

## Chapter 27 -- Free Blacks Begin Their Long Uphill Journey Toward Equality



**Dates:**  
1775-1831

**Sections:**

- Free Blacks Seeking Assimilation Are Shunned By White Society
- Prince Hall Founds Black Freemasons Lodges
- Reverend Thomas Paul Opens A Church And Meeting Hall For Blacks In Boston
- Reverends Richard Allen And Absalom Jones Found The Free African Society
- The Roll Call Of Black Abolitionists Is Formed Early On

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Time: 1775-1808

### Free Blacks Seeking Assimilation Are Shunned By White Society



A No-Nonsense Free Black

In 1790 there are some 57,000 so-called “free blacks” living in America alongside almost 700,000 slaves. Just under half live in the North; the rest are in the Border states and the deep South.

**The Free Black Population – 1790**

	<b>Total</b>	<b>% Of FB</b>	<b>% All Blacks</b>
North	26,800	47%	40%
Border	12,056	21	23
South	18,327	32	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>57,183</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8</b>

These black men, women and children are now left on their own to make their way in America. Their heritage is one of chains and whips and degradations, and most wish now to simply fit in to the white dominated society around them.

But this is no simple task, since the vast majority of whites regard them as an inferior race, prone to anti-social behaviors and possibly bent on violent retaliation against their prior masters.

Rather than trying to assimilate free blacks, whites in both the North and the South are mainly interested in containing and eliminating the “threats” they represent.

Containment comes in the form of efforts to pen up the free black population in segregated ghettos, and to use local government statutes or codes to restrict their rights.

Across the North and South, free blacks huddle together in downtrodden neighborhoods designated locally as “Darktowns” or “Shantytowns,” and their daily lives remain shaped by the color of their skin.

Relatively few are able to read or write – skills strictly forbidden to their slave ancestors and now limited by a shortage of black schools. Those lucky enough to find work are typically confined to the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. Men are cast as common laborers; women as servants. Both try to survive on minimal wages, with little chance of advancement.

Their inferior status is reinforced in subtle sleights and direct prohibitions. Deference to whites is expected in personal interactions, be it stepping aside on the street or speaking only when spoken to. Segregation is also sharply enforced in some locales – where free blacks are unable to own property or are required to carry “passes” when traveling in certain areas or after dark.

The legal system is rigged against them. Taking disputes with whites to court is discouraged; no black lawyers exist to represent them; and they are not allowed to serve on juries. Punishment of free blacks is harsh and uneven. They are “put back into servitude” for offenses ranging from “laziness” to harboring runaway slaves or receiving stolen goods. Sexual relations with white women, even consensual, is punished by being sold into slavery, castration or hanging.

This is the plight of free blacks in 1790. Seeking ways to fit into the dominant white society, they are met with outright rejection.

While allowed to mingle in public, the color of their skin “brands them” on sight. For some whites, this branding evokes outright fear. Others react with humiliating disdain or pity.

But, almost always, the “lesson” is that blackness is something to be looked down upon. A stain of inferiority.

And the darker the color of the free blacks skin, the deeper the stain in the eyes of most whites.

In fact, an entire taxonomy develops around “blackness and bloodlines,” derived from Spanish and French traditions. Those who are half black and half white are labeled “mulatto’s.” The offspring of mulattos and whites are “quadroons” – followed in turn by “octoroons” and even “quintoons.”

Some free blacks, having escaped from slavery, now attempt to flee to freedom and equality by escaping from their very skins. Hence the practice of light-toned blacks “passing for white.”

But this path is a rarity, and the vast majority are left in a kind of “limbo status” – much better off than field slaves picking cotton in the South, much worse off than their white counterparts.

While the toll taken by this white racial antipathy is great, it prompts free blacks to band together and begin to form their own society, eager to battle for true freedom, citizenship and equality.

Their efforts are led by America’s first “abolitionists” – free black men and women whose efforts will prove to be nothing short of heroic.

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Time: 1775-1807

### **Prince Hall Founds Black Freemasons Lodges**



Kings Chapel Boston – Site of First Freemasons Meeting in America

One of the earliest Black Abolitionists in America is Prince Hall, who devotes his life to bridging the racial gap he encounters through involvement with the Order of Freemasons.

The Freemasons are a fraternal group, probably originating in Scotland in 1599, and officially chartered with London's First Grand Lodge in 1717. The order's stated mission is to support mankind's search for Truth, Charity and Brotherly Love – a search which progresses for inductees through three phrases or "degrees," from apprenticeship to basic achievement to mastery.

For Freemasons the symbol of this mastery on earth lies in the aesthetic perfection they find in ancient architecture, especially medieval churches – the handiwork of stonemasons down through the ages. The Freemason's crest offers up two tools of the mason's trade as essential to man's moral quest – the Square, encouraging actions that "square with virtue," and the Compass, asking that members "circumscribe their own selfish desires" in favor of that which supports society as a whole.

Freemasonry takes hold in Europe and gradually migrates across the Atlantic to America, where the first officially recorded Lodge meeting occurs in 1733 at King's Chapel, Boston.

Several founding fathers are dedicated Freemasons, including George Washington, Ben Franklin, John Hancock and Paul Revere. President James Monroe also joins the order, as does the sitting president in 1828, Andrew Jackson.

Freemasonry comes to the free black community in Boston through the lifelong dedication of one man, Prince Hall.

Hall is thought to have been born in 1735 and purchased at age 11 by one William Hall, a Boston tanner, who decides to teach him to read and write, before freeing him in 1765.

Prince Hall quickly rises up within the free black community, speaking and writing in favor of abolishing slavery, educating black children, and allowing blacks to serve in the military.

He recognizes, however, that his voice on behalf of these causes will be amplified by association with an institution respected by whites, such as the Freemasons. He first tries to join the Boston St. John's Lodge, but is denied admission because he is black. His next attempt – directed at Irish soldiers stationed in Boston in 1775 – pays off first, with the formation of African Grand Lodge #1, comprising 14 free black members and Hall as Grand Master, and after the War in 1784 with recognition of Grand Lodge #459.

Within the Freemason's charter, each Lodge sets its own rules, elects its own officers and pursues its own agenda on behalf of improving the life and moral growth of its members. For Prince Hall, the Lodge becomes a vehicle for teaching Africans about the political process in general, and for then petitioning the Massachusetts's state legislature to end slavery (which it does by 1781) and provide the education blacks need to become equal members of society. Rebuffed here, he begins to school children from his home.

Hall organizes other Freemason Lodges in Philadelphia and Providence, and is recognized as "Provincial Grand Master" in 1791.

On several occasions, he tries to unite his Lodge with white Lodges in Boston in the spirit of "Brotherly Love," but in every case is turned away. Frustrated by ongoing white rejection, he also dabbles for many years in a "back to Africa" colonization program.

While he dies in 1807, the black Freemason movement will live on in the form of "Prince Hall Lodges," projecting the voice of free blacks beyond the safer confines of the church and into the white man's political realm.

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Time: 1804-1831

### **Reverend Thomas Paul Opens A Church And Meeting Hall For Blacks In Boston**



A Free Black Man Standing Tall

While Prince Hall pursues his freemason lodges, another early Black Abolitionist, the Reverend Thomas Paul, is intent on opening an African Baptist Church in Boston.

Thomas Paul is born in 1773 to free parents living in Exeter, New Hampshire. He is educated at the Free Will Society Academy, run by the Free Will Baptist Church. Like two of his brothers, he sets out to become a preacher. He is ordained in 1804 and marries before moving to Boston at 31 years of age.

Once there he takes up residence among some one thousand other free blacks living just west of City Hall in a segregated area which becomes known as "The Hill."

As an aspiring minister, he finds that the only religious services open to blacks occur in white churches, where they are forced to sit in segregated and out of sight pews. He recalls this humiliation as follows:

*I raised my head up (from prayer) and saw one of the trustees having hold of the Reverend Absalom Jones pulling him up off his knees and saying "you must get up, you must not kneel here. Mr. Jones replied," wait until prayer is over and I will trouble you no more. With that he beckoned to one of the other trustee...and went to William White to pick him up."*

Henceforth Paul is determined to establish an independently run black church in his neighborhood.

At that time, only two such black run churches exist in America, one in Savannah, Georgia, the other in Petersburg, Virginia. Both are Baptist and both are less than two years old.

But Paul is undeterred by the odds, and, together with twenty other free blacks he charters The African Baptist Church and Meeting House in August 1805. His group buys land, builds the church itself and holds its first service on December 6, 1806. Membership is open to blacks and to all others who are "benevolently disposed to Africans."

Paul's Church of Boston quickly becomes the model for "mutual aid societies" across free black enclaves.

Children are given their first exposure to education at the church, initially through tutoring by adults who can read and write, then by a more formal school run by Prince Hall's son, Primus.

For free black adults on The Hill, the Meeting House annex proves as impactful as the church itself. It becomes their social hub, a safe harbor where they can "be themselves," away from the humiliations imposed by white society. It is also a place where they can gather freely, locate shelter, engage in commerce from banking to buying groceries and clothing to hairstyling and barbering, advance their own education, and learn trades.

Administering the affairs of the Church provides members with a chance to experience the governmental and political challenges integral to white social structures. In his wisdom, the Reverend Paul charges them with selecting their own leaders and rules; funding their operations; learning from each other, supporting each other and building self-confidence.

As a clergyman, Thomas Paul is recognized both for his oratory skills, including impassioned sermons to white audiences, and for his theological arguments linking biblical scripture to the cause of abolishing slavery.

Like Prince Hall, his legacy extends beyond his initial work in Boston. In 1808 he helps found the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York. His work as a Freemason takes him to England, where he meets with William Wilberforce, the evangelical white MP instrumental in eventually abolishing slavery in the United Kingdom. He also travels in 1823 to Haiti as a missionary.

The Reverend Paul dies in 1831 at 58 years old, but his African Baptist Church and Meeting Hall continues to serve the free blacks of Boston.

In 1832, the white abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, convenes the first gathering of the New England Anti-Slavery Society at the church. In 1834 a school building is erected on Joy Street, adjacent to the church, from funds willed by the white philanthropist, Abiel Smith, for the education of black children.

Paul's children also advance their father's cause. His son, Thomas Paul, Jr., becomes the first black graduate of Dartmouth College in 1841, and joins his two siblings in lifelong support of black advancement, especially through black access to schooling.

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Time: 1790's

### **Reverends Richard Allen And Absalom Jones Found The Free African Society**

As in Boston, a grass-roots movement on behalf of advancing the cause of free blacks is also under way in Philadelphia.

It is led by two black ministers, who share similar backgrounds.

One is Reverend Absalom Jones, born in 1746 and a slave in Delaware until manumitted by his master in 1784. After moving to Philadelphia, he takes up the ministry within the Methodist Church. He is, however, frustrated by the segregation and slights he encounters there, and moves on to later found the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. Its charter rings out its purpose as follows:

*To arise out of the dust and shake ourselves, and throw off that servile fear, that the habit of oppression and bondage trained us up in.<sup>L</sup>*

The other is the Reverend Richard Allen, born in 1760, and, like Jones, an ex-slave from Delaware. Allen is able to purchase his freedom in 1780, becomes a preacher, and founds the first independently run African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Together these two men and churches form the rallying point for free blacks in Philadelphia.

Even before their churches open in 1794, Jones and Allen have worked together to set up The Free African Society, aimed at providing aid to blacks in need. Its preamble proposes that men of the African race join together in a society, cutting across religious sects, aimed at helping those in need.

*Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, two men of the African race, who...often communed together... (decided) that a society should be formed, without regard to religious tenets, provided, the persons lived an orderly and sober life, in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children.*

Members will pay dues of one shilling a month to create a fund which will subsequently be distributed to worthy persons in need.

*We, the free Africans.. do unanimously agree, for the benefit of each other, to advance one shilling in silver Pennsylvania currency a month; and after one year's subscription from the date hereof, then to hand forth to the needy of this Society, if any should require, the sum of three shillings and nine pence per week of the said money: provided, this necessity is not brought on them by their own imprudence.*

Those who join the Society must live up to a series of requirements.

*And it is further agreed, that no drunkard nor disorderly person be admitted as a member, and if any should prove disorderly after having been received, the said disorderly person shall be*

*disjointed from us if there is not an amendment...without having any of his subscription money returned.*

*If any should neglect paying his monthly subscription for three months, and after having been informed of the same by two of the members, and no sufficient reason appearing for such neglect, if he do not pay the whole the next ensuing meeting, he shall be disjointed from us...*

*If any person neglect meeting every month, for every omission he shall pay three pence, except in case or sickness or any other complaint that should require the assistance of the Society, then, and in such a case, he shall be exempt from the fines and subscription during the said sickness.*

*We apprehend it to be just and reasonable, that the surviving widow of a deceased member should enjoy the benefit of this Society so long as she remains his widow, complying with the rules thereof, excepting the subscriptions.*

*We apprehend it to be necessary, that the children of our deceased members be under the care of the Society, so far as to pay for the education of their children, if they cannot attend the free school; also to put them out apprentices to suitable trades or places, if required.*

*We unanimously agree to choose Joseph Clarke to be our Clerk and Treasurer; and whenever another should succeed him, it is always understood, that one of the people called Quakers, belonging to one of the three monthly meetings in Philadelphia, is to be chosen to act as Clerk and Treasurer of this useful Institution.*

*The following persons met, viz., Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, Samuel Baston, Joseph Johnson, Cato Freeman, Caesar Cranchell, and James Potter, also William White...This evening the articles were read, and after some beneficial remarks were made, they were agreed unto<sup>1</sup>*

In addition to helping those in financial need, the Free African Society will play an important role in opening up schools to educate black children, as well as providing funds to slaves to purchase their freedom.

Reverend Absalom Jones is also remembered for his groundbreaking petitions to the U.S. Congress protesting abuses associated with the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act. This law becomes a daily nightmare for free blacks everywhere – allowing bounty hunting “agents” to seize blacks off the streets, haul them in front of a judge, use flimsy evidence to label them run-aways, and then return them to slavery. He fails to get the act changed, but his petitions set the stage for future “political actions” by blacks to seek redress from congress.

While Absalom Jones dies in 1818, Richard Allen lives on until 1831, long enough to see his African Methodist Episcopal Church take hold in early black communities across the nation. In his later years he also pioneers the Free Produce Society, an economic movement that boycotts the sale of goods made by slave labor.

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Time: 1775-1808

### **The Roll Call Of Black Abolitionists Is Formed Early On**

Even as the nation prepares to embark on its new form of government, future turmoil looms around the long-term fate of America’s black population.

For the vast majority of whites, the Africans are regarded as an inferior species, incapable of ever being assimilated into mainstream society.

In the South their presence has become essential to economic prosperity – slaves to pick cotton and be bought and sold at auctions for profit.

In the North, their economic utility is gone and they are mostly considered a nuisance – “free blacks” to be feared, to be “constrained,” and to be shunned.

Amidst this daily despair, however, come the voices of America’s earliest Black Abolitionists, determined to make a new home for themselves against all odds.

#### **Black Abolitionists: Early Milestones**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Milestone</b>	<b>Where</b>	<b>Leaders</b>
1775	African Grand Lodge #1	Boston	Paul Cuffe
1787	The Free African Society	Phil	Jones and Allen
1794	African Methodist Episcopal Church	Phil	Richard Allen
1794	African Episcopal Church Of St. Thomas	Phil	Absalom Jones
1805	First African Baptist Church & Meeting Hall	Boston	Thomas Paul
1808	The Abyssinian Baptist Church	New York	Thomas Paul



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Time: 1753-1784

**Sidebar: Phyllis Wheatley – Young And Gifted And Black**



Casseopia, "A Slave Girl of N.O."

Just as Jefferson and white America are stereotyping all blacks as a lesser species – “3/5ths of a person” in the 1787 Constitution – up pops a prodigy like young Phyllis Wheatley to make a liar of the inferiority claim.

Phyllis is purchased in 1760 off a slave ship anchored in Boston harbor. The seller gives her up “for a trifle,” fearing that his only option is to get nothing for the frail seven year old. The buyer is a local tailor named John Wheatley, who gives the girl her last name and turns her over to his wife, Susanna, to make her into a domestic helper.

But it quickly becomes apparent to all that the child is blessed with extraordinary talent, especially when it comes to reading and writing and languages. She is tutored by the Wheatley’s son and daughter, and, at age twelve, has learned both Greek and Latin. She soon turns her attention to poetry, including the works of John Milton and Alexander Pope, and at fourteen, begins to try her own hand at the art form.

Those who read her early poems are won over by their authenticity and emotional impact, and encourage her to publish them to reach a wider audience. But neither American printers nor their white audiences are ready to accept the notion of black authorship – a bias that will persist all the way up to and beyond the narratives of David Walker and Frederick Douglass.

So in 1773 the Wheatleys send the twenty year old girl off to London, along with their son, to explore the possibility of having her early poems published

there. She soon finds patrons, and her first collection of poetry is distributed that same year.

It is then that recognition from the outside world comes to Phyllis Wheatley.

Celebrity follows, including correspondence with a host of dignitaries and a personal visit with George Washington in 1776, soon after the Revolutionary War is under way.

In 1778 John Wheatley dies and emancipates her in his will. That same year she marries a free black grocer, John Peters, and begins to make her own way in the segregated enclave of Boston – which will prove to be a difficult journey to the end of her life.

Her husband is thrown into debtor's prison, two of their babies die in infancy, and she is left working as a scullery maid to try to support herself and her one remaining son. Her strength runs out in 1784 and she dies in Boston age thirty-one, followed shortly by her child.

The person Phyllis Wheatley is soon forgotten, but not her poetry. It lives on beyond her time, graceful and haunting, telling her story, moving those who hear it.

She writes her English patron of the trauma surrounding her enslavement in a poem titled *To The Right Honourable William, Earl Of Dartmouth*:

*Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,  
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe below'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?*

In another poem, *On Being Brought From Africa To America*, she acknowledges and laments the racial prejudice she has encountered and asserts that “Negroes...may be refin'd and join th' angelic train.”

*'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”  
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd and join th' angelic train.*

In a third poem, *To A Clergyman On The Death Of His Lady*, she echoes the solace found in many Negro Spiritual about the “perfect bliss” to come in God’s hereafter.

*WHERE contemplation finds her sacred spring,  
Where heav’nly music makes the arches ring,  
Where virtue reigns unsully’d and divine,  
Where wisdom thron’d, and all the graces shine,  
There sits thy spouse amidst the radiant throng,  
While praise eternal warbles from her tongue;  
There choirs angelic shout her welcome round,  
With perfect bliss, and peerless glory crown’d.*

In her poetry, her letters and her manner, young Phyllis Wheatley signals the world that blacks are not to be denied on their road to freedom and respect