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Anthony Benezet and the Africans' School: Toward A Theory of Full Equality

AMONG the many but relatively little-known achievements of Philadelphia Quaker educator, humanitarian, and social critic Anthony Benezet (1713–1784), probably the most significant, both in his time and in the two centuries since, was his discovery of the inherent equality of the black and white races. By applying his radical Protestant theories of human brotherhood in his classes for black children, he proved to his own satisfaction first, and then to others, that the widespread belief in black mental and moral inferiority was founded only in the fears and prejudices of the white ruling race. Beyond the long-range effect of this startling social discovery on a skeptical, sophisticated Enlightenment audience, the impact it had on his own students and their peers and descendants may turn out to be even more important in an ongoing revolution in attitudes and sociopolitical adjustments.

Anthony Benezet's Philadelphia had grown to a city of approximately 15,000 inhabitants by the year 1750, when he first began his experiments in teaching black children to read, write, and do simple arithmetic. The port city had never had a large slave population, owing largely to the commercial nature of its economy. Esti-

mates of the black population at mid-century range upward from 3,000, of which an unknown proportion were freemen. A very few of the slaves may have been tutored in the homes of their masters, their reading limited to the Bible and catechism. White public sentiment against instructing blacks was such that a "Mr. Bolton" had been arraigned in court for teaching Negroes in his Philadelphia school as late as 1740.[1] Free blacks apparently had no formal educational opportunities.

As W. E. B. DuBois has noted with two-edged perception, "Anthony Benezet and the Friends of Philadelphia have the honor of first recognizing the fact that the welfare of the State demands the education of Negro children." Indeed, Benezet believed that the instruction of *all* children was the proper concern of the state in its own best interests. It was the universality of his inclusion of blacks, along with poor whites and young females, that made his educational drive so important.[2]

One impetus for his early home teaching of free blacks originated in his spontaneous friendships with many of them. His frequent conversations with members of the black community on the streets and in the market place confirmed his faith in the brotherhood of all mankind. Certainly he saw no reason to deny his black friends the same opportunities that he believed so important for his white students. He summed up the reasons for educating blacks in these words: "Having observed the many disadvantages these afflicted people labor under in point of education and otherwise, a tender care has taken place to promote their instruction in school learning, and also their religious and temporal welfare, in order to qualify them for becoming reputable members of society."[3]

The few earlier attempts than Anthony Benezet's to instruct

[1] Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1970), 308; W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia, 1899), 13; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: The Development of American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 133.

[2] Roger Bruns, "Anthony Benezet's Assertion of Negro Equality," *Journal of Negro History* (*JNH*), LVI (1971), 230–238; DuBois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 83; Benezet to Samuel Fothergill, Nov. 27, 1758, George S. Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia, 1937), 232.

[3] Herbert Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," *JNH*, XXV (1940), 353, 354; Roberts Vaux, *Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia, 1817), 19–22; Benezet, *A Short Account of the People Called Quakers* (Philadelphia, 1780), 2, 3.

Negroes had been almost exclusively religious, oriented toward "saving souls" through the use of Scripture to reinforce patterns of servitude. William Edmundson, traveling companion of Quaker founder George Fox in the New World, had argued in the late seventeenth century that the instruction of blacks in Christian precepts would help maintain slavery, rather than destroy it; and somewhat later, evangelist George Whitefield insisted that religious training was quite useful for the control of slaves, who should be taught "to obey their masters" as part of the "Christianizing" process.[4]

Even these guarded arguments for religious education had met with increasing hostility in the eighteenth century. There was a widespread belief that only heathens could be enslaved in the first place, with a disquieting corollary that once slaves were converted to Christianity, they merited freedom. In practice, then, the conversion process could subvert the whole profitable development of the slave system. If only non-Christians could be slaves, religious instruction was tantamount to inviting rebellion. Also there was the ever present fear that literate slaves might find more incendiary reading material than the specified Scriptures to guide their actions.[5]

When we consider the prevailing hostility to the education of blacks, it is not surprising that George Whitefield's projected Christian school for Negroes in Pennsylvania was a total failure. Although Whitefield, who was a friend of the Benezet family, protested the blatant abuses of the slave system, and called for more humane treatment of human property, he did not object to the institution of slavery *per se*, nor suggest emancipation. He believed that Christian training could create a more efficient slave labor force without the use of brutal coercion. In 1740, the same year that Mr. Bolton was arraigned in Philadelphia for teaching black children, Whitefield purchased 5,000 acres of land at the forks of the Delaware River. There, on a site called Nazareth, he planned to build his training school. He worked closely with Anthony Benezet's father, John Stephen, who had been his friend and host during

[4] Aptheker, "Quakers," 333; Milton Cantor, "The Image of the Negro in Colonial Literature," *New England Quarterly*, XXXVI (1963), 454, 455. Also, see Thomas Woody, *Early Quaker Education in Pennsylvania* (New York, 1920), 232.

[5] Cantor, "Image," 454, 455.

preaching tours in the Philadelphia area. The elder Benezet served as manager for the school project, but the undertaking failed to attract sufficient capital to succeed. In addition, the first contingent of missionary teacher-builders at Nazareth confronted serious resistance from local Indians who objected to yet another invasion of their lands by white settlers. After a few months, the major financial backer, William Seward, died, and the project was abandoned.[6]

The failure of Whitefield's school was, of course, known to Anthony Benezet because of his father's deep involvement in it. Anthony and Whitefield, who were nearly the same age and had known each other from their youth in England, had serious differences of opinion in at least two areas. For one thing, Benezet disliked the evangelist's "enthusiasm," or zealous, emotional brand of proselytizing Christianity, and apparently did not support the preaching services Whitefield held in Philadelphia. Whitefield's willingness to propagate slavery, even a benevolent kind, was increasingly disturbing to Benezet, and created the most serious barrier to their continuing friendship.[7]

Whitefield, still stinging from the collapse of his Nazareth plans, announced in 1741 that slave labor would be necessary for the success of his newest educational project—the "Bethesda" Orphan House on a 640-acre plantation near Savannah, Georgia. He defended his position with the statement that he would "make their lives comfortable, and lay a foundation for breeding up their posterity in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Whitefield was a key figure in the official decision to allow slavery in Georgia, where it had been outlawed earlier. As soon as the law was changed, he brought in a large number of slaves to cultivate the rice and flax crops for Bethesda. When the evangelist died in 1770 and willed

[6] See James Wickersham, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania* (Lancaster, Pa., 1886), 250; Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (London, 1808), I, 182; Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 232; George Whitefield, *Journal* (London, 1960), VI, May 7, 1740, 419; Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century Revival* (London, 1970), I, 594, 595.

[7] Brookes, 96, 97. Soon after John Stephen Benezet moved to Germantown in 1743, and Anthony moved to Philadelphia, Whitefield wrote to Benjamin Franklin that he planned to visit the city soon, but since his "old friend and host, Mr. Benezet," no longer lived there, he did not know where he would stay. Apparently, staying with Anthony Benezet, whose house normally was quite hospitable, was not an alternative for Whitefield at the time.

the slaves to his patroness, the Lady Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, rather than emancipating them, Benezet could no longer restrain his anguish. He wrote Lady Huntingdon a long letter urging her to free them as a Christian duty. She replied that she intended to do so, but the Revolution intervened before any action was taken and the slaves continued to be held at Bethesda as part of the Countess' estate until after 1784.[8]

The failure of both Whitefield's Nazareth project and Mr. Bolton's school probably served as a caution to Benezet in his own desire to found a free school for the black children of Philadelphia. He began his teaching quietly at home, without seeking outside financial support of any kind, rather than attempting to start a full-fledged school at first. He understood the highly controversial nature of his actions, and he disliked overt conflict. Many years passed before he wrote anything about his work, but he continued for two decades the unobtrusive, free evening classes in the same basic subjects that he taught to his white pupils during the daytime.[9]

The home teaching of Philadelphia's free blacks proved successful, and a great source of satisfaction to Benezet. It was evidently one of the topics of conversation he shared with his neighbor, Benjamin Franklin, as their friendship developed in the early 1750s. In 1757, Franklin went to London as agent for the Pennsylvania Assembly. As a result of the good impressions he had received from Benezet's evening classes, he initiated contacts with Bray's Associates, a London philanthropic society. Upon Franklin's recommendation, the Bray group decided to found a school for the instruction of free blacks in Philadelphia. The Associates worked through the Anglican Church. Consequently their classes emphasized Bible reading, catechism, and the practical arts—in contrast to the general curriculum Benezet offered his students. In November, 1758, their

8 Stuart C. Henry, *George Whitefield, Wayfaring Witness* (New York, 1957), 116, 117; Thomas Gamble, Jr., *Bethesda, an Historical Sketch* (Savannah, Ga., 1902), 64–76; Lucia Myers, *Lady Huntingdon, Friend of the Wesleys* (Montgomery, Ala., 1956), 45. Benezet and Whitefield apparently reconciled their friendship in 1770, just before the latter's death. Benezet to George Dillwyn, 1770, Brookes, 278, 279.

9 Brookes, 45–48; Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (New York, 1942), 254; Sydney V. James, *A People Among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 136, 235–237. Night Schools for whites were fairly common in Philadelphia from mid-century on. Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 187.

school opened at Christ Church and continued for many years, though with several lengthy interruptions, most notably during and after the Revolution. Three more religious schools were established by the Bray Associates in 1760, at New York City, Williamsburg, and Newport, thereby widening the circle of influence initiated by Franklin's quiet neighbor.[10]

By 1770, Benezet's effective demonstration of the educability of blacks had convinced several other leading members of Philadelphia Monthly Meeting of the feasibility of a Quaker-sponsored school. As a result of the Society's increasingly strong antislavery testimony, many Friends were preparing their slaves for emancipation. A school could aid the process by providing an academic foundation, as well as vocational training and moral instruction. There was a growing interest in schools generally because of the need for social control during a period of increasing political agitation.[11]

Thus, the sociopolitical milieu of January, 1770, provided a timely context for Anthony Benezet's far-reaching proposal to Philadelphia Monthly Meeting—the formal establishment of a school for free blacks. His proposal was accepted, and an "Africans' School" became the newest division of the Friends' Public School. According to the minutes, the Africans' School was to provide such "religious and literary instruction as would qualify them for the proper enjoyment of freedom, and for becoming useful and worthy citizens."[12] That is, the new school for blacks was organized both for their own benefit and for that of the surrounding society, perhaps mainly the latter. The pupils' "religious and literary" education would enable them to be "useful and worthy," and to enjoy being so. Clearly, an element of self-interest motivated the Friends' action, and it coexisted harmoniously with their benevolent idealism.

The Quakers saw their new enterprise as a missionary endeavour, not only to the students but also as an example to other Christian groups. All Friends were urged to support the school in the "hope

[10] Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen*, 254, 255; Richard I. Shelling, "Benjamin Franklin and the Dr. Bray Associates," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (*PMHB*), LXIII (1939), 285, 286; Wickersham, *Education*, 249; Arthur S. Pitt, "Franklin and the Quaker Movement Against Slavery," *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, XXXII (1943), 21, 22.

[11] Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 239–241.

[12] *Ibid.*, 239–246; *A Brief Sketch of the Schools for Black People and Their Descendants* (Philadelphia, 1867), 3, 16.

that in other places a concern of the same kind will be raised, as the good effects of our care become more known and observed." The hope was not disappointed, for the fear of a large class of undisciplined free blacks existed in white society throughout the colonies.[13]

While serving as schoolmaster in the Friends' girls' school, Anthony Benezet regularly attended sessions of the Overseers' "Committee on the School for Africans." He acted as an ex-officio member and prestigious consultant, as well as a regular contributor of funds. In any case, he played an important part in the Committee's policymaking decisions throughout the remainder of his life.[14]

The first class opened on June 28, 1770, in a large rented room on Pear Street, "over the potash works." Twenty-two pupils, half of them girls, attended class the first day, with the student body increasing to thirty-six within the next two months. The earliest students were mostly children, but later "many cases occurred of men and women far advanced in life, attending . . . often at great personal sacrifice." Very young students had to be excluded early, however. In October, 1770, the decision was made not to admit any more children under six years of age. A similar rule was operative in the parallel schools for white children. The rented upstairs room proved unsatisfactory, and in 1773 a new schoolhouse, thirty-two feet by eighteen feet, was constructed on the lot next to the Quaker Alms House on Walnut and Fourth Streets. Care was taken to build a fence between the two buildings so as "not to incommode the habitations of the poor Friends."[15]

Not only were black children taught separately from whites, but they were also treated differently in that the sexes were mixed in the classroom, a practice not approved for white children. Benezet's views on this situation in the new school are unknown; it may be that he was forced into concessions on these points in order to obtain approval for the Africans' School.[16]

13 *Ibid.*, 11.

14 Minutes of the Africans' School, I (1770–1811), Dept. of Records, Arch St. Meeting House, Philadelphia. Anthony Benezet's name appears regularly with the list of those in attendance, though he was not listed as a member of the committee.

15 Minutes of the Africans' School, I, 8–18; *Brief Sketch*, 6–8; Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 70, 71.

16 Minutes of Penn Charter School, I, 117, Dept. of Records, Arch St. Meeting House. On Quakers and racism, see Drake, 16, 17, 120.

The curriculum bore the same practical stamp that characterized Benezet's other classes. All the students studied reading, writing, and arithmetic. The girls learned sewing and knitting from a mistress, while the boys went on to more advanced academic work. The reading and writing was undoubtedly suffused with Christian precepts, as in all the Friends' schools, but instruction was not limited to religious maxims. A French visitor to the school many years later described a curriculum substantially unchanged. He was particularly impressed with the effect of the instruction on the demeanor of female pupils. "The black girls," he wrote, "have the appearance of decency, attention, and submission. It is a nursery of good servants and virtuous housekeepers."[17] Benezet would have added that the school had demonstrated the high innate moral and mental abilities of its students, who were worthy of their freedom, in part because they had learned self-discipline.

All the Quaker schools faced a series of difficult problems during the Revolutionary 1770s. Although the Africans' School became a relatively popular object of Philadelphia Friends' philanthropy, there were numerous occasions when income from subscriptions and legacies failed to cover necessary expenditures. Two leading supporters, Daniel Stanton and Joseph Hilburn, died in 1771 leaving substantial bequests which made possible the new building that was completed two years later, but funds for day-to-day operation became increasingly scarce with the outbreak of war. By 1777, the cryptic aside "to be paid when in cash" appeared frequently alongside authorizations for expenditures, and payment of teachers' salaries often fell behind. Rampant inflation meant that many of the Friends' subscriptions, pledged earlier in paper currency, helped little in the crisis. Collecting committees were appointed and exhorted by the Overseers to "renewed diligence" and "greater exertion" to keep the school in operation.[18]

The securing of qualified teachers became a major problem.

[17] Minutes of the Africans' School, I, 3, 4; *Brief Sketch*, 5, 6; Minutes of Philadelphia Monthly Meeting (PMM), Mar. 30, 1770, 370, Dept. of Records, Arch St. Meeting House; Jean Pierre Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in America Performed in 1788*, Mara Soceanu Vamos, tr., and, Durand Escheverria, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 157 (quoted in Brookes, 51, 52).

[18] Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 64, 242; Minutes of the Africans' School, I, 16; Minutes of PMM, Apr. 26, 1771, 444, and Dec. 25, 1772, 145; *Brief Sketch*, 29, 10.

Benezet insisted from the first that "teachers employed should be persons interested in the real well-doing of the scholars," in his mind a far more important qualification for good teaching than being "highly learned."[19] But most teachers, however well qualified in a religious sense, had economic needs that could not be totally ignored. Few could afford not to know when, or even whether, they would be paid for their services.

When Moles Patterson was hired to teach the first classes for £80 annually, the Overseers' minutes recorded that "the salary to the master was higher than we should have agreed to, if we could have engaged one that we thought suitable, on easier terms, or if a mistress capable of the service, could have been procured, but neither at the time offering. . . ." Unfortunately, even the salary which the committee considered extravagant was apparently insufficient for Patterson, who resigned before his one-year contract was out. Of his account, the Overseers noted that "some of the articles appear to be overcharged." Patterson's wife, Ann, then took over the school on a temporary basis. She soon proved herself an extremely capable teacher, according to the minutes. However, she refused the Board's offer of a permanent position at £40 annually, one half the salary her husband had received for precisely the same responsibilities. The Overseers then hired a schoolmaster who died within a few months of assuming the position, forcing the school to close for six weeks until a replacement could be found.[20]

Eventually, a young man named David Estaugh was hired "on trial." Estaugh was an apprentice of Benezet's who was preparing to be a teacher. Classes reopened in April, 1773. During this period, Benezet was frantically busy with his first major antislavery petitioning campaign, which he was conducting simultaneously in England and the colonies in addition to his regular girls' school responsibilities in the mornings. Nevertheless, seeing the precarious situation in the black school, he agreed to attend its classes daily to help the inexperienced Estaugh with his new duties. By the end of the year, the young man had found "the employment too heavy, [and] he chose to resign it."[21]

19 *Brief Sketch*, 32; Will of Anthony Benezet in Brookes, 166.
20 Minutes of the Africans' School, I, 12–14, 24, 31, 35, 36.
21 *Ibid.*, 25, 36; *Brief Sketch*, 10.

An older and more experienced teacher, Jacob Lehre, was next in the procession. Benezet greeted his arrival with relief, and expressed satisfaction with Lehre's religious dedication. The new master found the school deficient in the necessary books and supplies. His complaint to the Overseers resulted in the immediate procuring of Testaments, spelling books, and primers to replace the old, worn-out ones.[22]

Lehre's efficiency in supplying his classroom with books, and his religious dedication, were not sufficient to attract and keep enough interested pupils at their desks. During his tenure, the problem of attendance became acute. Although a total of 250 black students received some elementary instruction between 1770 and 1775, attendance had been falling off since Lehre took over at the end of 1773. By January, 1775, only nine pupils were regularly in class. Deeply concerned, the Overseers decided to visit all the parents and guardians of the children enrolled to encourage better attendance, and, if necessary, to admit poor white children in order to fill up the classroom. Both steps were actually taken, and by April forty black and six white children regularly took their places under Lehre's tutelage, at least temporarily.[23]

There were several reasons for the dramatic shifts in attendance patterns. Officially, the Overseers blamed the pupils themselves for "their neglect," which had resulted in "their not improving so much as we expected." Benezet, sensitive to the environmental factors working against the black students, saw the problem in a different light. He noted that these children, like the poor whites, were subject to various demands on their time which they could not control. Often they were required to work to help support their families, or to serve in homes where they were apprenticed. Frequently they received little encouragement, or even met active opposition, to attending classes. In addition, at times the schoolmasters had fallen below the standards of good teaching expected of them, and consequently student interest lagged.[24]

22 Benezet to George Dillwyn, Feb. 15, 1774, Brookes, 317; Minutes of the Africans' School, I, 37, 28.

23 *Brief Sketch*, 12, 130; DuBois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 84; Minutes of the Africans' School, I, 48, 49.

24 *Brief Sketch*, 9, 17; Will of Anthony Benezet in Brookes; Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 243.

By April, 1776, the aging Lehre had to be requested "to seek employment more likely to suit him" elsewhere. The attendance problem had become acute again, despite combined efforts of many black parents and visiting Overseers. He was finally dismissed in December, 1776, and the school again closed briefly until a suitable teacher could be found.[25]

The report sent to Monthly Meeting the following February constituted both a revised statement of the goals set for the Africans' school, and an urgent plea for stronger financial backing.

> We are, after upwards of seven years experience, confirmed in believing that by a religious care to discharge our duty towards these long oppressed people, they may receive much benefit, and the increasing concern that appears to restore them to their right to liberty, encourages us to hope that Friends in general will be more and more united in a faithful fulfilling of their trust, by instructing them in necessary learning, and the ways and means of a livelihood suitable to their stations.[26]

The Overseers' specific emphasis on "ways and means of a livelihood" was new to their stated goals for black education, but the idea behind it was not. The earlier goal of creating "useful and worthy citizens" covered the vocational ideal. The new urgency felt by the Committee justified the more precise statement—it was a language all prospective donors could understand. More and more slaves were being emancipated in Philadelphia, many by masters who fled the country during the Revolution. A generation of free blacks left untrained for any income-producing vocation could only mean future social disturbances and endless calls for charity donations. The further phrase, "suitable to their stations," was understood in the eighteenth century as an assurance of firmly delimited social and economic boundaries beyond which students were not expected to aspire. The black school was presented as a prudent investment for Quakers caught up in the Revolutionary upheaval.

The February subscription drive was successful; the school reopened almost immediately with John Houghton as schoolmaster. His five-year tenure was a difficult one in many ways. Houghton was not a young man, and his failing health became a major problem.

25 Minutes of the Africans' School, I, 53, 54; *Brief Sketch*, 12.
26 Minutes of the Africans' School, Feb. 22, 1777, I, 59.

In addition, the Revolution created at times nearly insurmountable financial and logistical difficulties. By 1781, the Overseers reported a deficit of £74, much of which was due in uncollectible subscriptions. The school's minutes recorded that "a part of this period was remarkable for commotion, and contending armies taking, evacuating, and repossessing this city; that schools . . . were generally suspended for a time." Shortages of all kinds plagued the classroom. Yet despite the confusion, Friends continued to superintend the black school, and it was, "with some intermission," kept open with a total enrollment of 250 students during the five-year span.[27]

Houghton's health declined further, and the financial situation of the school grew steadily worse during the late war years. The outlook for the school's survival was poor by March of 1781, when Benezet wrote of his concern and his proposed remedy to a close friend:

> The education of the poor blacks . . . has been so much the object of my consideration that I solicited to be appointed master of the School we have for a long time maintained for their education; notwithstanding that situation would have been less profitable or in the eyes of most people less honorable than the school I now attend; but my friends, perhaps from a fear the service would be too arduous or some other cause, put me by. If the place be vacant I shall renew my application, for it has been indeed a matter of concern to me.[28]

During the following year, Benezet struggled with mounting difficulties to keep the school in operation. Finally, Houghton resigned. The Board, unable to find another replacement, accepted Benezet's offer to take over the teaching. Despite the tremendous inflation of the war years, Benezet accepted the same salary that Moles Patterson had found insufficient twelve years earlier. In a concession to his age and "infirm" constitution, he received permission to hold the classes in his home, with a small allowance provided for rental. Despite this added call on his time he carried on his last great burst of antislavery work. He also made regular visits to his pupils' homes "in order to excite scholars to a diligent

[27] *Ibid.*, 54, 55; James Pemberton to John Pemberton, May 14, 1784, Brookes, 458; *Brief Sketch*, 13, 14; Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 242, 243. The British army occupied Philadelphia from September, 1777, to June, 1778.

[28] Benezet to Robert Pleasants, Mar. 17, 1781, Brookes, 352.

attendance."[29] If he was aware that his firm take-over of the school at a critical juncture kept it from being abandoned by the Society, he did not mention the fact. His action proved to be the turning point. From that time onward the black school prospered and grew.

Along with his concern for the formal education of as many of Philadelphia's free blacks as possible, Benezet was keenly interested in the situation of young black apprentices. He believed that those in urban areas needed protection, both from the inevitable corruption of city life and from abuse by unthinking or tyrannical masters. In a letter dealing with the matter of freed slaves among Quakers, he recommended apprenticing young black boys in the homes of rural Friends: "I am very averse to placing [them] in this city except it be to some of the low trades, shoemaking; to place them for menial service in the kitchen or stable I refuse to be concerned, as from the leisure they have, and conversation of servants, etc., they are mostly corrupted." In short, if they were bound out in the city, it should only be to learn semiskilled trades. There was no suggestion here, however, that some might be trained in the "higher" trades of commerce or the professions. Benezet felt that apprentices, "if pretty well grown," should be paid "a sufficient compensation for their service." They should be protected from exploitation and prepared for "suitable" trades. Unfortunately, he had observed a "backwardness of Friends among us to promote the welfare of the blacks except where there was a prospect of advantage to themselves."[30] The comment was a recurring counterpoint theme in his endless attempts to orchestrate the Africans harmoniously into the American composition. Benezet was genuinely concerned for the moral and physical well-being of the young freedmen themselves, and this concern underlay his feeling that they should be placed with rural families when possible rather than in the city. He shared the utopian vision of his day—an agricultural paradise where pious family life could be combined with healthful outdoor work to produce virtuous citizens of whatever race. This goal, rather than a desire to disperse Philadelphia's young black population, apparently motivated his thinking and recommendations on the matter.

Benezet instructed daily classes averaging between fifteen and

29 Minutes of the Africans' School, I, 62, 63; *Brief Sketch*, 13–15.

30 Benezet to Robert Pleasants, Mar. 17, 1781, Brookes, 352, 353.

thirty-five pupils, most of whom made acceptable progress in their studies. He seems to have been given complete control of the school beginning in June, 1782. The Board of Overseers did not hold any official meetings during his tenure, apparently entrusting the entire operation to Benezet's experienced care.[31]

However, his health was deteriorating and he seemed increasingly aware of the delicate nature of his own mortality. His letters of this period suggest that he deliberately willed to live on after 1780, primarily as a result of urgent inner promptings of the "Divine Architect" who maintained "some deep purpose" for his "human frame." He began making specific plans, "in case of my demise," for continuing the work in behalf of the "oppressed Africans." In October, 1781, he wrote that "time and age press close upon me . . . the world with its fugitive being and false appearance passeth swiftly away, and it's he alone who doeth the will of God who will abide." The divine will at that point he perceived to be a mandate to take over the precarious fortunes of the black school. The work became the "deep purpose" for which he remained tied to the earth. Nevertheless, by summer of 1783, the old desire for peaceful repose was again upon him, "the most earnest longing of my mind," he wrote. Still, "necessary action seems continually presenting, which I dare not refuse."[32]

In the last weeks of his life, Benezet solidified the foundations of the Africans' School. He arranged for a continuing teaching staff and adequate financing—in the past the two most difficult problems. He composed a letter to the Overseers urging that his friend and one-time teaching assistant, Joseph Clark, "a person who makes it a principle to do his duty," should succeed him as master of the school. Clark, he wrote, was presently employed in "a more advantageous school," but was willing to assume the lower-paying position upon Benezet's retirement, "by a desire of doing good to the black people."[33]

31 Minutes of PMM, Jan. 30, 1784, 128; Edward R. Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania 1639–1861* (Washington, D. C., 1911), 128–129.

32 Benezet to George Dillwyn, Aug. 6, 1780, Aug. 17, 1783, Benezet to Morris Birbeck, Oct. 16, 1781, Brookes, 348–358, 363, 400.

33 Quoted in *Brief Sketch*, 15; Benezet to George Dillwyn, Feb. 15, 1774, Brookes, 317. Clark, when faced with the actual proposition after Benezet's death, declined to accept, citing unnamed "circumstances" that made it necessary for him to continue in his present position. *Brief Sketch*, 17.

Benezet went to considerable lengths to secure adequate operating funds. The war years had taught him the insufficiency of depending on annual subscription drives and occasional small legacies if the project was to survive permanently. He wrote to leading English philanthropists to plead the cause of black education in America and the Philadelphia Africans' School in particular. One of these men, the radical clergyman Thomas Wilson of Bath, responded with a gift of £50 sterling for the school. He promised more to follow, but his death soon after cut off further donations.[34]

In his determination to insure the survival of the school, Benezet took what was for him an unusually rash step. By the end of the Revolution, British Quakers had accumulated a substantial fund earmarked for war relief of American Friends. Since hostilities had ceased, Benezet felt that the money was more urgently needed for other purposes. Thus, he decided in August, 1783, to present a proposal to the London Quakers. In requesting that the war relief funds be diverted for the "relief and education" of American free blacks, he believed that such an idea stood little chance of being approved by Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, whose individual members had vested interests in the fund. So it was, as he explained to William Dillwyn, the idea was solely his own, "unknown to Friends" in Philadelphia. The urgency of the need and his own sense of impending death outweighed for him the principles of group unity and "sense of the meeting," which ordinarily restrained his generous impulses within bounds acceptable to Friends.[35]

Response to Benezet's plea was delayed, probably due to the "weighty" discussions it provoked among members of the London Yearly Meeting's subcommittee to oversee the fund, chaired by David Barclay. Three years elapsed before a decision was reached and Barclay sent the committee's contribution of £500 sterling to Philadelphia as a permanent endowment for the Friends' African School.[36]

Benezet's personal determination to solidify the school's financial basis amounted to more than appeals for funds from others. He

34 Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (4th ed., London, 1788), xi; also, Granville Sharp to Benjamin Rush, July 10, 1784, Woods, 24.

35 Benezet to William Dillwyn, Aug. 20, 1783, Brookes, 282, 283. See James, 236.

36 Carter G. Woodson, *Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (New York, 1915), 79; *Brief Sketch*, 19. Barclay was a grandson of the famous Quaker theologian of the same name.

arranged to dispose of his own modest estate in a way that would ensure his objective. His will, signed in March, 1784, left his estate for the use of his wife, who was "ancient and feeble," until her death. Then, after a few small token legacies to certain poor black and Acadian neighbors, relatives, and the "hire-maid," all the rest was assigned for the perpetual endowment of the school, "to . . . employ a religious-minded person or persons, to teach a number of Negro, mulatto, or Indian children to read, write, arithmetic, plain accounts, needlework, etc." In addition, he left his large personal library to the school.[37]

Sources vary on the amount of his bequest, from £700 to more than 2,000; the latter figure is probably closer to accuracy. After Mrs. Benezet's death from a stroke on July 19, 1786, Friends invested the Benezet legacy in "ground rents," which by 1800 were returning an annual income of nearly £200 to the school's coffers—its main source of support.[38] With the addition of the £500 gift from London Friends, solicited earlier by Benezet, the endowment made possible a substantial increase in the size of the school and its facilities. Two teachers rather than one were hired and a second story constructed atop the school building to accommodate another class. The new addition was used by a mistress "to teach the younger children and girls," while on the lower floor a master handled the instruction of older boys and adults. This division by age marked the beginning of secondary-level education for the black males of Philadelphia.[39]

Benezet found his role in the establishment of the Africans' School enormously rewarding personally. As master of the school from 1782 onward, he achieved at last the full satisfaction that signified fulfillment of his life-long quest for vocational integrity. In his seventieth year he wrote a revealing letter to his old friend,

37 Small, 202; *Brief Sketch*, 16, 17, 21; Brookes, 167; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, obituary, May 12, 1784.

38 James Pemberton to John Pemberton, May 14, 1784, Brookes, 458, cites the £700 figure, as opposed to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* obituary, May 12, 1784, which claims "above 2,000 pounds." Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 245, 246, documents the income from Benezet's bequest. The school also received £117 annually from other sources in the same year.

39 *Brief Sketch*, 18; Wickersham, *Education*, 250, 251; Benjamin Davies, *Some Account of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1794), 65; DuBois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 84.

Benjamin Franklin: "I have solicited and obtained the office of teacher of black children and others of that people, an employment which though not attended with so great pecuniary advantages as others might be, yet affords me much satisfaction. I know no station in life I should prefer before it."[40]

In 1784, the thirty-five-pupil institution, known informally as "Benezet's School," was the only one in Philadelphia for black students. Encouraged by the founder's bequest, Philadelphia Monthly Meeting issued a report that stressed the need for another similar school in the near future. Two years later, the recommendation became a reality. Sunday Schools for working students, and night schools for adults followed rapidly, as did more day schools. By 1837, there were twenty-five institutions with a total enrollment of 1,732 black children operating under various auspices in the city. In the school begun by Benezet over 8,000 pupils had matriculated by 1866. It set the pattern, also, for many other "African Schools" organized throughout the United States.[41]

A far more significant index of Benezet's educational contribution to the black community is found in the records of the known alumni of his school. Several of them assumed the leadership of Philadelphia's growing free black population. Former slaves Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, who became co-founders of the Free African Society, had studied there. They organized the Society as a result of their indignation at being forced to sit in a segregated section of St. George's Church in Philadelphia. The two led a walk-out of black worshippers from a Sunday morning service in 1787, and promptly formed their followers into an "ethical and beneficial brotherhood." The formation of the Free African Society, which met for a time in the Quaker schoolhouse, was a step of tremendous significance. It constituted the first real social organization among blacks for their own mutual benefit, heralding the beginning of community race pride in a nonsectarian structure. The Free African

40 Benezet to Franklin, Mar. 5, 1783, Brookes, 387.

41 "Benezet's School" later became known as the "Raspberry Street School." Woody, *Early Quaker Education*, 243, 246–261; Wickersham, *Education*, 251; DuBois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 85. After 1795, the school began instructing some Indian children. Woody, 263; Dwight L. Dumond, *Antislavery and the Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor, 1961), 52; *Brief Sketch*, 29. Jordan, 357, mentions a black school started by Robert Pleasants on his Virginia plantation in 1782. Pleasants and Benezet had corresponded on the matter.

Society set up Quakerlike marriage ceremonies for its members and attempted ethical guidance of members' lives. The group worked with Benjamin Rush and other abolitionists, however refusing to become involved in late eighteenth-century colonization schemes, "apprehending every pious man is a citizen of the whole world"—echoes of one of Anthony Benezet's favorite classroom maxims![42]

Later, Jones founded the first black Episcopal Church in America and served as its rector. Allen was founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. James Forten, another outstanding former student of Benezet's school, became a leading Philadelphia manufacturer and shipper. Along with Jones and Allen, Forten led in the free black petitioning of Congress for repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.

As early as 1786, Forten had begun holding classes in his home, as Benezet had done from 1750 on, to teach the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic to the local children of his race. Forten led opposition to the proposed registration of all Philadelphia blacks in 1813. With Allen he also led the dramatic 1817 mass black protest against the increasingly determined deportation policies of the American Colonization Society. It was Forten who was largely responsible for convincing the nineteenth-century abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison of the inhumanity of colonization policy, urging him onward to the unconditional emancipation position.[43] Benezet had argued cogently against colonization in his *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, published in 1772. That book and Benezet's *Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies*

[42] Jordan, 357; *Brief Sketch*, 20, 21; Henry J. Cadbury, "Negro Membership in the Society of Friends," *JNH*, XXI (1936), 154; also Henry J. Cadbury, "One Good Friend," *Friends' Quarterly* (1974), 204; quote from Free African Society letter to the Negro Union of Newport, R. I., 1788, DuBois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 18–23; William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark* (New York, 1968), 491, 492. Benezet, too, refused to have anything to do with colonization schemes.

[43] DuBois, *Philadelphia Negro*, 21–23; Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 491, 492; Ira Vernon Brown, *The Negro in Pennsylvania History* (University Park, Pa., 1970), 17; Russell Adams, *Great Negroes, Past and Present* (3rd ed., Chicago, 1969), 14, 28, 100, 107. Esther Morris Douty, *Forten the Sailmaker* (Chicago, 1968), 13–20, 144, 154, records Forten's experiences in Benezet's school in 1774–1775, and the schoolmaster's assistance in finding a suitable apprenticeship for the lad after his father died. On Forten and Garrison, see Douty, 53, 54, 154; also, William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (Boston, 1832), II, 9, 10; and Walter M. Merrill, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), I, 196, 197.

were valued possessions of Forten, possessions that formed an important link with the antebellum abolitionist movement. And finally, Forten helped to launch the Negro Convention Movement, the first interstate black political organization, for "the abolition of slavery in the South and racial discrimination in the North," a full three years before the 1833 founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society.[44] In all, the story of Benezet's alumni was a continuing saga of leadership in struggles, victories, defeats, and renewed efforts for racial equality.

Roberts Vaux, Benezet's earliest memorialist and correspondence editor, observed that the success of the Africans' School "powerfully contributed to recommend their race to the notice, and the cause of their sufferings to the investigation, of many persons who had previously held both in contempt." One of the people so impressed was Brissot de Warville, who became one of the leading exponents of racial equality in France, and a founder and president of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*. Brissot visited Benezet's School in Philadelphia and later reported:

> There appears to be no difference between the powers of memory of a curly head and those with straight hair and today I have proof of this. I have seen, questioned, and listened to Negro children, some read well, others recited from memory, others did sums quite rapidly. . . . It is to Benezet that humanity owes this useful establishment.

English Friends, too, began investigations into the intellectual potential of blacks, on the basis of "some proofs of the Negro children's advancement in learning in this school" in Philadelphia, and their conclusions supplied sound arguments for use in the British antislavery campaign.[45]

In 1762, Benezet had first published his conviction that "Negroes are generally sensible, humane, and sociable, and that their capacity is as good, and as capable of improvement as that of white people." He reiterated basically the same observation in his *Caution and*

[44] Douty, *Forten*, 53, 54; *Some Historical Account*, 116; *Caution and Warning* (Philadelphia, 1766); Ray Allen Billington, "James Forten, Forgotten Abolitionist," *Negro History Bulletin*, XIII (1949), 31–36; Adams, *Great Negroes*, 107.

[45] Vaux, 29; Brissot, *New Travels*, Letter XIX, 217, 218; *Some Historical Account*, xi. One student whose neat handwriting was sent to London was James Forten, according to Douty, *Forten*, 13.

Warning in 1766.[46] Later, his pamphlet entitled *Short Observations on Slavery* made a strong third-person assertion of full racial equality, citing his own experience as evidence:

> A. Benezet, teacher of a school . . . for the instruction of the black children and others of that people, has for many years, had the opportunity of knowing the temper and genius of the Africans; particularly those under his tuition, who have been many, of different ages; and he can with truth and sincerity declare, that he has found among them as great variety of talents, equally capable of improvement, as among a like number of whites.[47]

He knew the time was short for him now. The full truth had to be spoken, and he was well aware of his own unique qualifications to speak on the matter.

In contrast to his liberal contemporaries, whose attitudes have been aptly described as "a be-kind-to-animals paternalism toward the blacks," Benezet's paternalism aimed to raise the level of free Negroes to their full intellectual, moral, and spiritual potential, which he saw as in no way inferior to that of whites. He observed in *Some Historical Account* that slaves rarely excelled in their mental faculties only because "few of them have any reasonable prospect of any other than a state of slavery." Thus, "though their natural capacities were ever so good, they have neither inducement or opportunity to exert them to advantage. This naturally tends to depress their minds, and sink their spirits into habits of idleness and sloth, which they would . . . have been free from had they stood upon an equal footing with white people."[48] Inequality produced the alleged inferiority, which in turn was used to justify the inequality, a self-perpetuating circle that could only be broken by enlightened education, he insisted.

Yet it should not be inferred that Benezet's ideas of black intellectual and moral equality necessarily extended to social and economic equality. In the same way that he visualized an ideal social order of harmonious, voluntary, and subordinate relationships between teacher and pupil, master and servant, man and woman, he

46 *A Short Account of That Part of Africa Inhabited by the Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1762), 8; *Caution and Warning*, 12.

47 *Short Observations on Slavery* (Philadelphia, 1781), 11, 12.

48 Bruns, "Anthony Benezet's Assertion," 232; *Some Historical Account*, 112.

seemed content to prepare black children for a position of happy, willing service in "the useful purposes of life." Achievement of high social status and the acquisition of wealth, as he saw it, should not be important, anyway, to rational creatures formed in the divine image, regardless of color. In the light of his own scale of values, then, he placed the blacks on the highest possible plane of equality with their white brethren. It was, again, both a practical and spiritual matter of first things first, and he saw no serious contradictions here.

Following Benezet's unequivocal assertions of mental and moral equality of the races, the subject was intensely discussed in intellectual circles, particularly in the decade following the American Revolution. In 1790, Philadelphian Charles Crawford brought out the second and greatly enlarged edition of his important *Observations Upon Negro-Slavery*. This new version of his 1784 work contained a long chapter defending blacks' mental capacities. He cited the results of Benezet's school as irrefutable proof of his position, as Brissot and others did in France and England. On the basis of this evidence, however, Crawford went further in his conclusions than Benezet had done, claiming for Negroes "all the rights of men," including intermarriage with whites and the franchise.[49] He was, of course, far ahead of his time. But the important breakthrough had been made during the years of patient daily lessons in the home and school of Anthony Benezet. The evidence was in and available for use.

In 1781, Benezet had written that "the notion entertained by some that the blacks are inferior to the whites in their capacities, is vulgar prejudice, founded on the pride or ignorance of their lordly masters." The assertion of mental and moral equality led directly to an attack on race prejudice, which Benezet both revealed and challenged as a chief support of slavery. The following year, the Overseers of the Africans' School made a significant addition to the stated purposes of their educational efforts. Now, beside "qualifying them for the useful purposes of life," and for the "proper

[49] See Jordan, 446, for evidence of extensive discussion of this subject and Benezet's influence. Crawford, (2nd ed., Philadelphia, 1790), 20–32, 117, 118. On Crawford himself see Lewis Leary, "Charles Crawford: Forgotten Poet of Early Philadelphia," *PMHB*, LXXXIII (1959), 293–306.

enjoyment of freedom," the committee observed that the training would remove "the prejudices entertained by some to their disadvantage."[50] Yet underneath their new theoretical commitment to Benezet's concern about race prejudice, most Friends retained the usual racial attitudes of their day. While they applauded in the schoolmaster a kind of saintliness that was to be encouraged in one who devoted his life to the education of children, they found it difficult to act upon his insights in their own daily rounds. Benjamin Rush pronounced Benezet himself "to be free from prejudices of all kinds." All who knew the Quaker schoolmaster appreciated to some degree his unquestioned personal integrity, but they could not live by his high standards. The Society of Friends found it expedient to continue its patterns of social and religious discrimination along racial lines in its Meetings and schools.[51] To what extent Benezet directly challenged this arrangement is unknown. He probably felt that the supplying of an adequate education and the abolition of slavery were the most urgent matters, after which a riper time would surely arrive for striking down the barriers to social intercourse between black and white. The practical moderation, the quiet gradualism of his personality, would seem to suggest such a response, at any rate.

Both Benezet's assertion of moral and mental equality, and his attack on race prejudice grew directly out of his pioneering experience in applying his brotherhood beliefs to black education. They distinguished him from earlier and contemporary advocates of emancipation who were merely repelled by the brutality and immorality of the master-slave relationship, and who sought to purge the conscience of white society of the most obvious evils. In his unremitting attempts to end slavery, Benezet moved far beyond other leaders of American Enlightenment thought, who, like Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and Alexander Hamilton, agreed that human bondage was morally indefensible, but kept their own slaves to the end of their lives.[52] Benezet could no longer accept a theory

50 Benezet, *Short Observations*, 11, 12, quoted in *Brief Sketch*, 14.

51 See Drake, *Quakers and Slavery*, 120, 121; Rush to Granville Sharp, May 13, 1774, Woods, 5.

52 See John C. Miller, *Alexander Hamilton and the Growth of the New Nation* (New York, 1959), 122; Robert McColley, *Slavery in Jeffersonian Virginia* (Urbana, Ill., 1964), 131; Patrick Henry to Robert Pleasants, Jan. 18, 1773, Brookes, 443, 444.

of society that labeled darker races inferior species, thus justifying their enslavement. He had achieved a breakthrough in social thought and practice that would require many subsequent generations to explore and to implement. He had begun, in fact, to undermine his own paternalistic world view, but such far-ranging implications were not yet in focus, not even in the Revolutionary 1770s.

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