



*The Surgeon and the Abolitionist:
William Chancellor and Anthony
Benezet*

ANTHONY BENEZET AND WILLIAM CHANCELLOR might, at first, seem strange collaborators. They both arrived in Philadelphia at about the same time: Chancellor by birth in 1730, the eldest son of an Anglican father who was a politically connected sailmaker; Benezet by ship in 1731, the eighteen-year-old son of a French Huguenot émigré. From that coincidental starting point, Benezet's and Chancellor's lives diverged in significant ways. Benezet renounced the life of business after an unsuccessful early trial and became a pioneering schoolteacher, first in Germantown and then, more famously, at Penn Charter School in Philadelphia. He went on to establish and teach in a school for girls and a school for blacks, both among the first of their kind in America. Partly

Work for this article was supported in part by a short-term Albert M. Greenfield Foundation Fellowship in African American History from the Library Company of Philadelphia in the summer of 2011. I am grateful to James Green, Connie King, and Phillip Lapsansky of the Library Company for their help, encouragement, and suggestions. My Philadelphia friends John Overbeck, Peg McCormick, and Abby Cooper encouraged my work with their extraordinary hospitality and, in Abby's case, with timely and generous research help. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania provided access to crucial manuscripts from its collections relating to John Woolman and the Pemberton family. Thanks to my daughters, Emilye Crosby and Sarah C. Campbell, for reading and making helpful suggestions. As always I am indebted to my wife, Patty, for her unfailing support and understanding, as well as her keen eye as a proofreader and good sense as a critic.

THE PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY
Vol. CXXXVII, No. 2 (April 2013)

through his adopted Quaker faith, partly through his native humane disposition, and partly through his acquaintance with enslaved and free blacks in Philadelphia, he became a staunch campaigner against slavery and the slave trade, writing and publishing some of the most influential abolitionist tracts to appear before the American Revolution. Chancellor, by contrast, became a doctor of physic, selling medicines that he imported from London at his apothecary shop on Philadelphia's Market Street. As a young man he sailed out of New York on a slave ship, using his medical skills to evaluate the health of potential slaves, either captured or purchased, and to keep them alive and healthy at sea so they could be sold at a profit in New York on the ship's return.

It seems unlikely that the paths of these two would cross, or that the ardent abolitionist Benezet would choose to collaborate with a doctor who abetted the slave trade through his practice. Yet evidence suggests strongly that the two did work together, in a way—that Benezet used the slave physician's testimony to powerful effect as he composed his first antislavery tract for public dissemination in 1759. In order to ascertain the probable nature of the relationship between the two men, how Chancellor came to share his experiences with the abolitionist, and what the consequences were of their collaboration, we must look first at Benezet to see what he might have desired from Chancellor, then follow the course of Chancellor's background and life to evaluate the experiences that might have led him to aid Benezet. In the process we get a snapshot of Philadelphia mercantile society in the decades leading up to the separation from England and of the forces that shaped disparate responses to the institution of African slavery in America.

One of Anthony Benezet's great contributions to the eighteenth-century campaign against slavery and the slave trade was his use of eyewitness testimony to correct "misconceptions" held by slave owners.¹ In his first tract against the slave trade, *Observations on the Enslaving*,

¹ For a recent and comprehensive overview of Benezet's career as an antislavery campaigner and his influence on both sides of the Atlantic, see Maurice Jackson, *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism* (Philadelphia, 2009). For Benezet's involvement with the world of Quaker publishing and petitioning, see Jonathan D. Sassi, "With a Little Help from the Friends: The Quaker and Tactical Contexts of Anthony Benezet's Abolitionist Publishing," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 135 (2011): 33–71. For his adoption of fact-based rhetorical strategies based on Enlightenment models, see David L. Crosby, "Anthony Benezet's Transformation of Anti-Slavery Rhetoric," *Slavery and Abolition* 23, no. 3 (2002): 39–58. For a judicious earlier treatment of his life and work that remains useful, especially on his relationship to American Revolutionary rhetoric, see Nancy S. Hornick, "Anthony Benezet: Eighteenth Century

Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes (1759), he addressed his fellow colonists who routinely purchased African slaves for use in their homes, farms, and businesses, assuring them that every purchaser, “as he encourages the trade, becomes partaker in the guilt of it.” “[A]nd that they may see what a deep dye the guilt is of,” he “beg[ged] leave to quote some extracts from the writings of persons of note, who have long been employed in the African trade, and whose situation and office in the factories will not admit any to question the truth of what they relate.” Benezet believed that if he opened the eyes of these purchasers to the evils created or encouraged by the transatlantic slave trade, he could prevent them “from being, in any degree, defiled with a gain so full of horrors, and so palpably inconsistent with the gospel of our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”²

To achieve this end, Benezet carefully assembled a small selection of printed narratives detailing European encounters with Africa. The majority of these sources consisted of widely disseminated accounts of explorers and merchants such as Willem Bosman and Jean Barbot or the compilations of anthologists such as Joseph Randall and Thomas Astley. But tucked in among them was an unpublished account by an individual Benezet identifies only as “a person of candour and undoubted credit now living in *Philadelphia*, who was on a trading voyage, on the coast of *Guinea*, about seven years ago.” Claiming that this person was an eyewitness to atrocities, Benezet quotes the author’s manuscript journal to demonstrate “the misery and desolation which the purchase of slaves occasions in that country.” Here is the quotation in full:

Being on that coast, at a place called *Basalia*, the commander of the vessel according to custom sent a person on shore with a present to the king of the country, acquainting him with their arrival, and letting him know that they wanted a cargo of slaves: the king promised to furnish them with slaves, and in order to do it, set out to go to war against his enemies, designing also to surprise some town and take all the people prisoners. Sometime after, the king sent them word he had not yet met with the desired success, having been twice repulsed in attempting to break up two

Social Critic, Educator, and Abolitionist” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1974). The groundbreaking biography by George S. Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet* (Philadelphia, 1937), also remains useful, especially for its collection of letters by, to, and about Benezet.

² Anthony Benezet, *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes* (Germantown, PA, 1759), 3, 8. Spelling and capitalization modernized throughout.

towns, but that he still hoped to procure a number of slaves for them; and in this design he persisted till he met his enemies in the field, where a battle was fought which lasted three days, during which time the engagement was so bloody that 4,500 were slain on the spot. Think, says the author, what a pitiable sight it was to see the widows weeping over their lost husbands, and orphans deploring the loss of their fathers, etc.³

This report served Benezet's purposes well. It alleged that the Europeans' request for slaves directly caused an African king to make war on his neighbors, at the expense of 4,500 lives, and, in its emotional description of the weeping of widows and orphans, it made clear the slave trade's human cost to an entire society. Benezet felt the power of the quote to express his own revulsion against war and violence and to reach out to those who owned or contemplated owning slaves. He used this quotation twice more in the next twelve years, in *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies* (1766) and *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771), as he expanded his attacks on the slave system.

The author of the manuscript from which Benezet quoted this passage has remained unidentified for over 250 years, but several pieces of information, some of which have not become available until quite recently, now allow me to suggest that he is William Chancellor.⁴ First of all,

³ Ibid., 5. This description of slaving in Barsally is consistent with a summary offered by Martin A. Klein, "Servitude among the Wolof and Sereer of Senegambia," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison, WI, 1977), 335–63. He writes, "The state controlled the trade and profited from it. The rulers made war, took prisoners, sentenced wrongdoers to enslavement, or sent warriors to attack dissident villages. Similarly, the same rulers and those who served them received most of the benefits from the trade" (341). Trade slaves were a distinct group, acquired through war, kidnapping, or purchase, and they had no value in the area where they were enslaved. Two other groups of slaves were domestic slaves, who were assimilated into new social units, mainly families; and the *tyeddo*, slaves usually attached to the ruler and his lineage, living in the capital city or nearby villages, and employed in most of the fighting and administration. These were the warrior slaves who would participate in raids on other towns and villages to capture trade slaves. Estimates of the number of *tyeddo* in the Barsally region run to about a third of the population, perhaps as many as 15,000 men. In the 1730s the King of Barsally had a reputation for raiding the towns of his enemies or even his own numerous towns in order to capture trade slaves. A pitched battle that killed 4,500 would have been exceptional, but perhaps not impossible.

⁴ Thomas Wolf, who edited *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes* for the anthology *Early American Abolitionists: A Collection of Anti-Slavery Writings, 1760–1820*, ed. James G. Basker (New York, 2005), states that the author is "possibly William Fentum" (23n16). Benezet does quote an entirely different passage from another manuscript journal in later publications, this one by an author who sailed to Africa in 1749 from Liverpool; Benezet identifies him once by the initials "W. F." (*A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by the Negroes*, 2nd ed. [1762], 54). Nowhere in his published writings does Benezet identify W. F. as

Benezet supplies more information about his source in later publications. In *A Caution and Warning*, he describes his anonymous eyewitness as a “surgeon” who sailed “from New York to the coast of Guinea, about eighteen years past,” and in *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, he repeats this information but changes the time reference to “about twenty years past.”⁵ So we know the author lived in Philadelphia in 1759 but sailed as a surgeon from New York on a slave ship to Guinea about the year 1752, 1748, or 1751 (subtracting the number of years past from the dates of publication of the three works). A search of the website Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, compiled by David Eltis and his colleagues, reveals records of twelve slave ships that sailed to Africa from New York Harbor and returned slaves to America in the five-year stretch from 1748 to 1752. For one of them, the sloop *Wolf*, the database provides a reference to an article by Darold D. Wax titled “A Philadelphia Surgeon on a Slaving Voyage to Africa, 1749–1751.” This article leads us to William Chancellor.⁶

William Chancellor and His Journal

Wax had come across a newly deposited manuscript at the Maryland Historical Society: “Continuation of a Voyage from New York to the Coast of Africa in the Sloop *Wolf* Gurnay Wall Commandr. in the Years 1749–50 & 51,” by William Chancellor of Philadelphia.⁷ The dates and

William Fentum, nor do his sources. I have not been able to find Fentum’s name in any published sources on the slave trade, and Wolf provides no further identification. Even if W. F. is some otherwise unknown William Fentum, there is nothing to connect him to the author of this quotation in *Observations* other than Benezet’s referring to one as “a person whose candor may be depended upon” and the other as “a person of candor and undoubted credit.” Although Wolf’s transcription of Benezet’s texts appears to be impeccable, his notes are not consistently reliable. For example, he fails to identify Basalia with the ancient kingdom of Barsally (or Bur-Salum or Salum) just north of the Gambia River (he places it in present-day Sudan), and he fails to recognize that most of *Notes on the Slave Trade* (1780), which he also edited, consists of a long quotation from John Wesley’s *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (he appears also to attribute the quote from Wesley to the same William Fentum [29n1]).

⁵ Anthony Benezet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies* (Philadelphia, 1766), 18; Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (Philadelphia, 1771), 119.

⁶ Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1751&yearTo=1754&ptdepimp=20600>, accessed May 3, 2012; Darold D. Wax, “A Philadelphia Surgeon on a Slaving Voyage to Africa, 1749–1751,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (1968): 465–93.

⁷ Diary of William Chancellor, 1749–51, E. A. Williams Papers, MS 899, Maryland Historical Society. The collection was donated to the society in 1962 by E. A. Williams III.

places fit what Benezet reveals about his anonymous source, but the question remains: is there more evidence that would link this William Chancellor to Benezet's "person of candour and undoubted credit"?

The best evidence would be to find the passage Benezet quotes in the text of Chancellor's manuscript, but that, unfortunately, is not possible. The manuscript described by Wax represents only the second volume of Chancellor's journal, beginning with the entry for May 18, 1750. The first volume appears to have been lost or possibly destroyed. The second volume does not cover the period of time Chancellor spent in the area of the Gambia River, where the Kingdom of Barsally (the author's "Basalia") was located. We do know, from a list of slave purchases near the end of the journal, that the *Wolf* was slaving off the coast near the Gambia for two months between mid-November 1749 and mid-January 1750 and that the captain purchased twenty-nine enslaved Africans from there. This means that Chancellor would have had opportunity to witness the results of the pitched battle described in Benezet's passage. That he was familiar with the natives of the Gambia region is clear from a comparison he made on July 3, 1750: "The negroes in these parts [the Gold Coast] tho' they are very ingenious, yet have not half that honesty and good nature, that the Gambia men are endowed with neither will you receive half that civility from them."⁸ Although Chancellor's primary duties were to see to the health of the slave cargo, from inspecting those offered for sale to treating the purchased slaves in the confines of holding pens and on board ship, we must not imagine him confined aboard ship. He would have had many duties that took him to shore and brought him into contact with Africans on their own soil, so he would have had ample opportunity to witness and comment on the actions of people like the "King of Basalia."

Other passages found in Chancellor's journal, when he describes the sufferings and deaths of slaves he had to care for aboard ship, are consistent in style and sentiments to the passage quoted by Benezet:

Wednesday, May 30 [1750]: This morning early going down among the Slaves, I found a boy dead, at noon another, and in the afternoon, another. Oh Reader, whoever thou art, it is impossible for you to conceive or me to describe the Torture I sustain at the loss of these Slaves we have committed to a watry grave. . . .

⁸ Quoted in Wax, "Philadelphia Surgeon," 473. Wax's capitalization, spelling, and punctuation followed throughout. There is no complete published transcript of Chancellor's manuscript, but Wax offers extensive quotations in his article.

Saturday, June 2: . . . [T]o see 29 come on deck and hardly able to crawl must be affecting to one who has the care of them. . . .

Sunday, July 1: . . . [I]t is [a] very affecting thing that I who have the Sole care of the Slaves and know [what] is proper must see them suffer & even die.⁹

From passages such as these we can get a glimpse of the kind of man this surgeon was. Wax describes him, based solely on the entries in his journal, as having “an alert and curious mind, and one which had received more than a mere smattering of what the century had to offer in the way of a medical education.” Chancellor knew Latin, dabbled in poetry (Alexander Pope was his idol), and experimented, sometimes successfully, with “recipes” for treating illnesses such as dysentery. Other than this, Wax says, “very little is known,” and he calls Chancellor’s family connections in Philadelphia “all rather obscure.”¹⁰

That was then; this is now. Digitized public records now allow us to bring three generations of the Chancellor family out of the shadows of history so we can consider and speculate about the forces that might have converged to send this Philadelphia lad on a slaving voyage to Africa as a surgeon and, later, to share his revealing journal of this excursion with Anthony Benezet.

Chancellor’s father, also named William Chancellor, was a sailmaker, minor politician, landlord, warehouseman, and property speculator. A man of his times, he employed both enslaved and indentured laborers in his businesses and his home, and had some trouble keeping them.¹¹ In a city where many of the businessmen and merchants were Quakers, he was an Anglican, serving as a vestryman at Christ Church for eleven years between 1721 and 1742. The year 1730 saw the birth of Chancellor’s first son, William. The elder William Chancellor’s business affairs and his life ended abruptly in February 1742/43. His wife apparently died before him, as no mention is made of her in his will. His children are listed as two sons, William and Samuel, and three daughters, Elizabeth, Lethea,

⁹ Ibid., 487.

¹⁰ Ibid., 466. The family history was obscure enough that Wax confused William Chancellor, the surgeon and author of the journal, with his father, William Chancellor, the sailmaker. Wax asserts that the surgeon was a friend of Governor William Keith, but Keith left the colony in 1727, three years before the surgeon was born. He also asserts that the surgeon’s son, William Jr., married Salome Wister, but, in fact, it was the surgeon himself who was William Jr., and it was he who married Salome. Compare Wax, “Philadelphia Surgeon,” 466, with my account herein.

¹¹ Between 1721 and 1723 he placed advertisements for two runaway white male servants and one “Negro woman named Nan.” *American Weekly Mercury*, June 22, 1721, Nov. 28, 1723.

and Mary. Young William had probably not yet reached his thirteenth birthday when the will was written and proved, yet he and his sister Elizabeth are listed as executors.¹² For the next several years Elizabeth fought to salvage something from an estate that was clearly having difficulty paying its debts. On May 5 she offered for sale “Three Negro men sail-makers, and a new chair for one horse, with harness,” while imploring those who owed the estate money “to make speedy payment.” By July 28 it appears that the three “Negro” men, not having sold earlier, had been seized and were to be offered at auction on August 10. Two years later the house and sail loft on Second Street were liquidated “by order of the trustees of the Loan Office.”¹³

We can only speculate where young William was and what he was doing in the years between his father’s death in 1743 and his 1749 voyage. We can tell from William’s journal that he received a liberal education in Latin and English and trained as a doctor, learning both medicine and surgery. Thanks to William Penn’s charters, grammar schools teaching Latin, English, mathematics, and other useful subjects were widely available to the children of Philadelphia, and young Chancellor could have attended one of these schools or studied with one of the dozens of private tutors who taught pupils in their homes or in makeshift classrooms. Printers and booksellers abounded, and, if you knew the right people, private libraries that were as good as any on the continent could be tapped.¹⁴

As for Chancellor’s medical training, Henry Burnell Shafer has written: “At that time, becoming a doctor involved one of two procedures: apprenticeship to a practicing physician for an indefinite number of years, or study abroad.”¹⁵ Of the two, apprenticeship is by far the more likely for Chancellor. In 1743 he turned thirteen, a common age for young men to

¹²Abstracts of Wills, 1724–1747, Philadelphia, Pa., Book G, Mar. 2, 1742: 35, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹³ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 5, 1743, July 28, 1743, July 4, 1745.

¹⁴ For the interpenetration of classical learning with Philadelphia’s civic and commercial culture, see Richard Mott Gummere, “Apollo on Locust Street,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 56 (1932): 68–92. On the public schools see Jean S. Straub, “Quaker School Life in Philadelphia before 1800,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 89 (1965): 447–58, and “Teaching in the Friends’ Latin School of Philadelphia in the Eighteenth Century,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 91 (1967): 434–56. On private tutors see Robert Francis Seybolt, “Schoolmasters of Colonial Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 52 (1928): 361–71.

¹⁵ Henry Burnell Shafer, “Medicine in Old Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania History* 4 (1937): 21.

become apprentices, and with his father's estate in debt he did not have the resources to head off to London or Edinburgh for medical school. If William had been apprenticed to a doctor at age thirteen, as seems likely, he could have acquired the skills he needed to serve as surgeon aboard a slaving ship at the tender age of nineteen. We can get an idea of those skills from his journal.

The maladies Chancellor treated aboard ship included measles; dropsy (edema); pleurisy; white, green, and bloody flux (dysentery); worms; kidney stones; imposthumes (abscesses); and one small cancer. The medicines he relied on included astringents (drying or drawing agents), cathartics (purges), sudorifics (sweat producers), and anodynes (painkillers). In August 1750 he complained bitterly about his difficulty in obtaining medicines, which he had run out of in May. He also regretted not knowing beforehand that the ship would be purchasing children, because, he lamented, "my medicines are very harsh for them." Most of the surgical procedures he performed seem to have been autopsies. In one case he found an otherwise healthy girl dead in the steerage and, finding blood in her right ear, decided to investigate. He reported, "[I] got my instruments and open'd the part where I found the Temporal Bone fractur'd, on an inquiry among the Slaves found one of the women had beat her in the night." When a three-year-old girl died of flux and measles, he "opened immediately and found in her Intestines 7 Worms some of the[m] 12 & 13 Inches roll'd up together in a bundle." A week later another girl died of worms, and he "found the Pylorus or neck of the Stomach chock'd full of them."¹⁶

In addition to treating illnesses and injuries, Chancellor was constantly concerned for alleviating the *Wolf's* poor accommodations for handling slaves. He complained in his journal about the waves that washed over the ship "into the very hold and steerage where the sick are which must make it not dangerous to the sick only but the well also, being obliged to be to the ankles in water." He lamented that there was "no quarter deck[,] no platform . . . for Children which we have of 3 & 4 years old," and that the cramped quarters led to a "want of exercise which they cannot have on board so vile a Vessel as this."¹⁷ He was fearful that contagious diseases would be brought on board by the errors of others. On July 18, 1750,

¹⁶ Wax, "Philadelphia Surgeon," 483–90 (Wax mistranscribes "sudorifick" as "sudonsick"), quotations 488, 484, and 487.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 467–68.

when they had been off the African coast for nine months, he fretted that some of the slaves they had lost to the flux “would not have been sick had not the Capt. gone on board a Vessel where the infection was” and expressed his “dread of having the Small Pox among them which is now in the Rhode and on board which Vessel the Capt very often is.”¹⁸ The *Wolf* would continue to languish on the coast yet another six months and lose many more slaves until late September. On November 23 Chancellor reported, with some satisfaction, “great Success with the Slaves having not lost one this 2 months, I have discover’d a Recipe for that Vile Disorder the Flux.”¹⁹

Given Chancellor’s youth and apparently sincere compassion for his charges, it is not surprising that seeing so many of them die might cause him to question his own competence. The loss of so many slaves had, Chancellor wrote, “thrown me into a melancholy out of [which] I shall not easily recover[.] An Account of their disorders & medicines apply’d I am now writing in order to present to the owners at my arrival in America.” Whether this accounting was designed merely to justify the merits of his own work or, perhaps, to try to rectify some of the wretched conditions he found on board the *Wolf* is difficult to say. What is clear is that Chancellor had felt a great personal loss in the twenty months he had spent aboard a slave ship. On the last page of his journal, he looks back at the voyage and regrets, “in the very best of my years, in the time of hopes, prospects and advantages [I should] be so wretched as to be debarr’d the Capacity of making use of them, and in a sense buried alive.”²⁰

Chancellor’s experience did not lead him to condemn slavery or even the slave trade, at least at the time he wrote his journal. He accepted the opinion that certain Africans were cannibals who would eat not only their African and European enemies but their own children.²¹ Luckily for the

¹⁸ Ibid., 487. Chancellor frequently uses the word “Rhode” in the nautical sense of a “roadstead,” a place offshore a port where vessels can lie at anchor in relative safety. In this case, however, he seems to be referring to an actual vessel on board which his captain, Gurnay Wall, had been spending time. This would be the *Rhode Island*, a sister ship of the *Wolf*, captained by Peter James, owned by the same Livingston brothers who owned the *Wolf*, and known to be in African waters at the same time in 1750. Cf. Wax, who says that Chancellor refers to the *Rhode Island* and another sister ship, the *Stork*, in his journal (ibid., 467). The *Rhode Island* returned to New York with its cargo of sixty-nine slaves on May 27, 1751, just seventeen days after the arrival of the *Wolf*. See Voyages, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1514&yearTo=1866&shipname=rhode+island>, accessed July 17, 2012.

¹⁹ Wax, “Philadelphia Surgeon,” 489.

²⁰ Ibid., 489, 492–93.

²¹ Ibid., 472–73.

slave traders, not all Africans were so savage. Some “were formerly as ravenous as those mentioned off of Cape Laho, but by the English Vessels being constantly here [at the Gold Coast] they are in some measure become naturalized, which has been very much to [their] advantage.”²² In the ethnocentric ideology of the young surgeon, Africans could only be helped by their contacts with Europeans, especially the English. It is not remarkable, then, that Chancellor would express an opinion, a few months before the end of his stay in Africa, that the slave trade was not “in the least” vile, because “tis redeeming an unhappy people from inconceivable misery under which they continually labour, and from those miseries of life into which they are every day precipitated.” He found particularly offensive the power Africa’s autocratic monarchs and chieftains wielded over the lives and deaths of their subjects, explaining, “A king very often takes it into his head to kill any body[. W]hen he dies numberless poor unhappy creatures are sacrificed to him, out of whose skulls they drink Rum as soon as clean’d . . . I say they are better in being servants to the English than in this continuall dread of Death.”²³ It should not be overlooked that Chancellor also had a financial interest in the survival of the slave cargo. As the surgeon he was entitled to some unspecified number of slaves to keep or sell for his own benefit. As he mourned the loss of three boys to illness in one day, he mentions, “one of [them] was to have been my own.”²⁴

Chancellor’s Return and His Associates in Philadelphia

For the twenty-five months following the *Wolf*’s return on May 10, 1751, Chancellor is missing from the public record. But on June 7, 1753, he returned to public notice in Philadelphia when he placed this advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*: “Imported in the *Myrtilla*, Capt. Budden, from London, and to be sold cheap, by William Chancellor . . . a neat assortment of chemical and galenical [i.e., herbal] medicines.”²⁵

²² Ibid., 476. Chancellor was aware that Africans who sent their sons to England did not always get them back as they expected, as in the case of William Sessarakoo, the son of John Corantie of Animabo, who was sent to England for education but instead was sold into slavery in Barbados by the ship’s captain. When his father discovered the treachery, he discontinued all trading with the English until his son was redeemed and sent to London.

²³ Ibid., 490–91.

²⁴ Ibid., 487.

²⁵ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 7, 1753.

Captain Richard Budden had been sailing out of Philadelphia since 1733, and many Philadelphia merchants depended on him to supply them with imported goods, especially cloth.²⁶ In that same issue of the *Gazette*, no fewer than seven other merchants mention that their stock had arrived on the *Myrtilla*. Of these, the most interesting is John Smith, because of his connection to Anthony Benezet.

Smith was precisely the kind of man the neophyte Chancellor might look to for friendship and guidance. Only eight years older, he too had gone to sea as a young man, though only as a passenger on one of his father's ships to Barbados; while there he got a good look at plantation slavery, which he detested. He was a hugely prosperous merchant who nonetheless cultivated his taste for literature and fine writing and was active in civic affairs: elected for three consecutive years to the Pennsylvania Assembly, helping to found one of the first insurance companies in North America and the first hospital, and serving on the board of overseers for the public schools. He was an elder in his Quaker meeting and was allied by marriage to one of the foremost families in the province. In fact, he was just what an ambitious young man like Chancellor might hope to become in eight years.²⁷ He was also a close personal friend and collaborator of Anthony Benezet. The year Smith and Chancellor were dealing in merchandise imported on Captain Budden's ship, Smith acted for the overseers of the Quaker public schools to review and approve Benezet's spending accounts as schoolmaster. In his diary Smith mentions meeting, working, and socializing with Benezet and his wife almost forty times in the years 1746–51, often in the company of dignitaries such as James Logan, Israel Pemberton, James Pemberton, and Benjamin Franklin. Anthony and Joyce Benezet were intimate participants in the wedding between Smith and Logan's daughter Hannah.²⁸

²⁶ The shipping news from Philadelphia for July 26, 1733, records that Hamilton and Budden left Philadelphia for Madeira (*New England Weekly Journal*, Aug. 6, 1733); for March 12, 1733/34 the shipping news records that R. Budden was entered outward for Jamaica, captaining the brig *Hampshire* (*American Weekly Mercury*, Mar. 12, 1733/34). For the next twenty-five years, Budden averaged over two voyages per year, most of them round trips from Philadelphia to London or Portugal.

²⁷ For a review of Smith's career see Frederick B. Tolles, "A Literary Quaker: John Smith of Burlington and Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 65 (1941): 300–33, esp. 303.

²⁸ For the relationship between Smith and Benezet, see Sassi, "With a Little Help from the Friends," 37–44. For Smith's diary, see *Hannah Logan's Courtship*, ed. Albert Cook Myers (Philadelphia, 1904), 85–305. For Benezet's account, see Philadelphia Overseers of the Public School, "Miscellaneous Manuscripts" (1754), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

Anthony Benezet's three brothers—James, Philip, and Daniel—were also part of the close-knit and competitive circle of merchants who sold imported goods along Front, Second, and Market Streets. James had done business with Captain Budden, advertising in 1749 an extraordinary list of items “just imported from London in the ship *Myrtilla*” that included scythes, pewter, steel, and over seventy-five named kinds of cloth and thread, plus “a variety of goods too tedious to mention.”²⁹ It is a virtual certainty that Chancellor would have known Smith and the Benezet brothers in the normal course of his business as it grew from this beginning in 1753.

In September 1753 William Chancellor married Salome Wister, the daughter of John Wister, a German immigrant who had become one of the richest landowners and merchants in the province.³⁰ Wister was also an intimate friend of Anthony Benezet's father, John Stephen Benezet. Both men lived and kept stores on Market Street, but Benezet's father gave up his business in 1743, became a member of the Moravian Church, and moved his residence to Germantown. Wister also had a summer residence in Germantown (which still stands) just north of Christopher Sower's printing shop, where Anthony Benezet is believed to have worked as a proofreader in 1739 and where the first two editions of his *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes* were printed. After Benezet's father died in 1750, Wister acted as agent in several advertisements offering the late Benezet's home and property for rent.³¹ Given Chancellor's possible business connections to John Smith and the Benezet brothers and his son-in-law relationship to John Wister, there is a strong likelihood that he and Benezet came to know each other, if not intimately, then at least as fellow citizens.

Immediately after his marriage, Chancellor's business appears to have prospered. In November 1753 he advertised that he had set up shop on Market Street across from the Presbyterian church “at the sign of the Pestle and Mortar.” At the end he offered to supply “masters of vessels not carrying surgeons” with a medicine box and proper directions.³² This advertisement was repeated at frequent intervals until the end of the year.

²⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 25, 1749.

³⁰ “1753, Sept. 29, Chancelor [sic], William, and Salome Wistar [a variant spelling of the name, more commonly used for the family of John's older brother Caspar],” Marriage Record of Swede's Church (Gloria Dei), 1750–1810, in *Pennsylvania Archives*, ed. Samuel Hazard et al. (Philadelphia and Harrisburg, PA, 1852–1935), 2nd ser., 8:327.

³¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 21, 1752, June 4, 1752, Mar. 6, 1753.

³² *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov. 22, 1753, Sept. 5, 1754.

Then he appears to have ceased advertising. This may be a sign that his importing business was doing poorly. The advertising of imported goods in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* decreased sharply in 1755 as the rumors of war with the French and reports of privateers preying on shipping depressed commerce. It could be, however, that Chancellor was devoting more of his time to the practice of medicine than to his importing business. He was also starting a family, fathering a son, William, and a daughter, Salome.

There is one document from the 1750s that links Chancellor's name with Anthony Benezet's: they both appear on a list that appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on May 29, 1755, of several hundred early contributors toward establishing the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Relief of the Sick Poor. As a physician, Chancellor would undoubtedly have become acquainted with the chief organizer of the hospital, Israel Pemberton, who was also an intimate friend of Benezet.

By 1759 Anthony Benezet had written or was engaged in writing *Observations on the Enslaving, Importing, and Purchasing of Negroes*, and, if my identification is correct, he had seen and copied a part of William Chancellor's manuscript. How would he have gotten it? The two men had many possibilities of contact: through Benezet's brothers; through Chancellor's marriage to Salome Wister, whose father was a coreligionist, neighbor, and ally of Benezet's father; and, most importantly, through John Smith, whom Chancellor probably met early and often in his first years of doing business on the waterfront. Smith and Benezet had been appointed to the Friends' Overseers of the Press in 1752 and had worked together in editing and arranging the printing of the Friends' 1754 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Epistle of Caution and Advice Concerning the Keeping of Slaves* and John Woolman's *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (1754). Even though Smith retired from his business and returned to Burlington, New Jersey, in 1756, he and Benezet continued to collaborate. Letters from Benezet to Smith in late 1757 and early 1759 mention "a small work . . . treating of Negroes" that probably refers to a manuscript version of *Observations* that Benezet was sharing with him before its publication.³³ So Smith knew that Benezet was planning a tract that would address the evils of the slave trade by citing the narratives of slave traders and other travelers to

³³ Sassi, "With a Little Help from the Friends," 39–40, 44; Anthony Benezet to John Smith, Dec. 30, 1757, and Feb. 20, 1759, in Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet*, 225, 234.

Africa. It is easy to imagine Chancellor sharing his journal with Smith, a man whom I believe he would have expected to feel some empathy for his experiences; and Smith could have told Benezet about a source that could contribute powerfully to his rhetorical purpose. Let us speculate that Benezet met with Chancellor, asked to publish a short extract from his journal, and agreed to keep Chancellor's identity hidden to spare the young man any personal embarrassment or discomfort. His experience aboard ship had been physically and mentally traumatic, and Benezet might have wanted to mitigate any pain that revelations about his past might cause.

William Travels to London

In March 1761 the following advertisement appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*: "William Chancellor, intending for England in three months, desires all persons indebted to him to make speedy payment; and those that have any demands against him to bring in their accounts that they may be settled. All sorts of drugs, chemical and galenical medicines, will continue to be sold at the lowest rates at his house, sign of the Pestle and Mortar."³⁴ This settling of debts was a fairly common practice among colonists who were preparing for a sea voyage; it was good manners to let your creditors know you were not sneaking out of town to avoid paying your notes. Chancellor most likely sailed with the veteran captain Richard Budden, now commanding the *Philadelphia Packet*, which cleared the Philadelphia Custom House on July 23 as it headed for London. A standard six-week passage would have put him there on or about September 3, just in time for him to write the following note to Benezet's good friends Israel and James Pemberton on September 6:

Much Esteemed friends/

The Civilities I have received from Doctor Fothergill, tho' arrived but a few days, demand from me the utmost return of thanks, as they could have proceeded, from nothing but your warm recommendation of me, to him. It will be my constant study, to prove worthy your Esteem, and acknowledge how much I am—

Your obliged Friend—
Wm Chancellor.³⁵

³⁴ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Mar. 26, 1761.

³⁵ William Chancellor to Israel and James Pemberton, Sept. 6, 1761, vol. 15, p. 44, Pemberton Family Papers (Collection 0484A), Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

This letter—the only other manuscript document by Chancellor known still to exist—raises many questions. Did Chancellor approach the Pembertons for a letter of introduction to John Fothergill, a devout Friend and one of the richest and most respected medical practitioners in England, or did the Pembertons send Chancellor to London on an errand for them? What business did Chancellor have in London, and did it involve Fothergill in a major way, or was Chancellor merely paying his respects to a renowned surgeon and physician? Fortunately, a letter written by Fothergill to James Pemberton some seven months later and carried back to Philadelphia by James Logan's son William helps to answer some of the questions. Pemberton appears to have sent Fothergill some books along with a request that he help raise money for the newly proposed Pennsylvania Hospital for the Sick Poor. Fothergill responded that the request “came at an unlucky juncture,” since “money is wanted here for many purposes, and men part with fifty pounds with reluctance.” Instead of immediate support, Fothergill promised to send a present of some anatomical drawings that would be useful in courses in anatomy, which is “of exceedingly great use to practitioners in Physic and Surgery.”³⁶ He further proposed that Dr. William Shippen the younger, with whom he would be sending his gift, be permitted to use the drawings in offering private courses in anatomy “to students who may attend the new hospital.”³⁷ Fothergill even looked forward to the day that Shippen and John Morgan, who would receive his MD from Edinburgh in 1763, “will be able to erect a school of Physick amongst you that may draw many students from various parts of America and the West Indies.”³⁸ Fothergill then offered his opinion on the thirty-two-year-old William Chancellor: “though perhaps not qualified to take any considerable share in an undertaking of this nature, yet [he] has spent his time here to considerable advantage. I esteem him much, and have no doubt but his diligence and

³⁶ John Fothergill to James Pemberton, Apr. 7, 1762, in *Chain of Friendship: Selected Letters of Dr. John Fothergill of London, 1735–1780*, ed. Betsy C. Corner and Christopher C. Booth (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 225.

³⁷ William Shippen the younger was the son of Dr. William Shippen of Philadelphia. He had graduated from the College of New Jersey, then studied medicine briefly with his father before studying under Fothergill and Dr. William Hunter in London. He took his MD degree from Edinburgh in 1761 (*ibid.*, 227n).

³⁸ John Morgan, another young Philadelphian, was a member of the first graduating class of the College of Philadelphia and, later, a student of Fothergill and Hunter in London before proceeding to the University of Edinburgh (*ibid.*, 225 and 228n).

care, improved by the opportunities of seeing a great deal of practice, will render him a very useful member of society.”³⁹

Another purpose of Chancellor’s visit was to purchase supplies in London to restock his shop on Market Street. In this he succeeded, announcing in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* for June 10, 1762, that he had new merchandise “imported from the original warehouses in London on the *Philadelphia Packet*” and another ship. The *Packet* had made entry to Philadelphia two weeks earlier, and it is likely that Chancellor arrived on it as well, perhaps along with William Logan and the letter he was carrying from John Fothergill to James Pemberton.⁴⁰

William’s Death and Its Aftermath

Four months later, William Chancellor was dead. His death notice is silent as to the cause, offering only the most conventional boilerplate to describe the event and his character: “On the 11th instant departed this life, in the 32nd year of his age, Doctor William Chancellor, to the great loss of his family: a gentleman of a most amiable character. He had an extensive acquaintance, and wherever he was known, was beloved and esteemed, both for his public and private virtues, as well as an eminent physician.”⁴¹ Whatever the cause, it seems Chancellor’s death was unexpected and probably left his wife and two children without much in the way of an estate. His apothecary business changed hands by January 1763, bought by John Shippen, druggist, another medical son of William Shippen the elder.⁴² In 1769, seven years after Chancellor’s death, his wife, Salome, was listed in the proprietary tax rolls along with two Wister relatives, Cathrine and Sarah, with whom she undoubtedly lived. Cathrine was assessed over £115; Sarah exactly £43; Salome was assessed only £1/10s.⁴³ Her two young children, William and Salome, probably

³⁹ Ibid., 225.

⁴⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 10, 1762, May 27, 1762.

⁴¹ Ibid., Oct. 21, 1762.

⁴² Ibid., Jan. 13, 1763. In Shippen’s advertisement in the *Gazette*, no reference is made to the name of the shop, the Pestle and Mortar, only “the house and shop lately kept by Dr. William Chancellor, in Market Street.” Shippen says he has “bought the shop furniture, and a valuable parcel of drugs and medicines,” but whether he bought the house itself is not clear.

⁴³ Proprietary Tax, County of Philadelphia, 1769, in *Pennsylvania Archives*, ser. 3, 14:160. The two women listed with Salome are probably Catharine Jansen Wistar, the widow of John Wister’s elder brother Caspar Wistar, who died in 1752, and Sarah Wistar, the unmarried daughter of Caspar and Catharine. They were, respectively, Salome’s aunt and first cousin. Catharine is listed as

were assimilated by the Wister family; twenty years later, both William and Salome Carpenter Chancellor were legatees in their maternal grandfather's will, and William was appointed one of the executors. Soon after that, each of them married into the prominent Wharton family.⁴⁴

Conclusions

To summarize the case for identifying William Chancellor as the "person of candour" that Benezet quotes in *Observations* and in two later works, we know he is first mentioned in Philadelphia's records in 1743 as the son of the sailmaker William Chancellor and one of the executors of his estate, though he was not yet thirteen years old. We know the nineteen-year-old Chancellor was serving as a surgeon on board the *Wolf* off the coast of Africa in the time frame Benezet specified for his author and that he kept a two-volume journal of his experiences. We know from the second volume that twenty-nine enslaved Africans were purchased for the *Wolf* in the vicinity of the Kingdom of Barsally near the Gambia River in November–December 1749. We know that Chancellor made visits to the African shore and had contact with traders and kings. This kind of contact would have given him the opportunity to witness the events described in the quotation Benezet chose for his tract. We also know that Chancellor reemerged in Philadelphia within two years of the *Wolf*'s return to New York. We know that he immediately set up business as an apothecary and physician. He obviously had training in medicine before, and may have had more after, his voyage on the *Wolf*. We know that he moved in circles that would necessarily have acquainted him with persons very close to Anthony Benezet, including Benezet's three merchant brothers, his father, and his close friend John Smith, who served with Benezet as an overseer of the Quaker press and read his books in manuscript. We also know that Chancellor, two years after Benezet published *Observations* and shortly before his own untimely death, secured a recommendation to the famous London doctor John Fothergill from two of Benezet's closest friends in the Quaker meeting leadership, James and

"Cathrine" in the tax rolls. For purposes of comparison, the same tax roll assessed Anthony Benezet £18, Benjamin Franklin £228, John Wister £239, Dr. William Shippen £505, and Israel Pemberton £898. William Chancellor's brother, Samuel, the ship captain, is listed as owing no tax. See page 158 for Benezet and Franklin; 189 for Wister and Shippen; 183 for Pemberton; 178 for Chancellor.

⁴⁴ Abstracts of Wills, 1789, Philadelphia, Pa., Book U, Feb. 6, 1789: 35, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Israel Pemberton. From these associations, it is hard not to conclude that Benezet would have known, or at least known of, William Chancellor, would have esteemed him as a man of “undoubted credit,” and would have had a chance to copy the passage in question from the first volume of his journal. And although all of this evidence is circumstantial, it is difficult to believe there was another Philadelphia surgeon who fits the known facts about the “person of candour” as well as William Chancellor.

As we have seen, Chancellor grew up in a family that owned and used slaves at home and in business. He and his sister tried to sell the slaves they had inherited from their father in an attempt to liquidate his estate. He himself signed on to a slave ship in the hope of reaping some of the profit of the voyage by selling whatever number of slaves would be assigned to him. In his journal, he expressed a belief in the brutal and primitive character of African societies and the benefits of forcing them to submit to European domination and tutelage. Though he felt repugnance at the brutal and negligent treatment of slave cargoes, this seemed to him a necessary price for the continued progress of British colonial society.

In spite of these conventional judgments, Chancellor was deeply affected by the sufferings of the Africans he cared for aboard ship. Witness the passages quoted earlier and these:

Thursday, August 9: . . . I now have the one [slave] which is choak'd with worms, but I have not that to give her, to kill them, my case is hard to see Young Creatures suffering in this manner in short it renders my life a misery to me.

Monday, August 27: I did not imagine that it was in the power to alter so very much as the deaths of the Slaves I mentioned have, in short their loss has thrown me into a melancholy out of [which] I shall not easily recover.⁴⁵

For a young man of twenty, just learning to make his way in the world of men, it must have been particularly troubling to be faced every day with the reality of the suffering caused by the slave trade while trying to maintain the ideological framework that allowed him to assert that this was a way to bring the blessings of civilization to Africa and its people. The psychic tension may have reached its peak in an incident he witnessed during a revolt of the slaves on board the *Wolf*, a revolt he helped to put

⁴⁵ Wax, “Philadelphia Surgeon,” 488, 489.

down with great courage after being wounded in the leg. He recalls, “nor can I mention without being affected how one of our Slaves that jump’d over board drowned himself, for finding that in spite of himself he swam he pull’d his frock over his head, & there held it while he had strength, which effectually finished him, & this unhappy affair.”⁴⁶ The irony inherent in these two acts of bravery—one by an American fighting to save lives in the service of the civilizing slave trade, and the other by an African fighting to die rather than be enslaved—perfectly captures the contradiction that Anthony Benezet sought to confront in his campaign against slavery: how could enlightened men who valued personal liberty and sought it for themselves at the cost of great political and economic struggle participate in the use of slave labor as a means to that end? We do not know how Chancellor finally resolved that contradiction in his own life, but if he offered a passage from his journal to Benezet nine years after the events it recorded, he might have known how the antislavery campaigner would use it. A further hint to Chancellor’s mature state of mind may be that when he sought additional training as a physician two years later, he applied for help not to slave-trading merchants but to Benezet’s antislavery friends James and Israel Pemberton and John Fothergill.

Benezet wanted his fellow citizens to experience the contradiction between freedom and slavery not merely in an intellectual way, but through their emotions; not simply as a result of reasoning from premises of religion or philosophy, but from feeling the suffering of fellow human beings. The testimony of William Chancellor, who walked the streets of Philadelphia and yet had experienced firsthand the horrors of the slave trade, not just for the enslaved but for the agents of their slavery, helped give urgency to Benezet’s contention that the slave trade involved acts of violence against individual men, women, and children, committed by citizens of British America. He wanted citizens to feel the suffering caused by that violence with the same immediacy as they felt the suffering caused, say, by the violence of Indians against the English and German citizens of Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War, then still in progress.

Benezet’s success, and that of his associates and allies in the campaign against slavery, can perhaps be measured by this: in 1789, when “The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and for the Relief of Free-Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 485.

the Conditions of the African Race” was reorganized and granted a state charter, one of the registered members was the grandson of a Philadelphia sailmaker who had owned slaves and the son of a surgeon who had participated in a slaving voyage to Africa.⁴⁷ His name was William Chancellor.

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⁴⁷ The act, dated Dec. 8, 1789, was published in the *The Freeman's Journal*; or, *The North-American Intelligencer*, Apr. 14, 1790.