously identified the “fellow-black,” but the petition details match Gordon’s experience. It describes how the prisoner had been freed in North Carolina and then re-enslaved for six years before running away, and it noted that his “claimer” had offered a “reward of ten silver dollars to any person who would bring him back, or five times the sum to any persons who would produce due proof of his being killed.” After eleven years in Philadelphia, this man had been “lately apprehended and committed to prison,” separating him from his wife and children. *Ibid.*, 2017 (quotations). The 1797 petition has been widely reprinted; see for example Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan, eds., *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*, rev. ed. (Amherst, Mass., 1989), 267–72; Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison, Wis., 1990), 185–89; Woody Holton, *Black Americans in the Revolutionary Era: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2009), 127–30; Edward Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty: Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era* (Lanham, Md., 2012), 160–64.

⁸ “The Petition of the People of Colour, Freeman within the City and Suburbs of Philadelphia,” Dec. 30, 1799, Slave Trade Committee Records (STCR), HR 6A-F4.2, National Archives (NA), Washington, D.C. (quotation). I thank Jessie Kratz for providing a digital scan of the petition and committee report. The text of the petition is also available in primary source collections such as Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 273–76.

white abolitionists remained aloof from the initiatives.⁹ Yet previously unexamined manuscript evidence—including rough drafts of both petitions—reveals the interracial and interregional networks that helped the nation's first black petitioners achieve political voice. Like Gordon, the four black petitioners of 1797 had been liberated by Quakers connected to the North Carolina Standing Committee (NCSC), and the Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings (PMS) subsequently supported their political activism. Quakers had established both organizations during the Seven Years' War to promote their peace testimony, but these groups (like their counterparts in other regions) quickly evolved into vehicles for advancing antislavery testimony as well.¹⁰ Many PMS members were also active in the PAS, yet historiographical trends and divisions have marginalized Quaker groups such as the NCSC and the PMS relative to secular societies such as the PAS. As a result, much of the existing scholarship obscures continuities between colonial and early national abolitionism as well as the movement's interregional scope.¹¹

⁹ Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan and Gary B. Nash imagine meetings between the four North Carolinians and Absalom Jones, whom they credit with drafting the 1797 petition. Such a meeting is plausible, but there is no actual evidence of it, and Nash acknowledges it is speculation; Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 267–72; Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 189, 324 n. 52; Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 77. Other scholars have followed their lead in crediting Jones with the petition's authorship; see for example Crawford, *Having of Negroes*, 143; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, Conn., 2016), 139.

¹⁰ Delegates from local Quaker meetings met annually at regional yearly meetings, which in turn established standing committees or meetings for sufferings that met monthly or as circumstances mandated. The best discussion of the PMS's antislavery activism remains Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (New Haven, Conn., 1950), esp. 84–113. However, Drake pays little attention to the connections between this group and formal abolition societies or African Americans, and he draws only on the PMS's official minute books. As discussed below, the rough draft of the 1797 petition and other evidence of direct collaboration between Quakers and the black petitioners come instead from the PMS's rough drafts and miscellaneous papers. This article thus bears out Sydney V. James's prediction that "conceivably, comparison of the various versions of such minutes might yield useful information"; James, *A People among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 337. Jean R. Soderlund correctly emphasizes divisions within the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) but gives little attention to the PMS, which was more uniformly antislavery, and ends her study in 1783; see Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, N.J., 1985). Brycchan Carey focuses on antislavery discourse without discussing the PMS and ends in 1761; see Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657–1761* (New Haven, Conn., 2012). For examples of scholarship that effectively bridges the Quaker and secular components of early American abolitionism, as well as the colonial and early republican eras, see Kirsten Sword, "Remembering Dinah Nevil: Strategic Deceptions in Eighteenth-Century Antislavery," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 2 (September 2010): 315–43; Jonathan D. Sassi, "With a Little Help from the Friends: The Quaker and Tactical Contexts of Anthony Benezet's Abolitionist Publishing," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (PMHB) 135, no. 1 (January 2011): 33–71.

¹¹ Literature on the PAS and other secular abolition societies acknowledges the importance of Quaker members but ignores the continued relevance (or even existence)

Integrating these relatively neglected Quaker sources into the study of abolitionism also reveals that scholars have failed to fully appreciate the level of interracial activism in the late eighteenth century, even though this theme has become increasingly pronounced in recent literature. Richard S. Newman's seminal study *The Transformation of American Abolitionism* argues that African Americans influenced the PAS's legal tactics beginning in the 1780s but that white abolitionists' political activism was overly conservative and resisted black input before the 1830s. More recently, historians such as Paul J. Polgar and Manisha Sinha have emphasized that white abolitionists in the early Republic responded to black activism by supporting black institutions and touting African Americans' potential for citizenship.¹² These forms of financial and rhetorical support were important, but the 1797 and 1799 petition efforts represent hitherto unrecognized examples of interracial activism at the level of national politics. This type of political agitation anticipated tactics that scholars still associate with the second wave of abolitionism in the 1830s.

The black petitioners accomplished significantly more than historians have realized. Traditional accounts of the political responses have misunderstood congressional procedure and ignored the relevance of North Carolina laws, mistakenly concluding that Congress rejected both petitions based on a racially restricted understanding of the Constitution.¹³

of the PMS and its counterparts in other regions. See for example Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York, 1991); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002); Paul J. Polgar, "To Raise Them to an Equal Participation': Early National Abolitionism, Gradual Emancipation, and the Promise of African American Citizenship," *Journal of the Early Republic* (JER) 31, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 229–58; Polgar, "Standard Bearers of Liberty and Equality: Reinterpreting the Origins of American Abolitionism" (Ph.D. diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2013). The PMS is wholly absent in even the most comprehensive synthetic accounts of abolitionism and emancipation; see James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*, rev. ed. (New York, 1997); Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777–1865* (Atlanta, 2015); Sinha, *Slave's Cause*.

¹² Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*; Polgar, JER 31: 229–58; Polgar, "Standard Bearers of Liberty and Equality," chaps. 2–4; Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, esp. 113–21, 130–59; Christopher Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* (Kent, Ohio, 2014); Sarah Levine-Gronningsater, "Delivering Freedom: Gradual Emancipation, Black Legal Culture, and the Origins of Sectional Crisis in New York, 1759–1870" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2014), chaps. 1–3. Scholarship on black Pennsylvanians' antislavery activism, meanwhile, tends to note their limited collaborations with the PAS without recognizing their connections to the PMS, thus neglecting important source material. See for example Nash, *Forging Freedom*; Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (Oxford, 2002); Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008).

¹³ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 187–88; Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty*, 110; Larry E. Tise, *The American Counterrevolution: A Retreat from Liberty, 1783–1800* (Mechanicsburg,

Reflecting a broader historiographical trend of “racial consensus history,” many scholars overstate the role of racism and exaggerate the extent to which the Constitution and Congress served the wishes of slaveholders in the early Republic, undervaluing the political influence of black activism in the process.¹⁴ Although Congress dismissed the 1797 petition, they did so based on legal technicalities rather than ideas about race. More significantly, in 1800 the House of Representatives formally recognized free African Americans’ right to petition the federal government and then answered one of the petitioners’ requests by passing the Slave Trade Act of 1800, which strengthened a 1794 ban on American involvement in the slave trade to foreign markets. Moreover, although the black petitioners did not achieve their goal of repealing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, their congressional sympathizers defended the idea of black citizenship and thwarted other efforts by slaveholders both to strengthen the Fugitive Slave Act and to further enlist the federal government in support of slavery. Nationwide emancipation and equal rights may have been out of reach, but black and white activists achieved important victories against slaveholders’ efforts to reverse the era’s limited antislavery gains.

THE 1797 PETITION FROM THE NORTH CAROLINA FREEDMEN represented the culmination of an interregional, intergenerational, and interracial saga

Pa., 1998), 522–23, 525–26; Winch, *Gentleman of Color*, xvii, 104; Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 140; Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (New York, 2016), 400.

¹⁴ James Oakes, “Conflict vs. Racial Consensus in the History of Antislavery Politics,” in *Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation*, ed. John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason (Charlottesville, Va., 2011), 291–303 (quotation, 297). Scholars such as Gary B. Nash and Larry E. Tise portray the American Revolution as a missed opportunity for egalitarian reform that quickly gave way to racism and proslavery; Nash, *Race and Revolution*; Tise, *American Counterrevolution*. Some scholars have rejected the missed opportunity component of this view, arguing that the revolution had been predicated in part on racial exclusion and the preservation of slavery from the beginning; see Taylor, *American Revolutions*, esp. 117–19, 470–72; David J. Silverman, “Racial Walls: Race and the Emergence of American White Nationalism,” in *Anglicizing America: Empire, Revolution, Republic*, ed. Ignacio Gallup-Díaz, Andrew Shankman, and Silverman (Philadelphia, 2015), 181–204; Robert G. Parkinson, *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2016), esp. 662–69. Parkinson is among the most nuanced of those focused on racism, emphasizing the expediency of racialized rhetoric rather than the hegemony of racist ideology. Other scholars acknowledge the ways the revolution and the Constitution protected slavery while also highlighting political and social opposition to slavery; see Christopher Leslie Brown, “The Problems of Slavery,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, ed. Edward G. Gray and Jane Kamensky (New York, 2013), 427–46; Mason, “A Missed Opportunity? The Founding, Postcolonial Realities, and the Abolition of Slavery,” *Slavery and Abolition* 35, no. 2 (2014): 199–213; Mason, “Necessary but Not Sufficient: Revolutionary Ideology and Antislavery Action in the Early Republic,” in Hammond and Mason, *Contesting Slavery*, 11–31; Hammond, “Uncontrollable Necessity: The Local Politics, Geopolitics, and Sectional Politics of Slavery Expansion,” *ibid.*, 138–60; Oakes, “Conflict vs. Racial Consensus,” *ibid.*, 291–303.

that began with the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Quakers (PYM) turning against slavery during the 1750s. Thomas Nicholson, a repentant slaveholder, encouraged other delegates at the North Carolina Yearly Meeting (NCYM) to follow the antislavery lead of northern Friends, and in 1755 the North Carolina Quakers registered their approval of the PYM's 1754 *Epistle of Caution and Advice, concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves*.¹⁵ In 1757 Nicholson attended the PYM and met with John Woolman, Anthony Benezet, and other antislavery members of the Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings and then helped establish the North Carolina Standing Committee, modeled after the PMS. The following year, the PYM forbade slave trading and advised "such Friends as have any Slaves to sett them at Liberty," while the NCYM admonished slaveholding members to treat their laborers well and established a series of worship meetings for slaves.¹⁶

Nicholson continued promoting antislavery reform during subsequent decades. Black resistance had long informed Quaker antislavery, and in 1767 Nicholson asked how pacifistic Quakers should respond "if our own negroes should ever be concerned in rising."¹⁷ Beginning in 1771, he also helped turn the NCSC in a publicly antislavery direction, distributing copies of Benezet's antislavery writings and petitioning the legislature to end the slave trade and liberalize manumission laws.¹⁸ The following year the NCYM

¹⁵ North Carolina Yearly Meeting Minutes (NCYM) Minutes, Oct. 10, 1755, 1: 55, Guilford College (GC), Greensboro, N.C.; Society of Friends, *An Epistle of Caution and Advice, concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves* (Philadelphia, 1754); PMS Minutes, Sept. 19, 1757, 1: 99, Haverford College Quaker and Special Collections Library (HC), Haverford, Pa.; NCYM Minutes, Oct. 16, 1757, 1: 63, GC. On the PYM's turn against slavery, see Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 56–58; James, *A People among Peoples*, 216–39; Jack D. Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748–1783* (Philadelphia, 1984), esp. 111–28, 274–76; Carey, *From Peace to Freedom*, 182–95; A. Glenn Crothers, *Quakers Living in the Lion's Mouth: The Society of Friends in Northern Virginia, 1730–1865* (Gainesville, Fla., 2012), esp. 29–63.

¹⁶ PYM Minutes, Sept. 29, 1758, 3: 121, HC (quotation); NCYM Minutes, Oct. 14, 1758, 1: 66, GC. On North Carolina Quakers and manumissions, see also Hiram H. Hilty, *Toward Freedom for All: North Carolina Quakers and Slavery* (Richmond, Ind., 1984); Katherine Dundy, "A Friend in Deed: Quakers and Manumission in Perquimans County, North Carolina, 1775–1800," *Southern Friend* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 3–36; Larry E. Tise, "Taking Up' Quaker Slaves: The Origins of America's Slavery Imperative," in *Varieties of Southern Religious History: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Mathews*, ed. Regina D. Sullivan and Monte Harrell Hampton (Columbia, S.C., 2015), 35–50.

¹⁷ Thomas Nicholson, "To any judicious and enquiring Friend," June 1, 1767, Society Miscellaneous Collection, box 11A-B, HSP, repr. in Crawford, *Having of Negroes*, 73–75 (quotation, 74). For earlier examples of Quaker antislavery reflecting black resistance, see "Cadwalader Morgan," 1696, in J. William Frost, ed., *The Quaker Origins of Antislavery* (Norwood, Pa., 1980), 70; "London Yearly Mee[t]ing, Epistles Received: Epistle from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1714," *ibid.*, 76. See also Nicholas P. Wood and Jean R. Soderlund, "To Friends and All Whom It May Concerne': William Southeby's Rediscovered 1696 Antislavery Protest," *PMHB* (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Thomas Nicholson to [Israel Pemberton Jr.], Nov. 7, 1771, Society Collection, HSP; North Carolina Yearly Meeting [Eastern] Standing Committee Minutes (NCSC Minutes), 1759–1823, July 11, 1772, 7–10, Sept. 25, 1773, 17–18, Apr. 16, 1774, 22–23,

forbade slave trading but resisted calls for emancipation. In addition to slaveholders' self-interest, Nicholson recognized a legal obstacle: "by setting them [slaves] free, contrary to the law of the Country, we might open a door for a more cruel Bondage, to be Intailed upon them."¹⁹ His correspondents in Philadelphia encouraged the North Carolinian reformers to persist in their antislavery efforts "without fearing consequences," trusting in God for aid.²⁰

The year 1776 proved an important milestone in Quaker antislavery efforts, though for reasons only indirectly connected to the Declaration of Independence. As pacifists, Friends generally opposed the War for Independence and dismissed patriots' natural rights rhetoric as cynical propaganda. But PMS members described the war as the "dispensations of Divine Providence" and increased their preexisting efforts against slavery in response.²¹ In September 1776 a delegation from the NCSC visited with PMS members and attended the PYM. They were present when the PYM established the policy of disowning members who still refused to free their adult slaves, and this action may have inspired them to take further action at home. In October 1776 the NCYM instructed its members who owned slaves to "cleanse their Hands of them as soon as they Possibly can," despite the law restricting manumissions. This yearly meeting also instructed its standing committee to aid any freedpeople who faced enslavement and to cover "any expence that may arise on their accounts."²² Such assistance was soon necessary. In May 1777 the NCSC learned that some freedpeople had been apprehended by the county authorities "to make sale of them." The Quakers issued a public statement defending slave manumission and hired lawyers "on behalf of the Negroes."²³ The lawyers did not come cheap, for they claimed that defending Quakers and their former slaves would "set the whole country upon their backs."²⁴

Although the North Carolina Quakers had knowingly violated the ban on private manumissions, subsequent developments opened a potential loophole that their high-priced lawyers tried to exploit. North Carolina had adopted a new state constitution in December 1776. Nothing in the

June 25, 1774, 24–26, May 24, 1775, 29–30, GC. The Quakers later established separate standing committees for the eastern and western parts of North Carolina; throughout this article I refer to the eastern one, which encompassed the area most affected by the manumission and enslavement controversies.

¹⁹ Crawford, *Having of Negroes*, 84–86 (quotation, 86).

²⁰ PYM epistle to NCYM, draft, Oct. 1, 1774, PYM Miscellaneous Papers, HC (quotation). See also the PYM epistles from 1771, 1772, 1773, and 1775, *ibid.*

²¹ *The Ancient Testimony and Principles of the People called Quakers*. . . ([Philadelphia, 1776]), 2 (quotation); Marietta, *Reformation of American Quakerism*, 222–76.

²² NCYM Minutes, Oct. 28, 1776, 1: 148, GC, extract repr. in Crawford, *Having of Negroes*, 92–97 ("cleanse," 92, "expence," 93).

²³ NCSC Minutes, May 20, 1777, 31 ("make sale"), June 7, 1777, 34 ("on behalf"), GC.

²⁴ Thomas Nicholson to Israel Pemberton Jr., Nov. 24, 1778, Pemberton Family Papers (PFP), vol. 32, HSP.

new constitution challenged slavery, but it ended government support for the Anglican Church, which had previously received the proceeds from selling reenslaved black people under the colonial law. When the new General Assembly met for the first time in April 1777, they had quickly passed “An Act to prevent domestic Insurrections,” modifying the 1741 law and using the proceeds of the slave sales to “defray the contingent Charges of the Government.” In court, the Quakers’ lawyers argued that the colonial law had been rendered “void” by the “Declaration of Independency.” Moreover, the state’s disestablishment of the Anglican Church meant “there was [*sic*] now no church wardens to sell them [the black people] and apply the money.” Finally, imposing the new 1777 law on bondspople whom Quakers had liberated before its passage would violate the state constitution’s ban on “retrospect[ive]” laws. However, courts in both Perquimans and Pasquotank Counties, where most Quaker slave owners lived, rejected such reasoning and ordered “the Negroes to be sold.”²⁵ North Carolina Friends soon appealed the cases of their forty-six former slaves whom the courts had condemned, and their lawyers won an important victory in the state superior court in November 1778, though it proved only temporary. Judge James Iredell issued a ruling voiding the previous court-ordered slave sales. The next month the legislature nullified Iredell’s ruling by passing a law confirming the title to all slaves who had already been manumitted and then reenslaved.²⁶ (Even if Iredell’s ruling had stood, it would not have permitted future manumissions; it only recognized those enacted during the eight months between the Declaration of Independence and the new state ban of April 1777.) During the next two decades, the North Carolina Quakers presented at least ten petitions asking the state legislature to permit private manumissions.²⁷ Throughout this time members of the PMS corresponded with the North Carolina activists and joined some of their lobbying trips.²⁸

In conscious violation of state law, North Carolina Quakers continued liberating their slaves when they reached adulthood, including the four men who would petition Congress in 1797. The four petitioners came from the northeastern counties of Perquimans and Pasquotank,

²⁵ Crawford, *Having of Negroes*, 111–12 (“Act,” 111, “defray,” 112), 63–64 (“void,” 64), 114–16 (“church wardens,” 114, “retrospect[ive],” 115, “Negroes,” 116).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93–94, 123–27.

²⁷ The petitions from the NCYM and NCSC to the North Carolina legislature date from 1779, 1782, 1783, 1785, 1787, 1793, 1794, 1795, 1796, and 1797. Most are available in the NCSC Minutes at Guilford College and through the microfilm and online database versions of the *Race and Slavery Petitions Project*, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, ed. Loren Schwenger, <http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/>, accessed Oct. 21, 2015.

²⁸ There is a large body of correspondence about the North Carolina re-enslavements between Thomas Nicholson, Edward Stabler (a Virginia Quaker), John Parrish, and the Pemberton brothers (Israel, James, and John) in the Pemberton Family Papers and the Cox-Parrish-Wharton Papers at the HSP.

and they were likely connected by kinship as well as the black worship meetings established by the NCYM. Three of these manumissions had initially been signed during the brief period covered by Judge Iredell's ruling, but they were all delayed manumissions that did not go into effect until the enslaved children turned twenty-one. The fourth manumission, for Thomas Pritchett, was signed and executed after 1777. Thus all four bondsmen received their freedom at a time when neither North Carolina's legislature nor its judiciary would recognize their liberty. In each case, their former masters or other Quakers sought to protect them from reenslavement. Their personal narratives demonstrate the precarious nature of black liberty, while also hinting at the interracial networks that helped them escape to Philadelphia.²⁹

Jupiter Nicholson, the former slave of Thomas Nicholson (who had died in 1781), seems to have been the first to settle in Philadelphia. Following his liberation in 1786, he worked as "a seaman in the service of" Zachariah Nixon, an active member of the NCSC who frequently visited Philadelphia, supplying Quakers there with copies of the manumissions for North Carolina freedpeople. Jupiter may have accompanied Nixon on religious or commercial trips to the northern port and then reported tales of the city's large free black community to his friends and relatives in Perquimans County. Around 1788, during one of Jupiter's stays in North Carolina, "men with dog[s] and arms" tried reenslaving him. He and his wife escaped to Virginia, where they resided for about four years. Manumissions were legal in Virginia, but black freedom was still fragile there; in the 1780s the Virginia Meeting for Sufferings repeatedly aided black North Carolinians who had been arrested as alleged fugitives. In search of greater safety, Jupiter and his wife made their way to Philadelphia around 1792. Like many other black laborers in the port city, Jupiter found employment "at times by water, working along shore, or sawing wood."³⁰ He was later joined in Philadelphia by Jacob Nicholson, a possible relative who had been liberated by another member of the Quaker Nicholsons in 1791, fled north a few years after that, and would sign the 1797 petition alongside Jupiter.³¹

²⁹ Copies of the manumissions for the 1797 petitioners have escaped the notice of previous scholars but are preserved, like those of many others from North Carolina and elsewhere, in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society records at the HSP and cited in 118–19 nn. 30–33 below. The manumissions allow us to fill in dates and details absent from the 1797 petition.

³⁰ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 2016 (quotations); Thomas Nicholson, manumission of Jupiter [Nicholson], Perquimans County, N.C., Jan. 31, 1776 (effective Jan. 22, 1786), Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) manumission book B, 63, PASP, HSP. On the arrest of black North Carolinians in Virginia, see NCSC Minutes, Aug. 30, 1784, 62, Nov. 29, 1784, 63–64, Dec. 31, 1785, 66–67, GC. Many of the North Carolina manumissions recorded in the PASP were certified by Nixon, whose name is rendered Zachery Nickson in the petition.

³¹ Joseph Nicholson, manumission of Jacob [Nicholson], Perquimans County, N.C., Feb. 19, 1777 (effective January 1792), PAS manumission book B, 4–5, PASP, HSP.

Job Albert, the eldest of the petitioners, had received his liberation from Benjamin Albertson, another member of the NCSC, in 1782. Albert married a freedwoman named Rose and spent several years earning wages from his former master. But eventually white men armed with “guns, swords, and pistols, accompanied with mastiff dogs” captured and jailed him. He managed to escape “by the assistance of a fellow-prisoner (a white man),” and then a “humane person” secretly transported Albert and his wife to Virginia. The rough draft of the petition reveals the humane person was Caleb Trueblood, the standing committee activist who had freed Moses Gordon in 1777. Perhaps Trueblood introduced the Alberts to members of the Virginia Meeting for Sufferings who could help provide protection and employment. In any case, the Alberts left Virginia after about four years and settled in Philadelphia. It is possible that Rose had visited the city before; her former master, William Robertson, had led the delegation of North Carolina Friends who attended the PYM in 1776 and might have brought her along as a servant. After the Alberts arrived in Philadelphia, around 1794, Job found employment sawing wood and working the docks, likely with Jupiter, whom he may have known since childhood.³²

Pritchard, apparently freed by Thomas Pritchard in 1783, also arrived in Philadelphia around 1794. He initially remained in North Carolina raising corn on land that Pritchard had granted him and his wife. But then a man named Holland Lockwood married Pritchard’s widow and tried to reenslave Pritchard. In August 1793, Pritchard fled to Virginia and then boarded a ship and ended up in New York City. He spent several months working as a waiter and apparently learned that his wife and son had also run away from Lockwood. Pritchard returned to Virginia, hoping to find them but instead discovered that Lockwood was advertising him as a runaway in Virginia newspapers. To avoid recapture, Pritchard returned to the North, settling in Philadelphia and working again as a waiter.³³

All four petitioners reported leaving family members behind, and the NCSC later compiled a list of 134 black men, women, and children who had been reenslaved, including probable relatives of the petitioners. For example, Albertson’s former slave Abraham was “carried to South Carolina

³² For the rough draft of the 1797 petition, see “Representn of Black People from No Carolina to Congress 1801,” PMS Misc. Papers, 1801, 24, HC (quotations). (The label, with the mistaken year, is in the handwriting of Henry Drinker, who apparently mislabeled it during his later service as PMS clerk, confusing it with a draft of another petition—discussed on p. 142—that was written during Thomas Jefferson’s presidency but never submitted.) “Petition of the Free Blacks,” [1801?], CPW, box 15, folder 53, HSP. Benjamin Albertson, manumission of Job [Albert], Perquimans County, N.C., Nov. 1, 1776 (effective July 27, 1782), PAS manumission book B, 108–9, PASP, HSP.

³³ Thomas Richard [Pritchard?], manumission of Thomas, Pasquotank County, N.C., Jan. 16, 1783 (effective Aug. 1, 1783), PAS manumission book N, 118, PASP, HSP; *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 2017; “20 Dollar Reward,” [Norfolk] *Virginia Chronicle and General Advertiser*, Apr. 11, 1794, [1].

from his wife and three children,” who may have included Albert.³⁴ Yet unknown numbers of black North Carolinians avoided this fate and made their way to areas of relative safety such as Philadelphia, sometimes with family members. Once there, they likely reunited with old acquaintances and found new Quaker allies.

WHEN THE BLACK REFUGEES FROM NORTH CAROLINA reached Philadelphia, they would have found a city that included plenty of white racists, slave catchers, and kidnappers but also economic opportunities and close ties between free people of color and antislavery activists, especially Quakers.³⁵ In the 1750s, Anthony Benezet began instructing black people in his home, and Philadelphia Quakers opened a formal Negro School for free and enslaved students in 1770. Early supporters of the school included active Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings members such as Nicholas Waln and John Pemberton.³⁶ In 1787, when former slaves led by Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and William Gray established the Free African Society (FAS), they turned to Quakers for support. Quakers helped draft the society’s constitution, and the FAS members unanimously chose Joseph Clark, a white Quaker teacher and Pennsylvania Abolition Society member, as their first clerk and treasurer. In 1788, when the group became too large to meet in Allen’s home, they began meeting in the Quakers’ Negro School.³⁷ Thus although black and white activist associations were essentially segregated, they routinely worked together.

Interracial collaborations at the local level soon bore fruit, as in 1790 when members of the FAS, the PAS, and the PMS successfully petitioned the city government to grant use of Potter’s Field “for the burial of black

³⁴ Parrish, *Remarks on Slavery*, 59.

³⁵ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, esp. 100–110, 134–71; Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 99–166; Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780–1865* (Lexington, Ky., 1994); Dee E. Andrews, “Reconsidering the First Emancipation: Evidence from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society Correspondence, 1785–1810,” *Pennsylvania History* 64 (Summer 1997): 230–49; Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 60–85; Newman, “‘Lucky to be born in Pennsylvania’: Free Soil, Fugitive Slaves, and the Making of Pennsylvania’s Anti-Slavery Borderland,” *Slavery and Abolition* 32, no. 3 (September 2011): 413–30; Polgar, “Standard Bearers of Liberty and Equality,” 72–80, 126–42.

³⁶ For Benezet, see Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 29–31, 202–3. For early supporters, see “Minutes of the Committees appointed by the Three Monthly Meetings of Friends of Philadelphia, to the Oversight and care of the School for Educating Africans and their Descendants, Philadelphia Monthly Meeting Records,” Philadelphia Monthly Meeting Negro School Minutes (NSM), vol. 1, Feb. 23, 1770, 1–2, Mar. 30, 1770, 2–4, Feb. 3, 1773, 23, Mar. 6, 1773, 23, HC. On the Negro School, see James, *A People among Peoples*, 294–95; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 98–113, 130–33.

³⁷ W[illiam] Douglass, ed., *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1862), 15–18, 32–33, 39, 44, 121. Anthony Benezet had recommended Joseph Clark as his successor at the Negro School, but Clark had declined; see NSM, vol. 1, May 8, 1784, 68, HC.

persons.” The FAS also established a committee that year to cooperate with the PAS’s committees on black uplift and protection. By 1792 the FAS had appointed its first black clerk, John Emory, and had begun meeting at the home of James “Oronoko” Dexter, a former slave.³⁸ On one level, these developments represented the group’s growing autonomy, but they still collaborated closely with white abolitionists. When Dexter hosted FAS meetings, he may have served some of the beer he brewed and bottled as part of his work in the Pemberton household. Dexter’s connection to Quaker activists was likely one of the factors that made him such an effective fundraiser after FAS members decided to establish an independent black church in 1792.³⁹ In 1794 Jones opened the St. Thomas African Episcopal Church while Allen, who had parted ways with the FAS, opened the Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Quakers and other abolitionists such as Benjamin Rush celebrated and supported the creation of these religious institutions, believing they would help uplift the black community.⁴⁰ The next year, a PAS committee found exactly that. They visited 381 black families, reporting that the majority “conduct [themselves] reputable and live comfortably, and some of them are very worthy Citizens.”⁴¹ Although these visits were undoubtedly characterized by a level of paternalistic condescension, they increased connections between white abolitionists and the black community.

Interracial support networks as well as independent black institutions made Philadelphia an attractive destination for black freedpeople and fugitives. Black churches, as sites of activism, were especially important for integrating former slaves into the community. For example, Jupiter Gibson, another exile from North Carolina, became a trustee of Mother Bethel. He also worked with the PAS at times, as when they hired him in 1795 to house some black Jamaicans who had been manumitted by an English Quaker.⁴² Gibson was later involved in the proceedings that

³⁸ Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church*, 34 (“burial”), 33, 39, 48; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 98–104.

³⁹ John Pemberton and James Pemberton frequently referred to James “Noque” [Oronoke/Oronokoo] Dexter in their correspondence; for a reference to his brewing, see James Pemberton to John Pemberton, Sept. 5, 1786, PFP, vol. 46, HSP. For more on Dexter, see Richard S. Newman, Roy E. Finkenbine, and Douglass Mooney, eds., “Philadelphia Emigrationist Petition, circa 1792: An Introduction,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 161–66, esp. 163–64. For Dexter as a fundraiser, see St. Thomas Receipts and Expenditures, 1791–1842, 20, AECST.

⁴⁰ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 109–10; Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 145–49; Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 58–73.

⁴¹ PAS Committee for Improving the Condition of the Free Blacks (PAS–CICFB) Minutes, 1790–1803, Dec. 1, 1795, III, PASP, HSP.

⁴² For becoming a trustee, see Richard Allen, *Articles of Association of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, of the City of Philadelphia, in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1799), 14. For Gibson’s work with the PAS, see “Minutes of the

culminated with the first black petition to Congress, and it is likely that he, along with other church leaders such as Jones and Allen, routinely welcomed North Carolina refugees into the community and introduced them to trustworthy white allies.

Among white activists, John Parrish of the PMS proved the most dedicated to helping the former slaves gain a political voice.⁴³ Born in 1729 and apprenticed as a bricklayer after being orphaned, Parrish was of a distinctly lower status than most members, but he nonetheless became a prominent Quaker minister and activist. Parrish traced his turn against slavery to his perception—common among Quakers—that the destruction of the Seven Years' War indicated divine wrath, but personal experience also inspired his zeal. According to family tradition, Parrish's antislavery spirit was awakened as a young man while employed building a house for the governor of Maryland. The shrieks of an enslaved woman being flogged by an overseer aroused his Quaker sense of morality to the point where he forgot his Quaker commitment to pacifism. When the overseer refused to release the woman, the two men did "battle . . . in which the persecutor was vanquished and the woman set at liberty." (Parrish was fired the next day.) Parrish emerged as one of Philadelphia's leading activists on behalf of both African Americans and Native Americans; he was appointed to the PMS in 1772 and became an overseer at the Negro School the following year.⁴⁴ Even within these two organizations—which represented the vanguard of Quakers' support for racial justice—Parrish's commitment to black activism was unusual. His later collaborations with black petitioners occurred through PMS networks but proved too controversial for the group to formally endorse.

The black Philadelphians with whom Parrish interacted likely helped preserve his undiminished antislavery zeal. The most influential was

Proceedings of the Committee Appointed by the Committee of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. . . ." Sept. 24, 1795, 36–38, PASP, HSP. I thank Jean Soderlund for alerting me to the existence of this minute book, which is not included in the microfilmed PASP, and Steve Smith of the HSP for tracking it down, as it had not been cataloged or used by previous researchers. For the broader significance of black churches, see Nash, *Forging Freedom*, esp. 112–44; Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*.

⁴³ Parrish reprinted the two early black petitions and other relevant documents in the appendix of Parrish, *Remarks on Slavery*, published in 1806, a year before his death. Many scholars have drawn on this pamphlet, but very little has been written about him as an activist. Richard Newman describes Parrish as "one of the most underrated Quaker abolitionists of the early national period." Newman, "John Parrish, 'Notes on Abolition' (circa 1805)," Quakers and Slavery Project, http://trilogy.brynmawr.edu/speccoll/quakersandslavery/commentary/people/parrish_john.php, accessed Nov. 2, 2015. Jayne Ellen Ptolemy discusses some of Parrish's involvement with African Americans and Native Americans in Ptolemy, "Our native soil: Philadelphian Quakers and Geographies of Race, 1780–1838" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2013), esp. 34–35, 44–59. Neither Newman nor Ptolemy connects Parrish to the black petitioners from 1797 or 1799.

⁴⁴ "Sketches of Friends, Historical, Biographical and Anecdotal," *Friends' Intelligencer* 27 (Apr. 30, 1870), 129–32 (quotation, 130); PMS Minutes, Feb. 20, 1772, 1: 361, HC; NSM, vol. 1, Feb. 3, 1773, 23, HC; Parrish, *Remarks on Slavery*, [1].

perhaps Cato Collins, a former slave who began working for Parrish during the 1790s after the aging Quaker switched from bricklaying to brush making. Collins had been freed in 1784 at age twelve, and the PAS had registered his indenture to another Quaker before he entered Parrish's service. Already able to sign his name while enslaved, Collins received further education as part of his indenture, likely at the Negro School. During his later employment, he handled the brush making and business correspondence whenever Parrish was out of town. He attended the worship meetings that Quakers held for black Philadelphians and also rose in the ranks of the congregation at St. Thomas, eventually serving as a lay reader following the Reverend Jones's death.⁴⁵ Collins clearly helped link the white and black branches of Philadelphia's antislavery movement, although the vast majority of his face-to-face interactions with black and white activists left little documentary evidence.⁴⁶ The Friends, by contrast, preserved vast archives of meeting minutes and rough drafts, allowing Parrish's involvement with the black petitioners to be traced more clearly.

Parrish had taken a special interest in the plight of black North Carolinians by 1779, when he lobbied the Continental Congress on the "sorrowful subject" before traveling south and joining North Carolina Quakers lobbying their state legislature.⁴⁷ In 1790, he and his frequent collaborator, Warner Mifflin of Delaware, lobbied the first federal Congress in support of three antislavery petitions presented by the PMS, the PAS, and the New York Yearly Meeting. They pressed congressmen to address the "hard Case of the poor Blacks in No. Carolina, who were set free & by an ex post facto Law have been again brot into a cruel Bondage."⁴⁸ Although Congress declined to intervene, the abolitionists found an important ally in representative George Thatcher of Massachusetts.⁴⁹ In 1791, after the

⁴⁵ "Cato Collins," obituary, *Friends' Intelligencer* 37 (Nov. 29, 1856), 581–82; Indenture of Cato Collings to Thomas Paschall, Sept. 18, 1784, Philadelphia House of Employment Indenture Papers, PASP, HSP; Cato Collings to John Parrish (care of Joseph James in New York), June 24, 1798, CPW, box 1, folder 25, HSP; Cato Collins to Joseph Handling & Co, Oct. 10, 1804, CPW, box 10, folder 2, HSP. By 1804 Collins was a trustee of the church's day school, and in 1818 he became a lay reader. Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church*, 111, 123; St. Thomas Minutes of Vestry Meetings, 1813–21, 38, AECST.

⁴⁶ Other correspondence from black activists to John Parrish also indicates a familiarity based on face-to-face interactions; see Quomony Clarkson to John Parrish, Mar. 13, 1806, CPW, box 2, folder 7, HSP.

⁴⁷ James Pemberton to Thomas Nicholson, Sept. 10, 1779, PFP, vol. 33, HSP (quotation); NCSC Minutes, Oct. 25, 1779, 43, GC.

⁴⁸ "Friends Remarks to the Committee of Congress," New York, February 1790, PFP, vol. 53, HSP (quotation). On Mifflin, who rivaled Parrish in terms of political antislavery activism, see Gary B. Nash, "Warner Mifflin (1745–98): The Remarkable Life of an Unflinching Abolitionist," in *Quakers and Their Allies in the Abolitionist Cause, 1754–1808*, ed. Maurice Jackson and Susan Kozel (London, 2015), 9–28; Nash, *Warner Mifflin: Unflinching Quaker Abolitionist* (Philadelphia, forthcoming).

⁴⁹ George Thatcher proved the key congressional ally of the black petitioners in 1797. In 1790, Warner Mifflin described him as "a perticular friend of mine and friendly

North Carolina Standing Committee asked the PMS for advice, Parrish suggested that black North Carolina refugees petition Congress themselves. He wrote, "A thought has occurred whether if some of the most senseablest of those set free who may have escaped the hands of such men of Violence, were assisted by such Friends who deeply feel for those unhappy people— Were to prepare a remonstrance to the Supreme Legislature of America accompanied by 4 or 6 of the free Blacks that had escaped."⁵⁰ However, the other PMS members apparently viewed this suggestion as too bold. The final draft of their reply simply encouraged the North Carolinians to continue petitioning their state legislature and to compile information about specific cases of reenslavement.⁵¹

Parrish nonetheless continued his efforts to help African Americans, including his correspondent Benjamin Banneker, speak with their own political voices. Beginning in 1791, Philadelphia Quakers had helped distribute Banneker's almanac and a public letter he had sent to Thomas Jefferson touting African Americans' capacity for mental improvement. Parrish also encouraged Banneker to write a "Respectfull Address" to Congress "on behalf of such as are in Slavery & such that may be subjected to that."⁵² Parrish's letter draft is undated and his proposal apparently never came to fruition, but it further illustrates his support for black activism. In another undated document, probably from 1793 or 1794, Parrish helped black Philadelphians draft what would have been their first petition to Congress, although it was never submitted. Inspired partly by Britain's Sierra Leone colony for black loyalists, the petition requested Congress to promote "gradual Emansipation" and "prepare an Assalem for such as may incline who are free, to resort, similar to the one prepared by the British." The fifty-five names on the petition—including Allen, Jones, Gray, Dexter, and Collins—are in the form of a list rather than signatures or marks, suggesting that they were individuals whom Parrish and his collaborators

to this business." Mifflin to Henry Drinker, June 3, 1790, Vaux Family Papers, box 2, HC. On the 1790 lobbying, see William C. diGiacomantonio, "For the Gratification of a Volunteering Society': Antislavery and Pressure Group Politics in the First Federal Congress," *JER* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 169–97.

⁵⁰ PMS to NCSC, undated draft, PMS Misc. Papers, 1790, 18, HC (quotation). Although undated and filed with materials from 1790, the other parts of the letter (discussing a militia bill in Congress and Isaac Collins's plan to publish Bibles) make clear that it is an initial draft of the letter from Mar. 17, 1791, which Parrish had been assigned to write: PMS Minutes, Feb. 17, 1791, 3: 151–52, HC.

⁵¹ For the PMS's reply, see PMS to NCSC, PMS Minutes, Mar. 17, 1791, 3: 156–58, HC; NCSC Minutes, May 27, 1791, 78–80, GC.

⁵² [John Parrish] to Benjamin Banneker, John Parrish Ledger Book A, CPW, box 19, HSP (quotations); this scrap is tucked in at page 62, where Parrish entered accounts with Charles Marshall dated from 1787 to 1794. Although only one letter from Banneker to Parrish survives, its tone suggests they were well acquainted: see B[enjamin] Banneker to John Parrish, Dec. 22, 1795, CPW, box 1, folder 19, HSP. For Banneker, see Kaplan and Kaplan, *Black Presence*, 137–51.

expected to endorse the petition. This list is not in Parrish's handwriting, although the rest of the petition is, indicating that he was working with at least one partner, though with whom is not known. The black activists may have asked for Parrish's aid following the passage of the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act.⁵³ In any case, the petition was never submitted, and Parrish's later collaborations with black activists focused on asserting their rights within the nation rather than promoting black emigration. And in a fitting extension of his decades-long commitment to black causes, he actively supported the black petitioners in 1797 and 1799.

THE ADDRESS FROM JACOB NICHOLSON and his co-petitioners to Congress in 1797 reflected their aspirations for political influence as well as their sense of vulnerability. White reactions to slave insurrections in Saint Domingue and other parts of the West Indies had exacerbated racial tensions throughout the United States.⁵⁴ In 1795, a new North Carolina law forbade the importation or immigration of West Indian slaves or free people of color while further encouraging the reenslavement of black freedpeople.⁵⁵ In what was clearly a coordinated effort, seven grand juries soon complained that Quakers harbored fugitive slaves "in the most flagrant and open manner" and warned that the danger was "greatly augmented by shoals of mulattoes, emigrating from the West-Indies."⁵⁶ Facing such hostility, freedpeople moved north in rising numbers. Whereas Quakers such as Caleb Trueblood had long been providing ad hoc aid to individual freedpeople relocating to Philadelphia, by the start of 1796 the North Carolina Standing Committee was formally reimbursing members for the expense of "forwarding some manumitted Negroes to the Northward."⁵⁷ Yet even in

⁵³ For the petition, see "anonymous," CPW, box 9, folder 7, HSP (quotations), repr. with an introduction in Newman, Finkenbine, and Mooney, *WMQ* 64: 161–66, esp. 165–66. Historians have not realized that it was drafted in Parrish's handwriting (and has his poor spelling). I quote from the original manuscript as the published transcript misprints "may incline" as "may meline"; Parrish often failed to dot his "i"s. *Ibid.*, 165.

⁵⁴ On American slaveholders' reactions to the Haitian Revolution, see Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, La., 2008), esp. 41–44; Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 417–22. The 1790s also saw an influx of emigrants of color (free and enslaved) from the French West Indies into Philadelphia, increasing racial tensions there and rendering abolitionism less popular. James Alexander Dun, "Philadelphia not Philanthropolis: The Limits of Pennsylvanian Antislavery in the Era of the Haitian Revolution," *PMHB* 135, no. 1 (January 2011): 73–102; Dun, *Dangerous Neighbors: Making the Haitian Revolution in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2016).

⁵⁵ "An act to prevent any person who may emigrate from any of the West India or Bahama islands. . . ." 1795, in *Laws of the State of North-Carolina. . .* (Raleigh, N.C., 1821), 1: 786–88.

⁵⁶ "State of N. Carolina, Edenton District, April term, '96," [Edenton] *State Gazette of North-Carolina*, June 16, 1796, [4].

⁵⁷ NCSC Minutes, Jan. 29, 1796, 113–14, GC.

Philadelphia freedpeople remained susceptible to reenslavement under the Fugitive Slave Act.

In 1795, the capture of Moses Gordon inspired an antislavery response in Philadelphia and a proslavery one in North Carolina. After William Skinner's agent apprehended the fugitive, Gordon was defended by William Rawle, a Quaker lawyer and Pennsylvania Abolition Society officer. Rawle persuaded an alderman to release Gordon because he had been manumitted during the "intermediate space of time" between the Declaration of Independence and the creation of North Carolina's 1777 law restricting manumissions.⁵⁸ But although Skinner found himself frustrated by his "Old Enemies (the Quakers)" in Philadelphia, he had more success in his home state. In November 1796, he warned state legislators that North Carolina Quakers would present another antislavery petition and encouraged them to forcefully oppose the "Diabolical scheme of amencipation."⁵⁹ He must have been gratified when a legislative committee cited the "letters from General Skinner" in their decision to reject the Quakers' petition.⁶⁰ The legislature's intransigence on the issue of manumissions meant that freedpeople faced the continued threat of reenslavement unless they left North Carolina.

In Philadelphia, Quaker activists mobilized to aid the black North Carolinians emigrating there. In September 1796, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting adopted a resolution clarifying that membership in the Society of Friends "is not limited with respect to Nation or Colour."⁶¹ They also instructed the Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings to continue its antislavery efforts with "renewed vigilance and Care."⁶² The latter in turn appointed a committee headed by John Parrish to correspond with Benjamin Albertson Jr. and other North Carolina Quakers, explaining that they planned to petition Congress about "the iniquitous practice of enslaving free men within your State" and requesting specific information that would facilitate their efforts.⁶³

The North Carolina exiles in Philadelphia were organizing themselves as well. On November 2, 1796, they composed a list of sixteen "African people" from North Carolina who "have left our father & mother Brother

⁵⁸ Opinion of William Rawle in regard to Moses Gordon, Nov. 2, 1795, PASP, HSP (quotation). William Rawle had recently stepped down as a vice president of the PAS; see Rawle to PAS, Oct. 5, 1795, PASP, Loose Correspondence Incoming, HSP.

⁵⁹ [Skinner], "Letter to a North Carolina Assemblyman," Nov. 10, 1796, copy, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, box 18.

⁶⁰ "House of Commons," *State Gazette of North-Carolina*, Jan. 5, 1797, [1].

⁶¹ PYM Minutes, Sept. 30, 1796, 4: 333, HC.

⁶² PYM Minutes, Oct. 1, 1796, 4: 338, HC.

⁶³ PMS to NCSC, PYM Minutes, Nov. 17, 1796, 4: 308–9 (quotation, 4: 308), HC; Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings to Exum Newby, Benjamin Albertson, Levi Munden, and Chalkley Albertson, Oct. 21, 1796, PMS Misc. Papers, HC; PMS Minutes, Oct. 20, 1796, 3: 305–7, HC.

& sisters parrents & children & fled to a city of refuge.” Unfortunately, little is known about this document’s creation; it may have represented their sense of insecurity after Gordon was captured again and jailed. The sixteen names include “Job albourdson,” Jacob Nicholson, and “Thomas pritchard,” three of the men who would petition Congress two months later, along with two of their spouses, Hager Nicholson and “Rose albourson.” The list also includes Jupiter Gibson, the Mother Bethel trustee from North Carolina, along with Tobias, Aaron, and Jane Gibson, who may have been family members who had fled with him or arrived subsequently.⁶⁴ Given Jupiter’s participation, it is likely that Richard Allen and perhaps Absalom Jones were also involved.

These black activists soon had the support of white Quakers. On November 6, John Nixon, a North Carolina Quaker visiting Philadelphia, affirmed that he was “personally acquainted” with the refugees and vouched for “their Carracters.”⁶⁵ Given the tradition of activism by North Carolina Quakers, it was only natural that the black refugees looked to Philadelphia Quakers for support as well. By January 1797, the PMS decided—likely at the urging of the black North Carolinians—“that circumstances demanded the exercise of immediate care”; they would support a petition to Congress without waiting for the North Carolina Quakers to supply the requested documentation about the reenslavements.⁶⁶ At that moment Congress was discussing the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act in response to a Delaware petition about kidnapping that Warner Mifflin had instigated. It was, in short, an opportune time for African Americans to intervene in national politics.⁶⁷

Parrish and his colleagues knew that collaborating with these black activists—who were considered fugitive slaves under North Carolina law—was controversial, and the PMS did not openly approve the proceedings. Neither Parrish’s formal committee report nor the PMS’s official correspondence mentioned the black petitioners.⁶⁸ But an excised passage from a draft letter to the NCSC explained that “a few Friends encouraged four blacks from your State who had been liberated & escaped hither to represent to the General Government the grievous situation the Laws of

⁶⁴ “the African people that has asceptd . . . ,” Nov. 2, 1796 (with an addition by John Nixon, Nov. 6, 1796), CPW, box 13, folder 7, HSP (quotations). John Parrish printed a corrected version of the document in Parrish, *Remarks on Slavery*, 65.

⁶⁵ “the African people that has asceptd,” Nov. 2, 1796, CPW, box 13, folder 7, HSP.

⁶⁶ PMS Minutes, Jan. 19, 1797, 3: 311, HC.

⁶⁷ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 18, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 1895–96; Donald L. Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics, 1765–1820* (New York, 1970), 286–87. For Warner Mifflin’s role in instigating the petition from the Delaware legislature to Congress, see Mifflin to Parrish, Feb. 13, 1796, CPW, box 1, folder 21, HSP.

⁶⁸ PMS Minutes, Mar. 16, 1797, 3: 314, HC; PMS to the NCSC, PMS Minutes, July 20, 1797, 3: 317–19, HC.

North Carolina had placed them in.”⁶⁹ It is unclear who else was involved, but Jupiter Nicholson, Job Albert, Jacob Nicholson, and Thomas Pritchett met with Parrish and at least one other person (likely PMS member John Drinker, and perhaps Jones and other local black leaders as well) to draft the petition. The four black North Carolinians signed or marked the final version on January 23, 1797.

The petition combined their personal narratives (and Gordon’s) with arguments about black rights and the illegitimacy of North Carolina law. A revision to the first draft clarified that the “exiles” were not only “late Inhabitants” but also “natives” of North Carolina, thereby highlighting their birthright connection to the nation. Without claiming full citizenship, the petitioners asserted that “we trust we may address you as fellow-men,” and they reminded Congress of “all that has been avowed as essential Principles respecting the extent of human Right to Freedom.” Describing how their conscientious masters had restored their “native Right of freedom,” the petitioners claimed—somewhat inaccurately—that the Superior Court of North Carolina had confirmed the “Validity” of their manumissions but that subsequent legislation had rendered them vulnerable to reenslavement. The petitioners hoped the “supreme Legislative body of a free and enlightened people” would investigate the proceedings of North Carolina, which they deemed a “Stretch of Power” and “a Government defect, if not a direct violation of the declared fundamental principles of the Constitution.” It is unclear whether they meant that North Carolina’s law violated the state’s constitution or that the U.S. Constitution had nullified the state law. In any case, they condemned not only North Carolina law but also the federal Fugitive Slave Act and slavery itself. They believed the “unconditional bondage” (rendered as “unconstitutional bondage” in the printed version) of their “fellows in complexion” was not “less afflicting or deplorable than the situation of Citizens of the United States, captivated & enslaved” by Algerian corsairs.⁷⁰ Just as white Americans assumed the federal government would use diplomacy and military force to protect them from enslavement abroad, the black petitioners implied Congress should intervene domestically against states that enslaved free people of color.

John Swanwick, a Pennsylvania Republican who presented the petition to the House of Representatives a week later, must have known that

⁶⁹ “Rough Essay of a letter to the Standing Committee in No Carolina, 1797,” July 20, 1797, PMS Misc. Papers, HC.

⁷⁰ I cannot conclusively identify the handwriting of the 1797 petition draft. It is clearly not John Parrish’s, but it may have been that of John Drinker, who drafted the 1799 petition. The rough draft of the petition is misfiled as “Representn of Black People from No Carolina to Congress 1801.” PMS Misc. Papers, 1801: 24 (quotations). The manuscript copy of the final, signed petition does not appear to be extant; for the printed version, see *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 2015–18.

it would incite a hostile response from Southerners. He was accustomed to provoking slaveholders' ire; during the recent congressional debates over the Fugitive Slave Act, he had been the leading proponent of revising the law to protect free people of color. A PMS committee had monitored these debates and may have approached Swanwick as a result.⁷¹ He also would have known Jones, at least by reputation; for years Swanwick had served on vestry committees with Jones's former master (who had allowed him to purchase his freedom) at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. It is thus possible that Jones or another black activist gave the petition to Swanwick.⁷²

The House of Representatives divided along sectional lines when responding to the petition. The six northern representatives who spoke all supported referring the petition to a committee, thereby acknowledging black Americans' right of petition. This group included Samuel Sitgreaves, who served as legal counsel for the PAS, and George Thatcher, the Massachusetts Federalist whom Parrish and Mifflin had met during their 1790 antislavery lobbying effort.⁷³ Thatcher argued that the four African Americans—whom he later described as “dark-complexioned citizens”—had an “undoubted right to petition the House” and possessed a just claim for “protection under the power of that House.”⁷⁴ But after additional debate, the representatives dismissed the petition by a vote of fifty to thirty-three, indicating that some Northerners voted with Southerners.⁷⁵

Historians generally characterize the 1797 vote against considering the black North Carolinians' petition as indicating that a congressional majority subscribed to a race-based understanding of the Constitution that denied African Americans the right of petitioning.⁷⁶ However, that

⁷¹ For Swanwick's role in the earlier antislavery debates, see *Annals of Congress*, Dec. 29, 1796, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 1730–34; *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 2, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 1767; *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 18, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 1895–96. For the PAS and PMS's lobbying, see PAS Meeting Minutes, Apr. 4, 1796, 255, Jan. 2, 1797, 270, HSP; PMS Minutes, Jan. 19, 1797, 3: 311, HC.

⁷² For Swanwick's connection to Benjamin Wynkoop, Jones's former master, see Benjamin Dorr, *An Historical Account of Christ Church, Philadelphia, From Its Foundation, A.D. 1695, to A.D. 1841. . . .* (Philadelphia, 1859), 210. I thank Arthur Sudler of the St. Thomas African Episcopal Church for alerting me to this connection.

⁷³ For the comments of John Swanwick and Samuel Sitgreaves of Pennsylvania, George Thatcher and Joseph Varnum of Massachusetts, Ezekiel Gilbert of New York, and Aaron Kitchell of New Jersey, see *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 2018–24. On Sitgreaves's connection to the PAS, see PAS Minutes, Jan. 2, 1796, 254, PASP, HSP.

⁷⁴ *Annals of Congress*, Nov. 30, 1797, 5th Cong., 2d sess., 658 (“dark-complexioned”); *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 2019 (“undoubted”), 2022 (“protection”).

⁷⁵ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 2024. This vote was not a roll call vote, so the sectional breakdown cannot be determined.

⁷⁶ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 187–88; Nash, *Race and Revolution*, 77–78; Tise, *American Counterrevolution*, 522–23; Countryman, *Enjoy the Same Liberty*, 110. For more

interpretation oversimplifies the course of the debate. The PMS more accurately characterized it in their draft letter to the North Carolina Quakers: “the opposition was chiefly grounded on the Constitution not authorizing Congress to interfere with laws of particular states.”⁷⁷ Rather than persuading Congress to endorse a racially exclusive conception of citizenship rights, the slave-state representatives managed to end the discussion by focusing on the petitioners’ ambiguous legal status and arguing that their grievances were judicial rather than legislative matters. None of the seven southern representatives who spoke denied that free African Americans had a right to petition Congress. The representatives from North Carolina argued (not inaccurately) that because their state “did not suffer individuals to emancipate their slaves,” the petitioners remained slaves under state, and thus federal, law. Virginia’s James Madison suggested that it was “a Judicial case, and could obtain its due in a Court of Appeal in that state [North Carolina].” He went on to note, “If they are slaves, the Constitution gives them no hopes of being heard here,” implicitly—if unintentionally—leaving open the possibility that free blacks might well have such “hopes.”⁷⁸

The Southerners’ rhetorical tactics indicate the limits rather than the extent of racism. As Nicholas Guyatt has recently argued, “educated Americans in the early republic found it far harder to be outright racists than we usually imagine.”⁷⁹ At that time the citizenship status of free people of color remained ambiguous and largely under state control. In 1790, a federal law had limited naturalization to “white” foreigners, but Pennsylvania’s state constitutional convention had rejected a similar proposal, leading James Pemberton to celebrate: “a free Black Man is to be put on the footing of a citizen of Pennsylvania.”⁸⁰ Theoretically, any citizen of one state was also a citizen of the United States and enjoyed privileges

balanced accounts, see Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics*, 288–90; Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 139.

⁷⁷ “Rough Essay of a letter to the Standing Committee in No Carolina,” 1797, PMS Misc. Papers, HC.

⁷⁸ For North Carolinian Thomas Blount’s comment, see *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 2019 (“suffer”). For James Madison’s comments, see *ibid.*, 2020 (“Judicial”). For similar arguments of representatives from North Carolina, see James Holland, *ibid.*, 2022; Nathaniel Macon, *ibid.*, 2022–23.

⁷⁹ Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation* (New York, 2016), 7.

⁸⁰ James Pemberton to the London Society, May 3, 1790, PAS Letterbook, 1: 32–35 (quotations, 1: 33), PASP, HSP. On the 1790 law and the ambiguous status of African Americans, see Douglas Bradburn, *The Citizenship Revolution: Politics and the Creation of the American Union, 1774–1804* (Charlottesville, Va., 2009), 103–4, 132, 235–71; Parkinson, *Common Cause*, 627–40. In 1838, a revised state constitution disenfranchised black Pennsylvanians, but even then, in the era of scientific racism, arguments about racial inferiority proved less influential than appeals to sectional harmony; see Nicholas Wood, “‘A Sacrifice on the Altar of Slavery’: Doughface Politics and Black Disenfranchisement in Pennsylvania, 1837–1838,” *JER* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 75–106.

and immunities protected by the Constitution. During the 1797 petition debates, southern congressmen could have further buttressed slavery had they established a precedent that all black people—free or enslaved—lacked rights under the Constitution. Slave-state representatives' reluctance to advance an explicitly race-based view of petitioning rights suggests they feared such a stance would provoke more northern opposition than their focus on the legal technicalities. Scholars rather than contemporaries have conflated skin color and legal status, essentially reading the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision back into the 1797 debates.

On one level, the distinction between Congress dismissing the petition based on legal status and dismissing it because of skin color is purely academic. After all, Congress provided no redress for the petitioners and Gordon resorted to suicide. Nonetheless, on another level, the 1797 petition debates had more positive implications for African Americans' claims to civic participation. One North Carolina representative said that "he should wish to know what evidence there was to prove these men free, and except that was proved, the House had no right to attend to the petition."⁸¹ As with Madison's speech, the potential corollary to this logic was that African Americans who were legally free could petition Congress. Thus when the debate ended in January 1797, the focus on legal status left the door open for petitioning by free African Americans in the future. Black petitioners built on this limited victory in their next campaign less than three years later.

In the meantime, white abolitionists helped keep the black petitioners and their cause before the public. Someone using the pseudonym "Humanity" published the black exiles' petition in Philadelphia's *American Universal Magazine* in February 1797. The next issue reprinted the House of Representatives' debates and decried their vote "in favour of cursed, hell-born oppression—in favour of barbarous, degrading slavery—worse than Algerine bondage." The magazine also published the North Carolina Yearly Meeting's petition from the previous December and denounced their state legislature for rejecting it.⁸² The magazine's readers would easily have recognized a connection between the black activists who petitioned Congress and the Quaker petitioners in North Carolina. The connections were even more intimate than readers could have known. The white North Carolina petitioners included Zachariah Nixon, who formerly employed Jupiter Nicholson, and Benjamin Albertson Jr., whose father had liberated

⁸¹ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 30, 1797, 4th Cong., 2d sess., 2019–20 (quotation, 2019).

⁸² Humanity, "Sketch of a Debate in the House of Congress, On January 30th, 1797, on the Petition of Certain Emancipated Africans," [Philadelphia] *American Universal Magazine*, Feb. 20, 1797, 275–82 ("favour," 282); Humanity, "To the Editor of the American Universal Magazine," *ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1797, 182–86; "(From a North-Carolina Gazette.) To the ensuing General Assembly. . . ." *ibid.*, Mar. 6, 1797, 353–55; Philo Libertas, "Observations On a resolution of the Legislature of North Carolina," *ibid.*, Mar. 20, 1797, 428–30.

Job Albert.⁸³ Moreover, Joshua Evans, an ardently antislavery Quaker from Haddonfield, near Philadelphia, joined the lobbying effort in North Carolina against the state's "unrighteous law." During his trip, Evans also attended Quaker worship meetings with "a large number of black people" and took the opportunity of "discoursing with several of them."⁸⁴ He may have told both white and black North Carolinians about the circumstances and activism of the former slaves who had settled in Philadelphia. In any case, the petition campaign of 1797 crossed regional and racial lines.

PHILADELPHIA QUAKERS FURTHER EXPANDED the interstate antislavery effort in the fall of 1797 after North Carolina Friends sent them authenticated materials documenting cases of reenslavement.⁸⁵ In response, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting assigned a committee, including John Parrish and Warner Mifflin, to draft a petition to Congress. The PYM clerk, Jonathan Evans, then copied and signed the final version, which a Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings committee delivered.⁸⁶ They described the reenslavement of black North Carolinians as an "abominable tragedy" and called on Congress to prevent such proceedings while warning that God would punish the nation for the "wrongs and cruelties practised upon the poor African race."⁸⁷ When Pennsylvania Republican Albert Gallatin presented the Quaker petition to the House of Representatives on November 30, 1797, it rekindled the heated debates from the previous session.⁸⁸

Over slaveholder opposition, the House of Representatives eventually voted to refer the Quaker petition to a committee headed by congressman

⁸³ NCYM Minutes, Nov. 2, 1796, 2: 22, GC.

⁸⁴ Joshua Evans, entry for Nov. 6, 1796, *A Journal of the Life, Travels, Religious Exercises, and Labours in the Work of the Ministry of Joshua Evans, Late of Newton Township, Gloucester County, New Jersey* (Philadelphia, 1837), 141 ("unrighteous"); Evans, entry for Oct. 16, 1796, *ibid.*, 139 ("large"); in general, see also *ibid.*, 139–46. On Evans, see also Ellen M. Ross, "'Liberation Is Coming Soon': The Radical Reformation of Joshua Evans (1731–1798)," in *Quakers and Abolition*, ed. Brycchan Carey and Geoffrey Plank (Urbana, Ill., 2014), 15–28.

⁸⁵ The materials included a list of 134 black men, women, and children whom Quakers had manumitted but the courts had reenslaved since 1777, along with extracts of court proceedings and slave auctions. The PMS reprinted these materials in their 1797 pamphlet, cited in 133 n. 90 below; they are also reprinted in Crawford, *Having of Negroes*, 100–105, 113–19, 122–27, 137–38.

⁸⁶ PYM Minutes, Sept. 28, 1797, 4: 349–52, HC; PMS Minutes, Oct. 20, 1797, 3: 321, Dec. 15, 1797, 3: 323, HC.

⁸⁷ *Annals of Congress*, Nov. 30, 1797, 5th Cong., 2d sess., 657.

⁸⁸ Scholars have rarely considered the two 1797 petitions together, with those more interested in African American history ignoring the one from the Quakers and vice versa. Michael J. Crawford includes both in *Having of Negroes*, but he does not suggest any coordinated link between them, assuming the first was produced with the aid of Absalom Jones and without the Quakers' knowledge; Crawford, *Having of Negroes*, 143–48, 158–81. Manisha Sinha mentions both but does not view them as coordinated; Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 139.

Samuel Sitgreaves, the sympathetic Pennsylvania Abolition Society lawyer. Parrish and the PMS delegation met with the congressional committee in late January 1798, providing documents sent by the North Carolina Quakers.⁸⁹ In order to attract public sympathy, they also printed and distributed five hundred copies of a pamphlet containing the petitions of both the PYM and the four black North Carolinian exiles.⁹⁰ However, the congressional committee ultimately concluded, as had been the case with the black petitioners, that the specific concerns about North Carolina's manumission policies were "exclusively of judicial cognizance" and that Congress lacked jurisdiction. They "recommended that the memorialists [Quakers] have leave to withdraw their memorial." Representative Sitgreaves nonetheless called for the entire House of Representatives to discuss the committee report; this parliamentary maneuver created opportunity for antislavery congressmen to voice their opinions even if they accepted that Congress would refuse to act in this case.⁹¹ George Thatcher reprised his role as a leading antislavery spokesperson, objecting to the committee report's provision that the Quakers withdraw their petition.⁹²

Only a brief summary of Thatcher's speech was formally recorded and printed, but Parrish took more thorough notes as he and other Quakers—and possibly African Americans—watched from the gallery in the House of Representatives. Thatcher not only defended the rights of free people of color but also denounced slavery itself, proclaiming, "All Laws made contrary to the Laws of God . . . are nul & Void in themselves." Referring to the North Carolina freedpeople, he asked, "has not Congress a right to do the same for those People who was [*sic*] at Liberty and were kidnaped & sold into unconditional Bondage as was done for the Citizens of the U. States who were captivated in Algiers[?]"⁹³ This reference to Barbary captivity echoed the black petitioners' earlier language. In fact, Parrish's

⁸⁹ For Sitgreaves, see *Annals of Congress*, Nov. 30, 1797, 5th Cong., 2d sess., 670. For documents from the NCSC, see Parrish, *Remarks on Slavery*, 54–60. For the Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings committee, see PMS Minutes, Dec. 15, 1797, 3: 323, HC.

⁹⁰ *To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, in Congress assembled. The Memorial and Address of the People called Quakers, from their Yearly Meeting held in Philadelphia, by Adjournments, from the 25th of the 9th Month, to the 29th of the same inclusive, 1797* ([Philadelphia, 1797]); PMS Minutes, Feb. 6, 1798, 3: 327–28, HC.

⁹¹ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 29, 1798, 5th Cong., 2d sess., 945–46 (quotations, 945).

⁹² *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 14, 1798, 5th Cong., 2d sess., 1032.

⁹³ "Relative to the Blacks set free by friends of N. Carolina" [speech of George Thatcher, Feb. 14, 1798], CPW, box 15, folder 54, HSP (quotations). This document has been filed in folder 54 as a "Senate committee report relative to free blacks circa 1796." But there was no such Senate report and the document's frequent references to "Mr. S[peaker]" indicate that it was a speech from the House of Representatives while the content clearly shows it was responding to the committee report that had been presented on Jan. 29, 1798. The style and substance indicate it is Thatcher's speech that was summarized in the *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 14, 1798, 5th Cong., 2d sess., 1032–33. The handwriting is clearly John Parrish's.

account indicates that the “4 black men” from North Carolina had themselves lobbied the congressman. Thatcher told Congress, “I have been spoken to during the present Session by those very men,” and “some of those men are now weighting [*sic*] and are looking to Congress for redress.”⁹⁴ Historians have increasingly acknowledged the informal ways African Americans shaped politics, but Thatcher’s speech suggests that on some occasions people of color directly influenced congressmen, encouraging them to take stronger antislavery stances.⁹⁵ The black and white activists alike must have been disappointed when the House of Representatives voted in favor of the original committee report, ending discussion and returning the petition to the Quakers.⁹⁶ Yet by breaking Congress’ preferred silence in reference to slavery—even if only temporarily—they challenged the proslavery revolutionary settlement desired by slaveholders.⁹⁷

BLACK PHILADELPHIANS AND THEIR QUAKER ALLIES again pushed the issue of abolition into national politics at the turn of the century. In December 1799, John Parrish served on a Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings committee that distributed ten thousand copies of an address about the evils and dangers of slavery.⁹⁸ Then, on December 29, the Reverend Richard Allen linked antislavery and black citizenship in a widely reprinted eulogy of George Washington. Celebrating Washington—who had previously donated funds to open St. Thomas and made provision to liberate his slaves in his will—as “the sympathizing friend and tender father” of African Americans, Allen called on his congregation to follow the advice in Washington’s Farewell Address in order to become “good citizens.” By eulogizing Washington and embracing his Farewell Address, black Americans laid claim to civic inclusion while enlisting the Father of the Country on

⁹⁴ [Speech of George Thatcher, Feb. 14, 1798], CPW, box 15, folder 54, HSP.

⁹⁵ On our broadened conception of political actions by African Americans, see for example Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); David Waldstreicher, “The Wheatleyan Moment,” *Early American Studies* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 522–51; Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause*, esp. 29–69.

⁹⁶ *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 14, 1798, 5th Cong., 2d sess., 1032; PMS Minutes, Feb. 16, 1798, 3: 327, HC.

⁹⁷ For examples of scholars who overstate the suppression of antislavery debate after 1790, see Richard S. Newman, “Prelude to the Gag Rule: Southern Reaction to Antislavery Petitions in First Federal Congress,” *JER* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 571–99; Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York, 2002), 81–119; Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 400. On the revolution’s legacy in regard to slavery as unsettled at this time, see James Alexander (Alec) Dun, “Atlantic Antislavery, American Abolition: The Problem of Slavery in the United States in an Age of Disruption, 1770–1808,” in *The World of the Revolutionary American Republic: Land, Labor, and the Conflict for a Continent*, ed. Andrew Shankman (New York, 2014), 218–45.

⁹⁸ PMS Minutes, Nov. 15, 1799, 3: 346, Dec. 20, 1799, 347, HC; John Drinker, *To Our Fellow Citizens of the United States of North America and Others Whom it May Concern* (Philadelphia, 1799).

their side.⁹⁹ The next day, seventy-one African Americans, including Allen and Absalom Jones, endorsed another antislavery petition to Congress.

As with the earlier black petitioning efforts, the formal minutes of the PMS and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society make no mention of this petition, but interracial connections were growing at this time. Earlier in 1799, the PAS began subsidizing schools run by Jones and other black educators for children who were too young for the Quakers' Negro School. Perhaps encouraged by Jones, North Carolina exile Jacob Nicholson attended a PAS committee meeting and proposed opening a school of his own in the Northern Liberties neighborhood.¹⁰⁰ The city's three Monthly Meetings of Quakers, meanwhile, started supporting a Sunday school for black adults in collaboration with Allen's Mother Bethel Church.¹⁰¹ Personal connections between black and white activists continued as well. For example, in 1799 PMS member Nicholas Waln used his Second Street mansion to host the wedding of his black domestic servant, Elesina Phillips, to Cato Collins, Parrish's employee. The marriage was "was solemnized after the manner of Friends," and Parrish was among the Quaker men and women who preached to the forty black and white wedding guests.¹⁰² The Collinses also worked occasionally at the home of Henry and Elizabeth Drinker, a frequent meeting place for Quaker abolitionists and a destination for the occasional fugitive slave in search of aid.¹⁰³

The black petitioners again found their most active white allies in the PMS. The group's clerk, John Drinker, worked with a "JP"—almost certainly John Parrish—on a rough "essay" (that is, a draft) of the antislavery petition.¹⁰⁴ The final version of the petition appears in the elegant

⁹⁹ For Richard Allen's eulogy of George Washington, see "On Sunday the 29th Dec. 1799, in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. . . .," *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 31, 1799, [2] (quotation). See also Richard S. Newman, "We Participate in Common: Richard Allen's Eulogy of Washington and the Challenge of Interracial Appeals," *WMQ* 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 117–28. On Washington's earlier donation to the black church, see Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 117.

¹⁰⁰ The PAS committee ultimately declined to advance funding for the proposed school; Committee of Education Minute Book, 1797–1803, Jan. 25, 1799, 38–40, Feb. 13, 1799, 42–43, Mar. 13, 1799, 45–46, May 8, 1799, 52–53, May 22, 1799, 53–55, June 5, 1799, 56–58, July 7, 1799, 60–61, Dec. 18, 1799, 66–67, Dec. 25, 1799, 67, Jan. 15, 1800, 69–72, Mar. 12, 1800, 74–79, July 2, 1800, 88–90, PASP, HSP.

¹⁰¹ John Alsop and Arthur Donaldson to Overseers of the Black School, Jan. 24, 1799, Philadelphia Monthly Meeting Negro School Misc. Records, Treasurer and Misc. folder, HC; Hanson Waters, Solomon W. Conrad, and Samuel Lippincott to Overseers of the African School, May 7, 1800, *ibid.*; NSM, vol. 1, Feb. 8, 1799, 226, HC.

¹⁰² "Cato Collins," *Friends' Intelligencer* 37 (Nov. 29, 1856), 581–82 (quotation, 581).

¹⁰³ Entries for June 23, 29, Oct. 4, 1795, May 23, Dec. 16, 1796, May 27, Nov. 30, 1797, July 17, 1800, in Elizabeth Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, 1991), 1: 695, 697, 737, 2: 805, 867–68, 922, 983, 1318–19.

¹⁰⁴ J[oh]n Drinker and JP [John Parrish?], "The Petition of the members of the African Church, and of divers other religious Societies of the of the People of Colour, free Men within the City & Suburbs of Philadelphia," [1799], CPW, box 15, folder 52,

handwriting of Jonathan Evans, the clerk who had produced the 1797 antislavery petition of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Nicholas Waln's cousin Robert Waln—a PAS member whose father had left a bequest to the Quakers' Negro School and who had recently succeeded the deceased John Swanwick in the House of Representatives—presented the petition on behalf of the black activists.¹⁰⁵

The petition represents the persistence of black activism, both in collaboration with Quaker abolitionists and through black autonomous institutions. The rough draft in Drinker's handwriting identifies the petitioners as "members of the African Church, and of diverse other religious Societies of the People of Color," suggesting that members of St. Thomas, Mother Bethel, and the Zoar African Methodist Society (established in 1796 in Northern Liberties) collaborated with the Quakers, likely under the guidance of Jones and Allen.¹⁰⁶ Most of the subscribers were probably connected to one of the black churches; unfortunately, very little membership data survives for this time.¹⁰⁷ At least eight subscribers can be identified from St. Thomas and twelve from Methodist congregations. Evidence suggests that Jacob Nicholson, who had also signed the 1797 petition, lived in Northern Liberties and may have attended the local Zoar African Methodist Society with his wife.¹⁰⁸ Allen, Jones, and at least three other subscribers had been members of the Free African Society, while the names of twelve petitioners also appeared on the colonization petition that John Parrish had drafted in the early 1790s. Job Albert, another of the North Carolina petitioners from 1797, also made his mark. Other signers, such as C. Wethington, had children who attended PAS schools.¹⁰⁹ In sum,

HSP (quotation). Scholars have not recognized that this document was the draft of the Absalom Jones petition. For the final petition, see "The Petition of the People of Colour," Dec. 30, 1799, STCR, HR 6A-F4.2, NA.

¹⁰⁵ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 2, 1800, 6th Cong., 1st sess., 229; PAS Membership List, 1795–1805, PASP, HSP; NSM, vol. 1, Mar. 1, 1785, 82–84, HC. On the activism of the Waln family, including Nicholas's brother Richard, see Susan Kozel, "In Pursuit of Natural Rights and Liberty—The Brothers Waln in Greater Philadelphia and the Atlantic World," in Jackson and Kozel, *Quakers and Their Allies*, 125–40.

¹⁰⁶ Drinker and JP, "The Petition . . . of the People of Colour," [1799], CPW, box 15, folder 52, HSP.

¹⁰⁷ Andrews, *Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 140. Dee Andrews reproduces the 1794 membership list of Mother Bethel and the incomplete member lists from St. George's Episcopal Church (which had a segregated congregation) and Zoar in Andrews, "The African Methodists of Philadelphia, 1794–1802," *PMHB* 108, no. 4 (October 1984): 471–86. The 1794 member list of St. Thomas is reprinted in Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church*, 107–10. Post-1794 member lists for Mother Bethel and St. Thomas do not survive.

¹⁰⁸ The school that Nicholson had proposed to open with PAS funds was in Northern Liberties, where Zoar was also located, and an 1800 list of Zoar members includes a "Hagate Necolson," who may have been his wife, Hagar; see Andrews, *PMHB* 108: 485.

¹⁰⁹ For FAS membership, see Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church*, 21, 24, 35. For the earlier petition, see Newman, Finkenbine, and Mooney, *WMQ* 64: 161–66.

the subscribers included free and formerly enslaved people of color from Pennsylvania and other states who forged communities through independent black organizations and expanded their political influence by means of collaborations with Quaker abolitionists.

As a “class of Citizens,” the black petitioners felt they could enlist the aid of the federal government. They believed that Congress had an obligation to protect free African Americans from “Men-stealers” who kidnapped and sold them “under colour of this [the Fugitive Slave] law.” They also complained of the “trade carried on in a clandestine manner to the Coast of Guinea,” in violation of the 1794 Slave Trade Act. These two specific grievances clearly fell under the purview of Congress, but the petitioners did not stop there. Although not presuming to request “the immediate emancipation of all,” they asked Congress to “exert every means in your power to undo the heavy burdens, and prepare the way for the oppressed to go free.”¹¹⁰ This request clearly violated the common understanding of congressional power, which denied federal jurisdiction over slavery within the states, and it would provoke the greatest opposition.

Congressman Robert Waln read the petition to the House of Representatives on January 2, 1800, and proposed referring it to a committee investigating violations of the 1794 Slave Trade Act.¹¹¹ As in previous years, Thatcher of Massachusetts championed the rights of black Americans and supported Waln’s motion. “Whether the petitioners were black or white,” he said, “was entirely immaterial: they stated their sufferings under a law of the United States, and that was argument enough for a respectful reference.” On the other hand, Harrison Gray Otis, another Bay State Federalist, mocked the many petitioners “who were incapable of writing their names.”¹¹² Southerners uniformly advocated rejecting the petition, but, as in 1797, they did not explicitly deny free African Americans’ right of petition. This time they focused mainly on the petitioners’ desire to ameliorate slavery within the states in preparation for emancipation, a request that they deemed “very improper and unconstitutional to discuss.”¹¹³ Responding to these objections, Waln modified his motion so that the committee would only consider the sections of the petition about kidnapping and the foreign slave trade.¹¹⁴

For Wethington’s children, see “List of Boys in the Black School under the Care of the Committee of Education of the Abolition Society,” February 1800, PASP, HSP.

¹¹⁰ “The Petition of the People of Colour,” Dec. 30, 1799, STCR, HR 6A-F4.2, NA.

¹¹¹ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 2, 1800, 6th Cong., 1st sess., 230. For the committee’s creation, see *Annals of Congress*, Dec. 11, 1799, 6th Cong., 1st sess., 199.

¹¹² *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 2, 1800, 6th Cong., 1st sess., 232 (“Whether the petitioners,”), 231 (“incapable”). For other vocal supporters of the petition, see John Smilie of Pennsylvania, *ibid.*, 230–31; Jonas Platt of New York, *ibid.*, 236; William Edmond of Connecticut, *ibid.*, 237; Albert Gallatin of Pennsylvania, *ibid.*, 237–38.

¹¹³ For John Rutledge of South Carolina, see *ibid.*, 230.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

Congressional procedure became complicated the next day, which has confused historians' understanding of the event. Scholars often suggest that the House of Representatives voted 85 to 1 to dismiss the petition. Compared to the vote of 50 to 33 to reject the 1797 petition, this vote appears to point toward a growing consensus that black Americans lacked First Amendment rights. However, the lopsided vote merely instructed the congressional committee to ignore the petition's reference to emancipation. When it came time to vote on "the main question, to agree [with] the said motion as amended"—that is, instructing the slave trade committee to consider only the black petitioners' complaints about the Fugitive Slave Act and the Slave Trade Act—the House "resolved in the affirmative."¹¹⁵ Although they would not consider the petitioners' desire for emancipation, a majority of congressmen voted to refer the petitioners' two other requests to a committee, thereby confirming free African Americans' right to petition Congress. After the congressional debates, the wealthy black Philadelphian James Forten wrote a letter of thanks to Thatcher, who alone had defended the petitioners' request for action on behalf of the nation's slaves. "Seven hundred thousand of the human race were concerned in our Petition," Forten wrote, and "we derive some comfort from the thought that we are not quite destitute of Friends; that there is one who will use all his endeavours to free the Slave from Captivity." Quakers published Forten's letter in newspapers throughout the North, touting him as an example of black capacity for education and uplift.¹¹⁶

Although Congress would not even consider action against slavery itself, the slave trade committee responded favorably to the petitioners' other two requests. The committee report described free African Americans as "entitled to freedom & Protection," and it stated that Congress had "a Duty to revise [the Fugitive Slave] Law & modify it" to protect free people of color. For whatever reason, however, the committee never presented its

¹¹⁵ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 3, 1800, 6th Cong., 1st sess., 238–45 (quotations, 245). The actual vote in favor of the motion was not recorded. See also the notations written on the back of the petition; "The Petition of the People of Colour," Dec. 30, 1799, STCR, HR 6A-F4.2, NA. For statements that Congress rejected the petition in its entirety, see Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics*, 315; Tise, *American Counterrevolution*, 526; Winch, *Gentleman of Color*, 154; Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*, 148; Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 140. For an exception, see Wilson, *Freedom at Risk*, 109.

¹¹⁶ James Forten to George Thatcher, January 1800, CPW, box 11, folder 13, HSP (quotations); Forten, "The following letter is from a free African. . . ." [Philadelphia] *Universal Gazette*, June 12, 1800, [4]; repr. fully or in part in Forten, "Expression of Gratitude," [Boston] *Independent Chronicle: and the Universal Advertiser*, June 12–16, 1800, [1]; Forten, "New York, June 10," [Portland, Maine] *Oriental Trumpet; or, Town and Country Gazette*, June 18, 1800, [2]; Forten, "Expression of Gratitude," [New Bedford, Mass.] *Columbian Courier*, June 20, 1800, [2]; Forten, "New York, June 10," [Portland] *Eastern Herald and Gazette of Maine*, June 23, 1800, [2]; Forten, "The following letter. . . ." [Norwich, Conn.] *Courier*, July 9, 1800, [1].

report and Congress did not revise the Fugitive Slave Act.¹¹⁷ Abolitionists could at least celebrate the defeat of slaveholders' attempts to strengthen the act the following year. A bill supported by slaveholders in 1801 would have made it virtually impossible for free African Americans to find employment while rendering them much more vulnerable to enslavement based on fraudulent allegations.¹¹⁸ So if the black activists' petition did not improve the situation of free people of color, at least the more numerous petitions from slaveholders desiring a strengthened Fugitive Slave Act failed to make things even worse. Given the growing economic importance of slavery and the political power of slaveholders, any thwarted proslavery effort should be interpreted as a modest victory for abolitionism and black rights.

Moreover, Congress addressed the black petitioners' other concern by passing the Slave Trade Act of 1800. Robert Waln, a chief supporter of the bill, argued that "a very great majority of the American people" wished Congress to suppress the Atlantic slave trade as far as possible before they could ban it entirely in 1808.¹¹⁹ The new legislation revised the 1794 law by extending prosecution to Americans having any involvement in the slave trade to foreign ports, "directly or indirectly," such as through insurance policies, and authorizing naval vessels to capture slave ships.¹²⁰ Along with Congress's recognition of African Americans' right to petition, this legislation marked a largely unheralded antislavery victory. Within a year, the navy had liberated more than one hundred African captives and the PAS oversaw apprenticeships and indentures for them.¹²¹

Another small antislavery victory occurred in 1803, as part of the ongoing struggle between North Carolina slaveholders and free people of color. Repeating the concerns expressed in the grand jury reports from 1795 and 1796, a group of white North Carolinians petitioned Congress about the dangers posed by black West Indian immigrants, "a species of population too obnoxious to be tolerated." They warned that free people of color threatened "the peace and safety of the southern states of the Union" and

¹¹⁷ "Report of The Committee to whom was referred the Petition of Absalom Jones & others respecting the Fugitive Law &c," STCR, HR 6A-F4.2, NA (quotations). The handwritten committee report was never printed and has escaped the notice of the scholars who assume the 85-to-1 vote dismissed the entire petition.

¹¹⁸ The bill was defeated by a sectional vote of 46 to 43. *Annals of Congress*, Dec. 18, 1801, 7th Cong., 1st sess., 336; *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 15, 1802, 7th Cong., 1st sess., 423; *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 18, 1802, 7th Cong., 1st sess., 425; Robinson, *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics*, 290–91.

¹¹⁹ *Annals of Congress*, Apr. 28, 1800, 6th Cong., 1st sess., 690.

¹²⁰ "An Act in Addition to the Act Intituled 'An Act to Prohibit the Carrying on the Slave Trade. . .,'" May 10, 1800, in Richard Peters, ed., *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*. . . (Boston, 1845), 2: 70–71 (quotation, 2: 70).

¹²¹ Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 183.

called for federal intervention.¹²² In response, Congress passed the 1803 Act to Prevent the Importation of Certain Persons, which extended federal enforcement to state laws restricting the entry of free or enslaved foreigners of color (such as North Carolina's 1795 law).¹²³ At first glance, Congress seems to have responded more favorably to the petition from slaveholders than to the earlier petitions from African Americans and Quakers. In fact, one scholar has recently characterized this legislation as demonstrating a "national and racist consensus against admitting anyone of African descent, slave or free."¹²⁴ But if the law demonstrated the racism of many congressmen, it also attested to the antislavery sentiment of others and their commitment to African American rights.

Before passing the bill into law, northern congressmen amended it to protect black citizens' right to move throughout the Union. The bill, as designed by a committee of southern congressmen, would have applied not only to foreigners of color but also to those from other states of the Union.¹²⁵ The initial debate on the bill was not recorded, but Thatcher sought to delay the bill and was likely among those "gentlemen who had expressed their opinions" against it.¹²⁶ Another Massachusetts congressman, Republican John Bacon, then led a successful effort to amend the bill. Bacon had previously helped secure black suffrage in Massachusetts, and his rhetoric echoed Thatcher's earlier speeches on the antislavery petitions of 1797 and 1799. Many African Americans were "citizens of the United States," Bacon argued, and some had "actually had a voice in the adoption of that solemn compact [the U.S. Constitution]," which had

¹²² Wm. Campbell et al., "The Memorial of the Undersigned Inhabitants of the Town of Wilmington. . . ." *Report of the Committee to Whom was Referred on the 17th Instant, the Memorial of Sundry Inhabitants of the Town of Wilmington, in the State of North Carolina* (Washington, D.C., 1803), 5–6 (quotations, 6); *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 17, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 385–86.

¹²³ *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 26, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 423–24; *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 2, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 459; *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 4, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 460–61. For the text of the Act to Prevent the Importation of Certain Persons, see *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 7, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 467. On the 1803 law, see also Howard Albert Ohline, "Politics and Slavery: The Issue of Slavery in National Politics, 1787–1815" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 1969), 342–48.

¹²⁴ Seymour Drescher, "Divergent Paths: The Anglo-American Abolitions of the Atlantic Slave Trade," in *Migration, Trade, and Slavery in an Expanding World: Essays in Honor of Pieter Emmer*, ed. Wim Klooster (Leiden, 2009), 259–88 (quotation, 272).

¹²⁵ My interpretation of amending the bill follows that of Padraig Griffin Riley, "Northern Republicans and Southern Slavery: Democracy in the Age of Jefferson, 1800–1819" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007), 365–68. For the committee, see *Annals of Congress*, Jan. 17, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 385–86. For the bill, see *A Bill to Prevent the Importation of Certain Persons, Whose Admission is Prohibited by Certain Laws of the State Governments* ([Washington, D.C.?], 1803).

¹²⁶ *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 4, 1804, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 460–61 (quotation, 461); *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 3, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 459.

further secured their rights. The proposed bill, on the other hand, was “repugnant to the radical principles and general tenor of the Constitution” and violated the “privileges and immunities” clause in particular. Other Northerners expressed similar concerns about the bill’s constitutionality and its abridgement of “the rights of free negroes and persons of color,” while praising the bill’s potential to further suppress the Atlantic slave trade by extending federal enforcement to state laws against importing black people as slaves.¹²⁷ The House ultimately amended the bill so that it applied explicitly to people of color “not being a native, a citizen, or registered seaman of the United States.” Thus, although slaveholders initiated the law, antislavery northerners modified it to acknowledge the existence of black citizens and protect their rights.¹²⁸ Few northern politicians were prepared to extend full equality to free people of color, but they resisted slaveholders’ efforts to further degrade them.

Congress’s continued support for black rights (at least in a limited sense) and the relative success of the black petitioners in 1800 begs the question of why no other African American activists petitioned Congress again before 1813 (when both houses formally accepted a petition from Paul Cuffee, a black Quaker). The relocation of the national capital in 1800 appears to have been a major deterrent to their efforts. Slaveholders certainly appreciated Washington’s distance from Philadelphia’s concentration of Quakers and free African Americans. During the 1797 petition debates, southern congressmen had complained that Quakers attended the debates “in a body” because they believed “that their presence will give more weight to their petition.”¹²⁹ And in 1808, after New Jersey congressman James Sloan proposed moving the capital back to Philadelphia, one South Carolinian opposed the relocation because of a “delicate consideration.” He reminded Congress that “there is, in Philadelphia, less sympathy . . . for a certain subject, in which the Southern States are deeply interested. When formerly there, one Warner Mifflin, and his associates, continually kept

¹²⁷ *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 7, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 468–72 (“citizens,” 468, “rights,” 472). For Bacon’s support for black suffrage in Massachusetts, see Riley, “Northern Jeffersonians,” 367.

¹²⁸ “An Act to Prevent the Importation of Certain Persons into Certain States, Where, by the Laws Thereof, Their Admission is Prohibited,” Feb. 28, 1803, *Statutes at Large*, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 205–6 (quotation, 205); *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 16, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 525; *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 17, 1803, 7th Cong., 2d sess., 534. Furthermore, federal officials soon used the 1803 law to increase their jurisdiction over the slave trade within the United States. For example, whereas South Carolina officials had rarely enforced the state ban on importing slaves, federal customs officials soon began enforcing the state’s law. Ironically, however, the specter of federal enforcement may have been one of the motives behind South Carolina’s decision to repeal their slave trade ban following the Louisiana Purchase; see Ohline, “Politics and Slavery,” 348–52.

¹²⁹ For comments by John Rutledge, see *Annals of Congress*, Nov. 30, 1797, 5th Cong., 2d sess., 667 (quotations).

Congress in hot water, by teasing and pestering them with something about slavery.¹³⁰ Washington lacked such a troublesome activist community, and southern congressmen felt more comfortable in an area in which the majority of African Americans were enslaved. Black activists in Pennsylvania, in turn, focused primarily on the local level, building up churches and other institutions while working with the PAS to protect people of color from slave catchers and kidnappers.¹³¹ They also drafted at least one petition to Congress during Thomas Jefferson's presidency but were apparently unable to deliver it to the new capital.¹³²

SCHOLARS' INTEREST IN THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF SLAVERY and racism too often leads them to overlook or dismiss the significance of abolitionist agitation in the early Republic. It is true that for many white Americans, an initial burst of antislavery sentiment subsided after the American Revolution, especially following the Saint Domingue slave insurrection. For instance, in 1794 Philadelphia abolitionists began hosting an annual convention of abolition societies, but within three years they were pleading with groups outside of the mid-Atlantic to send delegates or "at least, acknowledge the receipt of the address, and send their reasons for such omission."¹³³ It was largely Quakers and African Americans—people whose antislavery activism predated the revolution—who kept the struggle for racial justice alive in the early Republic. Yet even scholars who recognize the absolute centrality of Quakers and African Americans in the era's efforts against slavery have failed to fully appreciate the nature, scope, and impact of their activities. Historians who highlight the importance of Quakers within secular organizations such as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society have neglected groups such as the Philadelphia Meeting for Sufferings, while those who study black activism have similarly overlooked

¹³⁰ For John Taylor, see *Annals of Congress*, Feb. 4, 1808, 10th Cong., 1st sess., 1567–68 (quotations, 1567); Pdraig Riley, *Slavery and the Democratic Conscience: Political Life in Jeffersonian America* (Philadelphia, 2016), 129–31.

¹³¹ Newman, *Slavery and Abolition* 32: 413–30.

¹³² "Petition of the Free Blacks," [1801?], CPW, box 15, folder 53, HSP. This petition is mentioned in Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 188–89; Winch, *Gentleman of Color*, 156. Winch assumes the petition was submitted, but there is no record of it.

¹³³ American Convention of Abolition Societies to the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom, Dec. 26, 1797, Baldwin Family Papers, box 6, Yale University Special Collections, New Haven, Conn. (quotation). On the convention, see *Minutes of the Proceedings of a Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies Established in different Parts of the United States*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1794); Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 19–20. The New York Manumission Society, disproportionately Quaker, remained active in the convention. On the persistence of abolitionist activism in New York, see T. Robert Mosely, "A History of the New-York Manumission Society, 1785–1849" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1963); Polgar, *JER* 31: 229–58; Levine-Gronningsater, "Delivering Freedom."

these Quaker groups and the corresponding archival sources. As a result, scholars underestimate both the extent and influence of interracial abolitionism, and they have generally understood the lessons of the 1797 and 1799 petitions in negative terms. Mistakenly assuming that white abolitionists declined to aid the black activists and that Congress rejected both petitions, historians use these episodes to argue either that a racist backlash cut short the revolution's antislavery promise or that the nation had been shaped by slavery and racism from its inception. Integrating sources from Quaker activist groups and revisiting congressional procedures leads to a different set of conclusions.

African Americans found important allies among Quaker activists in their struggle to preserve and expand the limited gains of the revolutionary era. Members of the North Carolina Standing Committee and PMS hired lawyers to defend freedpeople, transported fugitives north, supported black institutions, and helped former slaves petition the federal government. Congress's responses to these petitions, furthermore, were hardly as one-sided as scholars have portrayed. The House of Representatives formally received the second petition from African Americans and passed the strengthened Slave Trade Act of 1800. Moreover, Congress declined to make the Fugitive Slave Act more draconian in 1801 and modified the 1803 Act to Prevent the Importation of Certain Persons to protect black citizens. To be sure, these victories were not as complete as abolitionists would have liked, but they nonetheless register the political influence of interracial antislavery in the face of nearly insurmountable obstacles.

Early black activists and their white allies laid the foundation for abolitionism throughout the coming decades. In 1813, when the Pennsylvania legislature considered banning black immigration and creating a registry of the estimated four thousand fugitive slaves already living in the state, the PAS and black Philadelphians sent petitions while James Forten published a pamphlet, *Letters from a Man of Color*, against the proposals. The PAS's William Rawle, who had successfully defended Moses Gordon in 1795, lobbied the legislature, which ultimately abandoned the measure. When slaveholders from Maryland pressed the Pennsylvania government to facilitate the return of fugitive slaves in 1826, black and white activists again mobilized. The aging Reverend Richard Allen traveled to Harrisburg to lobby legislators, although he arrived after the bill had been adopted.¹³⁴ Fortunately for African Americans, a PMS delegation had reached the capital earlier, held "interviews" with various legislators, and successfully promoted "several beneficial amendments."¹³⁵ The final

¹³⁴ Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*, 43; Winch, *Gentleman of Color*, 169; Andrew K. Diemer, *The Politics of Black Citizenship: Free African Americans in the Mid-Atlantic Borderland, 1817–1863* (Athens, Ga., 2016), esp. 1–3, 56–60.

¹³⁵ PMS Minutes, Mar. 17, 1826, 4: 369 (quotations), Feb. 8, 1826, 4: 367–68, HC.

version of Pennsylvania's Fugitive Slave Act of 1826, although instigated by slaveholders, increased safeguards against kidnapping and rendered the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 nearly impossible to enforce within the state. Beginning in the 1830s African Americans and Quakers were disproportionately involved in openly interracial organizations such as the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society. These groups expanded their demands to encompass fully eradicating slavery and establishing racial equality, but they represented an evolution rather than a radical departure from the interracial abolitionism of the late eighteenth century.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ William R. Leslie, "The Pennsylvania Fugitive Slave Act of 1826," *Journal of Southern History* 18, no. 4 (November 1952): 429–45, esp. 443–45; Beverly C. Tomek, *Pennsylvania Hall: A "Legal Lynching" in the Shadow of the Liberty Bell* (New York, 2014), 45–62; Sinha, *Slave's Cause*, 195–227.