

Another Urban Crucible: Gary Nash and the New Black Urbanism

ALTHOUGH THE OPENING LINES of *The Urban Crucible* did not directly address urban slavery and freedom, they predicted the wave of studies that would soon revolutionize African American historiography—including Gary Nash’s own pathbreaking book *Forging Freedom*.¹ Noting that colonial British North America was “predominantly rural,” Nash nevertheless argued that “cities were the cutting edge of economic, social and political change.” “The cities predicted the future,” he explained. “It is surprising that historians have studied them so little” (vii).

When he wrote these words in 1979, slavery and racial studies focused primarily on the plantation South. Very few scholars delved deeply into the black urban experience above the Mason-Dixon Line. Yet, as *The Urban Crucible* showed, enslaved people formed a critical part of the northern urban mosaic. “The common view that slavery in colonial America was overwhelmingly a Southern plantation phenomenon must be modified,” Nash observed, “for slavery took root in the northern port towns and persisted there throughout the colonial period” (13). Indeed, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston—the focal points of his acclaimed study—accrued significant black populations between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Boston and Philadelphia, blacks accounted for between 8 and 10 percent of the urban population by the 1740s. In New York City, nearly a fifth of the population was enslaved. Moreover, Nash surmised that northerners’ reliance on slaveholding fostered deeply imbedded notions of white supremacy. “Slavery,” he wrote, “was far more than a labor system” (14).

With slavery entrenched in the urban sphere, northern black freedom struggles would take shape within the emerging city grid. Planned racial rebellions scared New York City in 1712 and 1741, and Nash noted that “a wave of black unrest swept the seaboard” by then (108). Cities also

¹ Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720–1840* (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

shaped early emancipation trends, and Nash illustrated that emerging market sensibilities, not humanitarianism, prevented slavery's expansion in the colonial north. "In uncertain times," he explained, "those who still possessed the resources to command the labor of others learned that they were better off hiring labor when they needed it while remaining free of the obligation to maintain unremunerative workers during dull periods." Unsurprisingly, "the importation of slaves dropped off sharply at the end of the Seven Years War in all three northern towns" (320–21). In other words, there was no antislavery North that rejected bondage. Agreeing with David Brion Davis, Nash asserted that northern slavery was a labor system whose rise and fall remained tied to urban economics.

Despite integrating slavery into his work on northern city life, *The Urban Crucible* was neither a study of race relations nor of enslaved people's lives. Nash remained concerned with class, particularly the way it framed the development of social identity and dissenting political ideologies. *The Urban Crucible* examined slavery episodically and then primarily as a subset of shifting colonial class relations. In Nash's story, African Americans were not distinct actors whose identity revolved around race; rather, they existed at the bottom of an urban underclass that was slowly creating its own political ideology.

In this sense, *The Urban Crucible* is a snapshot of the historiographic world just before the explosion of work on northern blacks. African Americans were there in the urban North, but their experiences had still to be delineated. Happily, Nash turned to that story in *Forging Freedom*, his wonderfully researched and deeply ramifying study of African American life in Philadelphia during the colonial and antebellum eras. Published less than a decade after *The Urban Crucible*, Nash's work built on new scholarship by Emma Lapsansky, Leonard Curry, Julie Winch, James Horton, and Lois Horton.² Yet it was a cutting-edge book. Even then, the black North barely registered in grand narratives of African American history. Writing in the *New American History* (1990), Thomas Holt argued that "there has been a veritable explosion of histories . . . on

² See Emma Lapsansky, "Since They Got Those Separate Churches': Afro-Americans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia," *American Quarterly* 32 (1980): 54–78; Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban American, 1800–1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago, 1981); Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787–1848* (Philadelphia, 1988); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York, 1979).

almost every conceivable facet of black life.”³ But, Holt continued, three areas remained central to African American history writing: southern slavery, postbellum emancipation, and the modern (read: southern) civil rights movement. Today, scholarship on northern slavery, northern freedom, and twentieth-century northern civil rights movements has reframed that narrative, making slavery and racial justice national story lines from the colonial era onward.⁴ Nash helped drive this scholarly shift, and he is still identified as one of the leading scholarly authorities on slavery and race in the urban North. Not only has the book remained in print for over twenty years, it still appears on a variety of course syllabi (including classes on urban history, early America, and multiculturalism as well as slavery and African American history). *Forging Freedom* may be Nash’s enduring work.

Like *The Urban Crucible*, *Forging Freedom* combined new social history techniques and old-fashioned narrative analysis. In doing so, the book offered a sophisticated yet imminently readable portrait of Afro-Philadelphians from the ground up and inside out. As Nash observed, “the traditional approach to black urban history has been to see the cities as venues of discrimination and impoverishment,” with scholars interested in “what happened *to* black communities, not what transpired *within* them.” *Forging Freedom* created a portrait of a “community with feeling and consciousness.”⁵ According to James Horton, *Forging Freedom* offered one of “the most complete picture[s]” of northern black society ever produced, deploying a “multilevel perspective, [that extended] from the family to the major institutions of black society.” No one could deny that black urban dwellers were a critical part of the early national “historical drama”; neither could anyone dispute Nash’s contention that northern emancipation foretold the promises and perils of southern Reconstruction.⁶

³ Thomas C. Holt, “African American History,” in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1997), 312.

⁴ Still, few scholars are connecting antebellum and postwar northern urban freedom movements. Three of the best northern civil rights studies make no connections to early black urban struggles. See Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2006); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); and Thomas Sugrue, “Sweet Land of Liberty”: *The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008).

⁵ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 7.

⁶ See James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington, DC, 1993), 11–12.

Again, like *The Urban Crucible*, *Forging Freedom* tells a story of urban transformation. Nash meticulously recreated Afro-Philadelphians' transition from slavery to freedom, particularly the way blacks "seize[d] control of their destiny" by escaping during the Revolution, vying for freedom in court, and bargaining slavery down to indenture contracts.⁷ Always conscious of the oppressive forces framing black life in Philadelphia, Nash nevertheless made "agency" a key part of black liberation.

Nash also detailed Philadelphia's transformation into a free black capital. By the 1790s, southern blacks accounted for well over a third of the city's free population. Looking at the birthplaces of Philadelphia mariners, Nash found that the largest contingent came not from Pennsylvania (20–29 percent between 1803 and 1821) but from Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina (36–40 percent); still others came from New England. "Philadelphia," Nash wonderfully observed, "was a city of refuge, not the place of birth of most of its free black populace."⁸

What did city life offer free blacks? In Nash's rendering, free blacks found not only access to a range of employment and housing options, but they found each other—communal power. The divide-and-conquer universe of plantation slavery could not cohere in the metropolis. "This was the first gathering in one American community of a large number of former slaves," he noted. "Perhaps more important than their number, however, was the latent power of a new group self-consciousness."⁹ Coming from diverse backgrounds, free blacks forged the autonomous institutions that guided them over the next century—churches, benevolent societies, and schools. A leadership cadre also emerged with a powerful civil rights agenda seeking equality and civic integration. "Once formed," Nash commented, the black community "could not be obliterated, whatever the magnitude of hostility toward its members."¹⁰

Looking well beyond Philadelphia, recent studies of emancipation in the Atlantic World have reemphasized the critical connections among city life, urban economies, and collective black freedom struggles. As Doug Egerton has argued, though urban economies could certainly stifle

⁷ Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 109.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

black aspiration, they often facilitated African-descended people's ability to amass capital, organize, and thereby create "psychological independence."¹¹ Nash's depiction of Philadelphia testified to the city's centrality in early black freedom struggles.

Indeed, Nash's tale of black community building is a heroic one. Against great odds, free black society grew and even prospered. By 1840, when Nash's story ends, the free black population of roughly eighteen thousand surpassed the populations of many American towns. Yet Nash also traced the precipitous decline of race relations during the nineteenth century. As white urban dwellers' support for black freedom waned, discriminatory policies steadily rose. Still, Nash remained inspired by black communal uplift in this key urban locale. When few others did so, black Philadelphians tried "to imagine and work optimistically toward a multi-racial and equal society."¹²

Assuming, then, that it is his definitive work on urban slavery and race, how would Nash approach *Forging Freedom* today? In 1989, Eric Foner offered abundant praise to Nash but wondered how black Philadelphians' experiences compared with other urban locales.¹³ While the lack of comparable urban studies made the question somewhat unanswerable then, there are now dozens of books on urban freedom struggles—including at least nine on New York City and a half dozen on Philadelphia.

Many of these works emphasize the tension between class and community within black urban sectors. Class certainly looms large in studies of black New York. With the legacy of a larger urban enslaved population in the eighteenth century, and a palpable history of both slave uprisings and African cultural retention, black New York had a more vibrant working-class culture and festive street life than Philadelphia. As Shane White showed long ago, and as others have verified, class framed the style of black politics throughout the early republic, with elites favoring uplift strategies while laboring populations turned to more confrontational tactics, particularly those that claimed physical space or workplace rights. Going back to *The Urban Crucible*, how would Nash navigate between vectors of race and class in and beyond black communities?¹⁴

¹¹ See Douglas R. Egerton, "Slaves to the Marketplace: Economic Liberty and Black Rebelliousness in the Atlantic World," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (2006): 617–39, quote at 622.

¹² Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 279.

¹³ Eric Foner, review, *American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 1470.

¹⁴ On New York City, see, among others, Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York*

New work has revised several key issues Nash originally treated, including the nature of black leadership and the meaning of gender relations in Philadelphia. Julie Winch and I have written biographies of perhaps the leading black Philadelphians of the early republic, James Forten and Richard Allen. Though they came from different backgrounds and embraced a range of tactical outlooks during their long lives, Forten (free) and Allen (a former slave) cherished an ideal of interracial reform that would influence subsequent generations of immediate abolitionists. But would black Philadelphia's elite embrace confrontational action? And were leaders sensitive to laboring people's concerns? Indeed, when Allen did sanction alternative strategies for achieving justice (such as Haitian emigration), he articulated concerns about an impending urban crisis that reified some white fears.¹⁵

Erica Armstrong Dunbar's recent book, *A Fragile Freedom*, similarly argues that Philadelphia's upper- and lower-class black women were increasingly divided by class concerns. While the former focused further on uplift initiatives and fighting for civic rights, the latter—"poor, under-educated and in search of secure employment"—remained "concerned with matters of everyday life."¹⁶ Nash offered perceptive portraits of black women's struggles and contributions to the broader freedom movement, but he also implied that gender and class divisions were not nearly as important as community cohesion. Has recent scholarship changed his mind?

What about the southern urban experience? Christopher Phillips has found that Baltimore's sizable free black community (thirteen thousand by 1830) built an impressive array of autonomous institutions but was "less racked by class and intra-racial divisions than in other comparable cities," including Philadelphia. The enslaved South's largest city,

(Cambridge, MA, 2002), and *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens, GA, 1991); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, 2003); Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Craig Steven Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York, 2001); and David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777–1827* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2006).

¹⁵ See Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York, 2002); and Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008).

¹⁶ Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT, 2008), 150.

Baltimore tolerated hiring out and private manumission but compressed black economic opportunity in ways that elided class divisions. In Virginia, Tommy Bogger found that over a third of Norfolk manumissions in the 1790s occurred via self-purchase—precisely the type of black agency that Nash celebrated in Philadelphia in *Forging Freedom*. Do these examples suggest that free blacks in the urban south (with fearful slaveholders omnipresent) had to imagine liberty, community, and political activism in similar or different ways from their northern counterparts?¹⁷

The prolific Nash has produced his own steady stream of updated articles, books, and essays on these and other questions.¹⁸ As he has observed, “the historians’ work is never done.” Yet, whatever his thoughts, we can go back to *Forging Freedom* for our own inspiration. Even more than *The Urban Crucible*, it reminds us that the black urban experience was defined not only by oppression but by uplift. For anyone who has walked Philadelphia’s streets with Gary Nash, it is clear that the city remains a crucible of change, offering great hope for racial redemption.

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¹⁷ See Christopher Phillips, *Freedom’s Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790–1860* (Urbana, IL, 1997), 2–3; T. Stephen Whitman, *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland* (Lexington, KY, 1997); and Tommy L. Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790–1860: The Darker Side of Freedom* (Charlottesville, VA, 1997). See also Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769–1803* (Durham, NC, 1997); and Midori Takagi, “Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction”: *Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782–1865* (Charlottesville, VA, 1999).

¹⁸ See, for example, Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), esp. chap. 2.