

Liberalism, Republicanism, and Philadelphia's Black Elite in the Early Republic: The Social Thought of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen

Thomas E. Will
University of Georgia

The 1793 yellow fever epidemic spread panic as well as death through the streets of Philadelphia. Between late August and early November, nearly 5,000 of Philadelphia's estimated 50,000 residents died of the fever while another 17,000 fled the city in fear.¹ The widespread abandonment of property and persons occasioned by death and dislocation generated "frightful scenes" which, in the eyes of one white observer, "seemed to indicate a total dissolution of the bonds of society in the nearest and dearest connexions."² The leaders of Philadelphia's black community found the suffering before them equally frightful, but from their perspective the dissolution of the bonds of society afforded an opportunity to forge new social bonds between members of their race and the larger community. As they had during the Revolution, and as they did during many subsequent crises in American history, African Americans stepped forward in this period of turmoil to demonstrate their capacity for bearing the responsibilities of citizenship. For neither the first time nor the last, white responses to their efforts disappointed their aspirations, if not their expectations.

1. Thomas Horrocks and John Van Horne, "Foreword," in J. Worth Estes and Billy Smith, eds., *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic* (Philadelphia: College of Physicians of Philadelphia, 1997), vii. Exact numbers are not known. The burial lists appended to Mathew Carey's book note 4,040 deaths but fail to account for burials outside the city. Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Yellow Fever*, . . . 4th ed. (Philadelphia, 1794; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1970), 116. According to a committee appointed during the epidemic, 12,196 residents left the city, but most historians estimate the number at 17,000 to 20,000. *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Committee to Attend to and Alleviate the Sufferings of the Afflicted with the Malignant Fever* (Philadelphia, 1794; reprint, Philadelphia, 1848), 243; J. H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949; reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 219.

The 1793 yellow fever crisis captures African Americans not only acting as citizens, but describing, defending, and explaining their actions in terms that lend meaning to the way black leaders in the early republic conceptualized citizenship. This study analyzes the writings of Philadelphia ministers Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, who coordinated black efforts to nurse the sick and bury the dead and later vehemently defended African Americans' role in the crisis against charges of greed and opportunism. Informed by both their own experiences and the ideological context defining the early republic, these two African-American leaders gave republican expression to their vision of community unity and liberal expression to their vision of freedom and independence. Though themselves middle-class, the ministers made it clear that they identified closely with lower-class African Americans, whom they considered well qualified to assume the responsibilities of citizenship. To those who would argue that poverty exempted one from disinterestedness and independent thought—and thus from citizenship—Allen answered that duty to God bound all individuals to society more closely than property ever could.

The yellow fever struck a Philadelphia community struggling with the ideological disruption attendant to the recent Revolution. Republican thought, culminating in the war and independence, fundamentally transformed the way people interacted, substituting new social bonds of respect, affection, and civic virtue for the traditional ties of family, church, dependency, and fixed status.³ As of 1793, however, it remained unclear how the young nation's competing social and political visions—republicanism and liberalism—would work to forge a new set of values and principles around which to organize human relationships. Scholars debate the structure of social and political thought in the decade following the war, some arguing that the republican paradigm continued to predominate and others contending that liberalism assumed an increasingly central role.⁴ Republicanism and liberalism posited contra-

2. Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*, 23.

3. Gordon Wood, "The Significance of the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 8 (Spring 1988), 18; Rowland Berthoff, "Independence and Attachment, Virtue and Interest: From Republican Citizen to Free Enterpriser, 1787-1837," in Richard Bushman et. al., eds., *Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 104.

4. For a discussion of republicanism's decline in the new nation see Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the Early American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969); Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1991), 252; and Wood, "The Significance of the Early Republic," 18. For a discussion of the liberal principles informing Jeffersonian Republican thought see Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); and

dictory verdicts on the nature of man that in turn informed divergent models of interaction between individuals. The former idealized "civic man," the propertied individual whose independence undergird his civic "virtue" and enabled him to voluntarily sacrifice his own interests to the greater good of the whole. The latter assumed the existence of "economic man," the individual who was naturally driven to maximize his own interests and who need do no more in order to serve the common good.⁵

The fundamental tension between the republican and liberal visions of America's future developed in conjunction with a social transformation of particular interest to black Philadelphians—the gradual abolition of slavery. The Pennsylvania Legislature's 1780 act to phase out slavery promised African Americans a new role in Philadelphia society, but by 1793 the contours of that role had yet to crystallize. As the curtain began to fall on the master-slave relationship, white and black Philadelphians alike found themselves engaged in a struggle to define the basis on which the two races would henceforth co-exist and interact. Black leaders confronted these issues on a personal as well as a theoretical level, for many members of the late eighteenth-century black middle class had obtained their freedom during their lifetimes. In short, everything seemed up for grabs, especially for African Americans, as the yellow fever descended upon Philadelphia.

The social and ideological context in which the epidemic emerged shaped the responses of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, two leading figures in the Philadelphia free black community. Their coordination of black efforts to nurse the sick and bury the dead has been chronicled by historians, but the conceptual framework underlying their actions bears further scrutiny. Jones' and Allen's discussion of free blacks' contributions to combating the epidemic, and of civic responsibility in general,

Joyce Appleby, "Republicanism in Old and New Contexts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 43 (January 1986): 20-34. For an interpretation emphasizing republicanism's continued predominance in the early republic see Lance Banning, "Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 43 (January 1986): 3-19; Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and Robert Shalhope, "Republicanism," in Jack Greene and J.R. Pole, eds., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 659. Daniel Rodgers discusses the historiography on republicanism's postwar fate in "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79(2) (June 1992), 19-20.

5. Rodgers, "Republicanism: the Career of a Concept," 18-19; Lance Banning, "Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited," 11-12.

sheds light on black elite thought in the early republic. Seeking to promote ties between Philadelphia's rapidly expanding free black population and the larger white society, and to demonstrate to anxious white observers that blacks merited inclusion in the state as equal citizens, Jones and Allen selectively drew upon the ideas and vocabularies associated with republicanism and liberalism.

The ministers' writings reflect the inherent tensions between liberal and republican thought, but they also illustrate how individuals in the early republic managed to subscribe simultaneously to principles from both conceptual models. An examination of Jones' and Allen's thought processes confirms Lance Banning's reminder that distinguishing between liberalism and republicanism may be a useful scholarly pursuit, but ultimately a counter-productive exercise "if we suppose that the analytical distinctions we detect were evident to those we study."⁶ Jones and Allen incorporated tenets from both lines of thought into a conceptual model suited to the particular needs and circumstances of the black community. The ministers assumed the existence of economic man; the individual, they held, was naturally motivated by self-interest. At the same time, Jones and Allen extolled civic virtue, civic involvement, and individual sacrifice for the greater good of the whole community. This study analyzes how Allen, in particular, sought to bring forth civic man by appealing to economic man; how he employed liberal terminology and proceeded from liberal assumptions to persuade his audience that sacrifice for one's fellow man ultimately served one's own interest by securing recompense from God.

Absalom Jones and Richard Allen were both born into slavery. Jones, who purchased his wife's freedom shortly after he married her in 1770, was not himself manumitted until 1784, at the age of thirty-eight. Allen, at the age of twenty-one, contracted with his owner in 1781 to buy his own freedom for \$2,000, which amount he earned chopping wood and laboring long hours in a brickyard. Though neither man received a formal education, both learned to read and write as slaves. Jones continued to work for his former master after his manumission, now receiving wages, while Allen became a Methodist preacher and supported himself working as a sawyer, wagon driver, shoemaker, and chimney-sweep. Their paths crossed at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, where Jones attended services and Allen preached to the small black congregation. Within months of their meeting, the two assumed

6. Banning, "Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited," 12.

leading roles in organizing the Free African Society, formally established in 1787.⁷

The Free African Society served as a benevolent and reform organization providing relief for orphans, widows, and sick members of Philadelphia's black community. Though the Society did not hold formal religious services during its first four years of existence, it adopted the Quaker custom of beginning each meeting with fifteen minutes of silence and, in affording institutional focus for support and communication in the free black community, generally assumed the social functions of a church.⁸ In 1791, the Free African Society appointed Jones to start organizing a drive for an independent black church. Allen, who had withdrawn from the Society in 1789 because of what he perceived as its drift toward Quakerism, joined efforts with Jones in the independent church movement. Shortly after the two began collecting subscriptions for a black church, a highly symbolic incident at St. George's Methodist Church confirmed the need for their endeavors. Jones, Allen, and other African-American members of the St. George's congregation contributed money and labor to help install a gallery and new floor, but white anxiety and resentment nevertheless increased at that church as black membership rose. The last straw came in 1792, when white elders attempted to relegate black worshippers to a segregated section of the newly built gallery. Jones and Allen left St. George's, more determined than ever to worship independently of whites.⁹

Jones and Allen understood that many white Philadelphians resented the assertiveness inherent in their plan for an independent black church. The Episcopal Bishop of Pennsylvania, for example, derisively stated that the plan "originated in pride."¹⁰ Seeking a powerful ally in the

7. Gary Nash, "New Light on Richard Allen: The Early Years of Freedom," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (April 1989), 336-337; Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 95-98; Ann Lammers, "The Rev. Absalom Jones and the Episcopal Church: Christian Theology and Black Consciousness in a New Alliance," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 51(2) (March 1982), 163-167; Carol George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 28-29.

8. Lammers, "The Rev. Absalom Jones and the Episcopal Church," 168-69.

9. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 118-19. Many historians, dating the St. George's incident in 1787, have regarded it as a catalyst for the independent church movement and argued that separate black churches had their origins in racial segregation imposed by whites. See Wesley, *Richard Allen*, 52-54; and George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 55. As Nash shows, however, the incident occurred five years after the formation of the Free African Society and several months after the subscription campaign for a black church had begun.

10. Benjamin Rush, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His "Travels Through Life" together with his Commonplace Book for 1789-1813*, ed. George Corner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 202.

white community, therefore, Jones and Allen appealed to Benjamin Rush for assistance in gathering subscriptions for the church. The ministers considered it vital to the future of free black Philadelphians that they cultivate the favor of sympathetic whites; "Dr. Rush," explained Allen, "did much for us in public by his influence."¹¹ With Rush's assistance, Jones and Allen managed to raise \$3,500 in subscriptions over the course of two years, but the project's relative value in the eyes of white Philadelphia became all too clear when fugitive slaveowners in flight from the Saint Dominguan Revolution began landing in the city during the summer of 1793. Many whites reneged on their pledges to the proposed black church, opting instead to contribute to the relief fund established for the French refugees. Within days, Philadelphians contributed \$12,000 to the Saint Dominguan slaveowners.¹²

When, therefore, Philadelphia succumbed to the yellow fever later in the summer of 1793, the city's free African Americans might have understandably declined to offer their services in alleviating white suffering. During the previous few years they had been humiliated in a church they helped refurbish; their plans for an independent black church had elicited a cool reception; and even sympathetic whites had shown more interest in supporting Dominguan slaveowners than aiding free black fellow residents.¹³ Many free African Americans likely also caught word of, and took offense at, early rumors circulating through the city that black treachery lay behind the yellow fever deaths. A white observer in the city at the fever's outbreak described in a letter to his son the latent white anxiety toward Philadelphia's free black population: "There was once a great Alarm rais'd that the Negroes had put Poison in the Pumps, and it was said that Somebody was found that would say he had seen some of them in the Act."¹⁴

Yet, the Free Africa Society responded when Rush, under the mistaken but common assumption that black people could not catch the fever, asked for the black community's assistance in early September.¹⁵

11. Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen, to which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793* (Philadelphia, 1833; repr., Philadelphia: Lee and Yeocum, 1887), 29.

12. Gary Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti in the American North: Black Saint Domingians in Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania History* 65 (Annual Supplement, 1998), 45.

13. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 122.

14. Paul Preston, "Some Incidents of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 38(2) (1914), 236.

15. Written accounts of previous yellow fever epidemics in Charleston and the West Indies led Rush to believe initially that African Americans would escape the disease. Rush realized his mistake

Jones and Allen mobilized free blacks to transport patients to Bush Hill hospital, deliver bodies to cemeteries, dig graves, and nurse and bleed sufferers. African Americans, in short, assumed the most grueling and distressing duties. Jones and Allen asserted that "twenty times" as many blacks as whites acted as nurses.¹⁶ While the precise number of African Americans contributing to relief efforts remains unclear, Benjamin Rush confirmed that African Americans comprised a sizable portion of the nurses and gravediggers. "They furnish nurses to most of my patients," Rush wrote to his wife in early September. Three weeks later, having finally realized that yellow fever afflicted blacks as well as whites, Rush acknowledged the importance of black volunteers and workers when he anxiously stated, "if the disorder should continue to spread among them, then will the measure of our sufferings be full."¹⁷ Another white Philadelphian writing in September echoed Rush's sentiments: "Indeed I don't know what the people would do, if it was not for the Negroes, as they are the Principal nurses."¹⁸

Jones and Allen rendered particularly conspicuous service. Rush noted in his personal correspondence that Jones was "indefatigable" in procuring nurses, "often sacrificing for that purpose whole nights of sleep without the least compensation," while Allen "was extremely useful in performing the mournful duties which were connected with burying the dead." Both men, continued Rush, "went among the poor who were sick, gave them the mercurial purges, bled them freely, and by these means, they this day informed me, they had recovered between two and three hundred people."¹⁹ After the epidemic subsided, Philadelphia

soon after black Philadelphians began caring for the afflicted. "They took the disease," he later wrote, "in common with the white people, and many of them died with it." Benjamin Rush, *An Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever, as it Appeared in the City of Philadelphia in the Year 1793* (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1794), 96-97.

16. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793, and a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia, 1794; reprint ed., Philadelphia: Independence National Historic Park, 1993), 14.

17. Benjamin Rush to Julia Rush, September 6 and September 25, 1793, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, vol. 2, ed. L.H. Butterfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 654, 684.

18. Edwin Bronner, "Letter from a Yellow Fever Victim, Philadelphia, 1793," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 86(2) (April 1962), 205; Elizabeth Drinker also noted, as early as September 8, that blacks "have offered to act as nurses to the sick." Elizabeth Drinker, "A Woman of the 'Best Sort': The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker," in Billy Smith, ed., *Life in Early Philadelphia: Documents from the Revolutionary and Early National Periods* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995), 143.

19. Benjamin Rush to unknown, October 29, 1793, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 731.

Mayor Matthew Clarkson applauded the "diligence, attention and decency of deportment" exhibited by Jones, Allen, and their fellow black relief workers.²⁰

Not all white Philadelphians, however, so readily acknowledged the sacrifices made by their black fellow residents. Most white chroniclers of the epidemic neither lauded nor disparaged black relief workers' "deportment" during the crisis. Rather, the typical white memory simply blotted out black contributions while applauding white efforts. Matthew Carey and Jean Deveze, for example, each heaped praise upon the prominent whites comprising the Committee to Attend and Alleviate the Sufferings of the Afflicted. "Oh! You who pretend to philanthropy, reflect upon the indefatigable Girard," exclaimed Deveze in a representative passage, "and you citizens of Philadelphia, may the name of Girard be ever dear to you!—if you, like me, had witnessed his virtuous actions, his brows would have been long ago adorned with a civic crown."²¹ Other white authors focused on the laudable actions of citizens with whom they shared a religious identity. Lutheran Minister Justus Helmuth, for example, never mentioned black nurses or corpse-bearers but emphasized, "I have found some real, sincere Christians among our so much defamed Lutherans."²²

Other whites openly criticized the actions of Philadelphia's black community during the crisis. After the epidemic subsided Allen and Jones wrote, "we feel ourselves sensibly aggrieved by the censorious epithets of many," but one individual in particular excited their ire. Mathew Carey, a Philadelphia printer, produced a pamphlet during the crisis that went through four editions between November 14 and December 20. Carey initiated his discussion of black involvement in the epidemic by claiming that few African Americans contracted the disease, an assertion that implicitly minimized black sacrifice. Though conceding the error in the original theory that African Americans enjoyed complete immunity, Carey added, "the error that prevailed on this subject had a very salutary effect; for at an early period of the disorder, hardly any white nurses could be procured; and, had the Negroes been

20. Jones and Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, 24.

21. Jean Deveze, *An Enquiry into, and Observations Upon, The Causes and Effects of the Epidemic Disease, which Raged Philadelphia From the Month of August Till Towards the Middle of December, 1793* (Philadelphia, 1794), 28.

22. Justus H. Helmuth, *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian*, translated by Charles Erdman (Philadelphia, 1794), 36.

equally terrified, the sufferings of the sick, great as they were, would have been exceedingly aggravated." This casual devaluation of black lives served as, at best, a backhanded acknowledgement of the importance of black contributions. Carey's ensuing statements, however, simply galled Jones and Allen. "The great demand for nurses," charged Carey, "afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of the blacks. They extorted two, three, four, and even five dollars a night for such attendance, as would have been well paid by a single dollar. Some of them were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick."²³

Jones and Allen might have opted to overlook Carey's censure of "the vilest of the blacks," for the white pamphleteer exempted middle class African Americans from his charges, singling out Jones, Allen, and William Gray as individuals whose services demanded "public gratitude." Jones and Allen might even have seconded Carey's denunciation of "the vilest of the blacks," exploiting this opportunity to demonstrate to upper- and middle-class whites that the black elite shared their concern for the creation of a stable, law-abiding society.²⁴ Indeed, fifteen years after the 1793 yellow fever crisis, Allen used the murder of a white woman by two black men as an occasion to warn lower-class African Americans against the black community's "tendency of dishonesty and lust, of drunkenness and stealing."²⁵ In 1809, Allen helped form the Society for Suppressing Vice and Immorality, designed to regulate the lives of non-elite black Philadelphians. Again, in 1822, Allen served on a seven-man committee organized to examine a recent crime wave attributed to a lower-class black gang. The committee members assured the public that African Americans were "burdened with shame" by the actions of the small criminal minority, and recommended to their brethren of color "such demeanour as will secure the good wishes of the public."²⁶

23. Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever*, 63. About 240 black Philadelphians died of yellow fever, or roughly ten percent of the black population. This figure approximates the percentage of whites who died. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 124.

24. For a discussion of the delicate balancing act performed by Philadelphia's black elite in order to legitimate their authority in the eyes of both influential whites and the black community, see Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 21-25. For the black elite's middle-class attitudes and reformist views, see also Frederick Cooper, "Elevating the Race: The Social Thought of Black Leaders, 1827-50," *American Quarterly* 24 (5) (December 1972): 604-25.

25. Richard Allen, "Confession of John Joyce, alias Davis, who was Executed on Monday, the 14th of March, 1808, for the Murder of Mrs. Sarah Cross; with an Address to the Public, and People of Color," in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 417.

26. *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, March 3, 1822.

Significantly, however, Jones and Allen did not respond to Carey's pamphlet by lecturing, apologizing for, or distancing themselves from lower-class black Philadelphians. Their 1794 pamphlet entitled *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People* unambiguously emphasized the authors' black identity over their middle-class identity. Jones and Allen minimized the importance of class differences within the African-American community and rallied to the defense of those dismissed by Carey as "the vilest of the blacks." "We have seen more humanity, more real sensibility," argued the ministers, "from the poor blacks, than from the poor whites." Steadily manifesting a relatively stronger race than class allegiance, the authors protested that laying charges at the feet of even a single portion of the black community would serve to "prejudice the minds of the people in general against us."²⁷

A Narrative suggests that Philadelphia's black elite possessed a less defined class consciousness in 1793 than it did after heavy immigration swelled the city's free black population in the early nineteenth century. Free African Americans, recently manumitted slaves, and fugitive slaves from other states and the West Indies increased Pennsylvania's free black population from 6,537 in 1790 to 32,153 in 1820.²⁸ The 1790 community's small size bred greater familiarity between African Americans of different classes, while many members of the black elite—such as Jones and Allen themselves—had obtained their freedom relatively recently and had just begun to accumulate wealth and construct a separate, middle-class identity. Thus, the eighteenth-century black middle-class proved less inclined to assert its "respectability" by distancing itself from "the vilest of the blacks" when white attacks focused on the latter.

The black elite's identity began to crystallize in the early nineteenth century, forged in its perception of the vast differences between itself and—in W.E.B. DuBois' words—the "mass of poverty-stricken, ignorant fugitives and ill-trained freedmen" streaming into the city.²⁹ The black middle-class feared that the immigrants threatened to stigmatize all African Americans. Individuals from other states and countries comprised the largest segment of the African-American population incarcerated at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Prison, for example, while the proportion of that institution's black inmates increased from 29 percent in

27. Jones and Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, 10-11.

28. Edward R. Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery—Servitude—Freedom, 1639-1861* (New York: Negro University Press, 1910), 253.

29. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), 31.

1800 to 46 percent in 1830.³⁰ The number of black Philadelphians prosecuted for property offenses tripled from ten in 1793 to thirty in 1800, while criminal prosecutions aimed at African Americans throughout the state rose from one percent of total prosecutions in 1793 to seven percent of the 1800 total.³¹

Though prosecution and imprisonment rates did not necessarily reflect the rate of black criminal activity relative to white, they did reflect and influence white perceptions of the black community. Black leaders took notice. Philadelphia newspaper editorials increasingly complained of black criminal activity, and the Pennsylvania House of Representatives appointed a committee in 1813 to consider introducing legislation aimed at preventing black immigration into the state. As the clamor against African-American criminals and immigrants grew, the black elite increasingly distanced itself from lower-class members of the race. Allen's shift in posture, from that of an indignant defender of lower-class African Americans in 1793 to that of a moral steward in the early nineteenth century, reflected the emergence of the black elite's self-consciousness as a distinct group endowed with superior values.

Jones' and Allen's defense of black labors during the 1793 yellow fever crisis incorporated both republican and liberal thought. Examined in conjunction with a sermon Allen wrote to promote acts of benevolence, *A Narrative* sheds light on the authors' assumptions concerning the nature of man and the relationship between individuals in society. Classical republicanism extolled public virtue—understood as the sacrifice of individual desires and interests to the greater good of the whole. According to republican thought, man reached his highest fulfillment as a social being in displaying public virtue.³² Jones and Allen bristled when Carey trivialized black sacrifice and charged that African Americans exploited the epidemic to further their own interests rather than contribute to the good of society. "We have suffered!," they protested in their *Narrative*. Jones and Allen countered Carey's assertion that few African Americans died from the disease, citing burial record evidence demonstrating a

30. Leslie Patrick, "Numbers that Are Not New: African Americans in the Country's First Prison, 1790-1835," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 119 (January/April 1995), 109.

31. G.S. Rowe, "Black Offenders, Criminal Courts, and Philadelphia Society in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Social History* 22(4) (summer 1989), 689-699.

32. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, 53; Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 104; Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 7.

fourfold increase in black deaths during 1793. "Thus," emphasized Jones and Allen, "were our services extorted *at the peril of our lives*." To the charge of financial self-interest, they answered that the Free African Society actually spent £411 on coffins and labor but only received £233 in payment. A committee appointed by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, after investigating vouchers provided by Jones and Allen in the summer of 1794, confirmed the £178 loss claimed by the two authors.³³

Further emphasizing their financial disinterestedness and sacrifice for the good of the whole, the two leaders explained, "we have buried *several hundreds* of poor persons and strangers, for which service we have never received, nor never asked any compensation." Jones and Allen rounded out their republican defense of black participation in the epidemic by relating numerous incidents of African-American individuals serving the community without expecting recompense. Mary Scott, for example, nursed a man and his son for half a dollar per day and refused more money when offered; Sarah Bass, a poor black widow, assisted several families "and when anything was offered her, she left it to the option of those she served"; another elderly black woman nursed a man to recovery, and when asked what he must pay her for her services replied, "a dinner master on a cold winter's day." Ultimately, *A Narrative* strongly implied that black Philadelphians not only possessed sufficient public virtue to merit full inclusion in civic affairs, but exhibited more public virtue during the crisis than most whites. Careful not to offend prominent, sympathetic whites such as Benjamin Rush, Jones and Allen nonetheless asserted, "we do not recollect such acts of humanity from the poor white people, in all the round we have been engaged in." They saved their sharpest republican barb for the pamphleteer Mathew Carey, whom they charged with making "more money by the sale of his 'scraps' [pamphlets] than a dozen of the greatest extortioners among the black nurses."³⁴

A Narrative demonstrates that republicanism was not the sole element in Jones' and Allen's thought; they subscribed as well to elements of eighteenth-century liberalism. Liberalism did not dismiss the importance of the public good; rather, it held that free individuals' pursuit of private ambitions in a competitive society ultimately served the public

33. Jones and Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, 7, 16, 6; Minute Book, 1790-1803, Committee for Improving the Condition of Free Blacks, *Papers of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery*, Microfilm Collection, reel 6 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1988), 84.

34. Jones and Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, 7, 11-13, 8.

good better than did the naïve assumption that men could be prevailed upon to sacrifice their own interests to the good of the whole. According to liberal thought, virtue attended acquisitive individualism, or the individual pursuit of wealth through hard work.³⁵ Though emphasizing that most black Philadelphians exhibited admirable republican sacrifice and disinterestedness during the epidemic, Jones and Allen admitted that some received “extravagant” wages for their services. Significantly, however, they chose not to condemn these high-wage earners. Jones and Allen explained that the high-wage earners, to whom Carey evidently referred when he charged African Americans with extortion, did not work for them but rather contracted their labor on a daily basis to the highest bidder. The authors noted that they had tried to procure the wage-seekers’ labor for a dollar a day, but found that “they had been allured away by others who offered greater wages, until they got from two to four dollars per day.” This individualistic response to market forces hardly represented a lack of public virtue, claimed Jones and Allen, for “it was natural for people in low circumstances to accept a voluntary, bounteous reward.” Later, they again argued—this time by implication—that acquisitive individualism was “natural”: “Had Mr. Carey been solicited to such an undertaking, for hire, *Query*, what would *he* have demanded?”³⁶

The authors’ use and implication of the word “natural” is telling. Eighteenth-century thinkers commonly sought to describe and explain the natural forces holding society together; republicanism offered virtue as a natural force, and liberalism offered acquisitive individualism. Jones and Allen, at different times and according to their needs, embraced one or the other. They accused Carey of unvirtuous self-interest when he responded to market forces by selling pamphlets, for example, yet they excused black responses to market incentives as “natural.” Conversely, *A Narrative’s* numerous examples of poor African Americans refusing pay for their services somewhat undermined the authors’ assumption that acquisitiveness naturally motivated individuals. The contradictions inherent in Jones’ and Allen’s thought did not issue from disingenuousness. To the contrary, liberal and republican postulates coexisted so seamlessly in the two leaders’ world views that they did not even perceive the possible contradictions.

Jones’ and Allen’s liberal assumptions derived from their own life his-

35. Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 8; Robert Shalhope, “Republicanism,” *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, 657-59.

36. Jones and Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, 7-8.

tories and underscore the vast differences between slavery's slow death in the North and its later rapid abolition in the South. The ministers' lives bridged the gap between slavery and freedom. Both men, and numerous other black northerners as well, purchased their own freedom—a process that introduced them to capitalist social relations and schooled them in the principles of acquisitive individualism. In order to earn his freedom, for example, Allen learned to work long hours for extra money, to save, and to meet the requirements of the contract negotiated with his owner. In short, Allen's experience as a slave, paradoxically, immersed him in the basic tenets of the bourgeois value system. One of his contemporaries praised his "business tact and managing capacity" as a chimney sweep, and he retired with an estate worth an estimated thirty to forty thousand dollars.³⁷ Allen's notions of freedom were closely tied to the means by which he escaped slavery. For him, freedom meant the freedom to negotiate an advantageous labor contract, the freedom to accumulate, and the freedom to secure economic independence. Thus, he bristled at Carey's charges of black "extortion," for Allen regarded the right to shop one's services on the labor market as integral to protecting black freedom.

Allen's liberal assumptions concerning the innate quality of acquisitive individualism in human beings appear all the more significant when compared with the pre-bourgeois values prevalent among freedpeople following the Civil War. As Barbara Fields deftly explains, slaves emancipated during the Civil War were "not habituated to that logic of ever-increasing effort to satisfy ever-expanding needs that market society had learned to call 'ambition,' [and] they did not seek higher wages with a view toward earning a maximum income."³⁸ Southern freedpeople in the Civil War era possessed no "innate" predilection toward, or understanding of, "rational" market behavior as expressed through acquisitive individualism. The point is not that they failed to recognize the benefits of high wages; emancipated southern slaves repeatedly demanded more pay. Rather, the point is that they did not regard high wages as the measure of their freedom and they did not perceive the labor market as their

37. Thomas Mitchell quoted in Charles Wesley, *Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1935), 76, 143.

38. Barbara Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 163. For a discussion of freedpeople's rejection of capitalist values and adherence to an alternate set of pre-industrial values following the Civil War, see also Lawrence Powell, *New Masters: Northern Planters During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 79, 97.

avenue to independence.

Southern freedpeople quite rationally eschewed "rational" market behavior. With good reason they cast a suspicious eye on wage labor. Whereas wage labor served as the mechanism through which Absalom Jones and Richard Allen drew themselves out of slavery, from southern freedpeople's perspective wage labor as introduced in the postwar South bore an all too familiar resemblance to bondage. Planters paying wages by the day or the month sought to maintain gang labor and establish a uniform time and pace of work in the cotton and rice fields. This system returned black workers to the supervision and discipline of a driver, sometimes re-christened a "foreman." Gang work managed by a driver, for a standardized, mandated number of hours each day, flew in the face of former slaves' conception of freedom. They understood that agricultural labor entailed hard work, but they insisted upon dispensing their labor at a pace and time determined by themselves. The individualistic wage system frustrated freedpeople's desire to establish cooperative work arrangements among family members. For southern freedpeople, in short, freedom meant greater personal and cultural autonomy. They understood that in their world, the path to those objectives lay not through waged gang labor but through independent land ownership.³⁹

Furthermore, southern freedpeople lacked the faith that Jones and Allen exhibited in the free labor market in part because nothing other than a grossly mutated labor market existed in the postwar South. Planters enlisted the law and turned to intimidation and violence to constrain the free market in labor. Vagrancy laws, aimed at any "laborer or servant who loiters away his time, or refuses to comply with any contracts," were designed to limit the mobility of labor and keep former slaves on the plantations.⁴⁰ Enticement acts, passed by every southern state after the war, sought to constrain the demand side of the labor market. Enticement acts made it a crime for a planter to "hire away, or induce to leave the service of another," any laborer "by offering higher wages or in any other way whatsoever."⁴¹ Many planters engaged in

39. Freedpeople's aversion to waged gang labor, manifesting itself in the partial withdrawal of their labor, ultimately forced planters, in a sort of compromise, to adopt share tenancy arrangements. See James Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 178-196; and Jonathan Weiner, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 35.

40. Weiner, *Social Origins of the New South*, 35-69; Jonathan Weiner, "Class Structure and Economic Development in the American South, 1865-1955," *American Historical Review* 84 (October 1979), 973-975; *Acts of the Session of 1865-6, of the General Assembly of Alabama* (Montgomery, AL, 1866), 119-20.

41. *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia* (Milledgeville, Ga., 1866), 153-54.

extralegal collusion to limit wage-raising competition for labor. As one planter explained in 1866, "The nigger is going to be made a serf, sure as you live. It won't need any law for that. Planters will have an understanding among themselves: 'You won't hire my niggers, and I won't hire yours,' then what's left for them? They're attached to the soil, and we're as much their masters as ever."⁴² Finally, postwar planters employed Klan intimidation and violence to limit labor mobility.⁴³ Taken together, planters' efforts to manipulate the labor market in the postwar South made a mockery of the term "free labor", undermining any potential faith freedpeople might have acquired in liberalism's abstract logic. Black southerners in the late nineteenth century emerged from slavery with a very different understanding of freedom than did Jones and Allen.

Jones' and Allen's liberal assumptions circumscribed their faith in republicanism's efficacy. They praised public virtue where they found it, to be sure, and they sought—partly for white consumption and partly because events justified it—to depict black contributions to the epidemic relief effort as models of disinterested sacrifice. Yet a sermon appended to Allen's autobiography indicates that he, at least, hesitated to appeal to his congregation's public virtue when seeking to inspire acts of benevolence. Allen's sermon, extolling "Christian charity," issued from the premise that individuals respond to self-interest rather than to quaint notions of disinterested sacrifice. Couched in liberal terminology and founded on liberal postulates, the sermon nonetheless ultimately promoted the republican ideals of civic involvement for the greater good of the whole. Thus, Allen conflated liberal and republican thought into an ideological amalgam that combined desirable and practical ideas from each. His sermon reconciled the contradictions between republicanism and liberalism, exploiting acquisitive individualism for the greater good of the whole while conversely rendering public virtue appealing to the acquisitive individual.

At first glance, Allen's definition of Christian charity appears synonymous with public virtue. Christian charity, he explained, was "pure and disinterested, remote from all hopes or views of worldly return or recompense from the persons we relieve." The key word in Allen's definition was worldly; Christian charity promised recompense from God,

42. John Townsend Trowbridge, *The South: A Tour of Its Battle-Fields and Ruined Cities* (Hartford, Ct., 1866), 427.

43. Allen Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 81, 290; Weiner, "Class Structure and Economic Development," 975.

distinguishing it from public virtue. Allen described the individual's decision to engage in benevolent labor in return for divine payment very much as one would describe a market transaction. Liberalism so pervaded the minister's thought that he conceptualized the relationship between the individual and God as commercial. In market terminology, Allen promised that an act of Christian charity would ensure "a return from God"; it "will not lose its reward"; it "can purchase heavenly possessions"; it "insures a blessing"; and it promises "future benefits." This spokesman for a bourgeois God admonished his congregation to be "as industrious in laying up treasures in heaven, as you have been in hoarding up the perishable riches of this world."⁴⁴

Ingeniously, Allen managed to condemn greed by employing the principles of acquisitive individualism. Those who coveted worldly wealth and prosperity, explained Allen, suffered not from excessive rationality but from insufficient rationality. Their focus on the accumulation of worldly wealth blinded them to the larger, immeasurably more significant imperative to invest in the future by accumulating heavenly credit. "How strangely inconsistent is the narrow-hearted man with himself, with his own settled principles!" exclaimed Allen; "He earnestly wishes for wealth and prosperity, yet cannot find it in his heart to lay out a little of what he has to secure that blessing, that prosperity, he aims at for himself and family." On the other hand, continued the author, "how much more rationally does the open-hearted, benevolent Christian act, and upon what sure and steady principles does he proceed!" The benevolent Christian, like the acquisitive individual, kept the end reward always in sight. Habituated to regard acquisitive individualism as innate, Allen combated worldly self-interest by appealing to a greater self-interest. By means attuned to liberal premises he promoted republican ends, for Christian charity entailed worldly sacrifice and worldly disinterestedness for the greater good of the whole.⁴⁵

Though it issued largely from his own assumptions forged in his own experience, Allen's ideological amalgam met the needs of Philadelphia's free black community. Republican thought promised the virtuous man exalted public status—a reward largely denied African Americans in the early republic. Allen simply could not promise his black congregation the social and political recompense whites assumed public virtue should elicit. The principle of Christian charity enabled Allen to say, in effect, 'Do not concern yourself with the ingratitude of the objects of your

44. Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors*, 58, 65, 67, 63, 61.

45. *Ibid.*, 65.

benevolence, for your reward awaits you in heaven.' The minister explained: "Should I bestow money upon one in apparent necessity, who might abuse it to ill purposes, yet the good intention sanctifies my gift, consecrates it to God, and insures me a blessing, because it was done in His name and for His sake."⁴⁶ Allen sought to forestall frustration in the African-American community, generating faith among his congregation that black sacrifices and acts of benevolence would catch the attention of a judge more powerful than white Philadelphia.

Allen's formulation enabled him to circumvent a premise proscribing most African Americans in the new nation from republicanism's folds. Classical republicanism held that only propertied men possessed the independence requisite for public virtue. "Such is the frailty of the human heart," opined John Adams, "that very few men who have no property, have any judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by some man of property, who has attached their minds to his interests."⁴⁷ Similarly, Thomas Jefferson reasoned that "dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition."⁴⁸ Very few black Philadelphians in the early republic possessed the landed property that republican theorists exalted. To white thinkers, therefore, African Americans implicitly stood outside the bounds of republicanism.

Allen rejected the notion that propertyless men had no judgment of their own or inevitably sank into venality. He indeed regarded his black congregation as dependent, but he bypassed whites and traced the lines of dependency to God. White republican theorists argued that men without property had no stake in society and thus no incentive to sacrifice for the good of the whole. Allen substituted God's judgment for property, thus affording all men a stake in society. The "prudent Christian," explained Allen, considered acts of Christian charity "a demand made upon him by Christ himself." Propertyless blacks thus had as much incentive as propertied whites to involve themselves in their communities, for "the lowest of us can serve God as well as the richest person here below."⁴⁹ Allen never entirely lost hope that African Americans' persistent acts of Christian charity might eventually dispel white prejudice, but the set of ideas he constructed enabled him to appeal to

46. *Ibid.*, 66.

47. Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850-56), IX, 376.

48. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed., William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 165.

49. Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors*, 62.

his black audience in the racist context in which he worked.

Allen's prosaic, sober assessment of African Americans' status in the new nation found expression in the familiar proverb with which he and Jones concluded *A Narrative*.

God and soldier, all men do adore,
In time of war, and not before;
When the war is over, and all things righted,
God is forgotten, and the soldier slighted.⁵⁰

Allen and Jones, however, never succumbed to pessimism or defeatism. Their defense of the slighted black soldiers of the yellow fever war testified to their confidence that white attitudes were susceptible to change. The same confidence impelled Jones in 1799 to petition Congress protesting slavery and the fugitive slave law, and drove Allen to devote the greater part of his life to uplifting his race. The ministers' pragmatism, in other words, by no means represented agreement with the status quo. When Allen asked his congregation to value God's judgment over white assessments of citizenship and worth, he registered a renunciation of—not his assent to—white ingratitude.

At the same time, Jones and Allen learned from their own experiences to expect slights from white America. The segregationist policy at St George's Church, the relative paucity of white contributions to their church compared to donations to Dominguan slaveowners, and their own masters' refusal to manumit them without first extracting compensation, convinced the ministers that phrases like "the good of the whole" rang hollow where race was involved. The "unvirtuous" behavior of many whites during the yellow fever crisis—President Washington and his cabinet left town—confirmed Jones' and Allen's skepticism toward republican ideals: "many of the white people, that ought to be patterns for us to follow after, have acted in a manner that would make humanity shudder."⁵¹ Consequently, though they gave an occasional nod toward "the good of the whole," Jones and Allen essentially conceptualized society as an aggregate of individuals pursuing disparate interests. Their liberalism went hand-in-hand with their pragmatic assessment of white racial attitudes. The path to black freedom and independence, held Jones and Allen, would be forged not by white philanthropy, but by individual African Americans advancing their own interests in a market society.

50. Jones and Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, 21.

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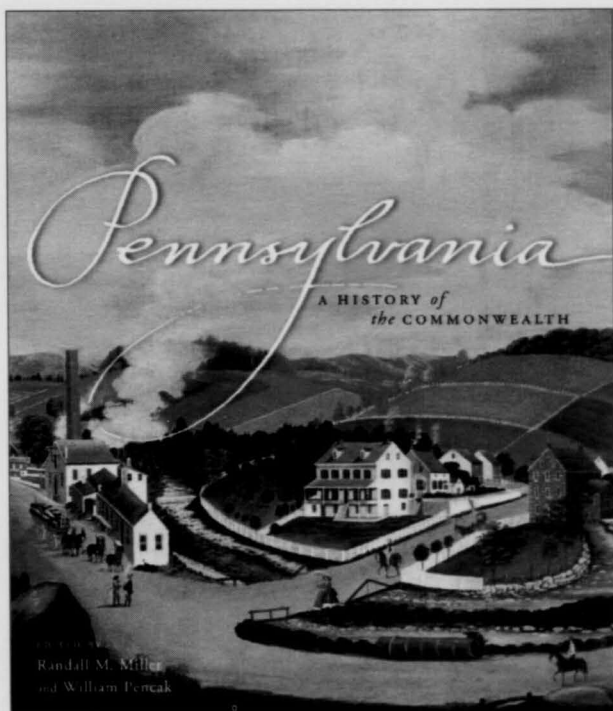
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Grundy Pulled the Strings



Cartoon appearing on page 1 of *The Philadelphia Tribune*, 9 April, 1949, criticizing Pennsylvania Republican boss Joseph Grundy, President of the Pennsylvania Manufacturers Association, and State Senator Mason Owlett for preventing passage of a law establishing a Fair Employment Practice Commission.