Living in the Societal Middle Ground: Free Antebellum African Americans in American Society

Kaitlyn Bylard

Dr. Munson

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Until the Civil War, the population in the United States often divided itself into the two separate categories of free white and slave black. However, other social groups blurred the lines between these stringent distinctions. Whites, especially children, who were occasionally sold as slaves to Southern planters, were a tiny but racial and social group that threatened white hegemony.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even more so, the free African American most challenged the ideas both free and slave had about the social order of the United States. Comprising about ten percent of the population of the United States by the time of the Civil War, free African Americans, particularly the most successful ones, showed that African Americans could live independently from their white masters.[[2]](#footnote-2) The primary trouble that the free African Americans experienced was their status as minorities and former slaves might provide economically and socially. These free African Americans proved to other slaves that it was possible to get their freedom and still be able to enjoy it. Additionally, as a product of interracial unions, mulattos, who were also more likely to be manumitted, exposed another ugly aspect of slavery. Slave owners had affairs with or raped their woman slaves, and the children usually continued to be treated as slaves even though they now had quite a bit of white blood and genetics and could not be seen as wholly brutish as most whites thought African Americans were. These intermixtures of who was slave or who was free and who was black or who was white, created a liminal space between the pressures or two cultures and races. Although there were many challenges, free African Americans created their own identities and communities that allowed them to often deflect and sometimes thrive among the pressures and difficulties they experienced.

Although slavery never became ingrained in the North’s economy, many slaves were freed during the chaos of the Revolutionary War and later as Northern states incrementally passed laws abolishing slavery. Escaped slaves from the South came from time to time to swell the free African American population in the North, which changed the dynamic of culture that African Americans experienced in the North. While Northern African Americans had the longest period of independence of African Americans in the United States, they faced many economic and social challenges, which caused them to develop a unique culture to deal with these problems, even though some of the basic units of life that had been so hard to keep when in slavery proved to also be difficult in their position of restricted freedom. Already predominantly urban, free African Americans in the North tried to establish themselves in the city, where it was more likely that they could find work. Another reason African Americans moved into the cities was that “the anonymity of urban life [was] a welcome relief from the proprietary attitudes of the rural freeholders who had known them as slaves.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In the cities of the North, free African Americans could establish a mixture of American ideals and their own values and ambitions.

Seeking a better life that they finally had the independence to determine for themselves, African Americans were eager to begin making money. Northern cities seemed to present African Americans with the chances they needed to obtain unskilled and skilled jobs. In New York, which had seen a massive growth of free African Americans after the Revolutionary War, there were many such opportunities. During the early nineteenth century, free African Americans worked a range of different occupations from “artisans…domestic service… [or] alternating between laboring around the docks or the city and working as sailors.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Even more importantly, in New York, free African Americans not only worked with slaves, but were also not segregated from whites, and “often labored alongside working-class whites and occupied similar types of housing in the same areas of the city.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This common distinction of class and notable lack of distinction of race provided a great environment for African Americans to prosper. The relatively greater ease with which the different social groups interacted with each other also allowed for relationships that were formed less on a socially competitive basis, which allowed for greater cooperation. This especially happened between free African Americans and slaves in the North. Because free African Americans’ culture was less distinct from slaves, “ties between free and bond [African Americans], rooted in familial, racial, and personal loyalties…remained strong as northern slavery waned in the early years of the twentieth century.”[[6]](#footnote-6)[[7]](#footnote-7) This cohesion and sympathy for those still enslaved would become increasingly important as free African Americans in the North rallied to the cause of abolition. Many African Americans went a step further and supplied safe havens and friendly faces for the slaves that were brave and fortunate enough to escape. Frederick Douglass, who would later become one of the major voices of the Northern African American community before, during, and after the Civil War, received help from such people. Without the guidance and advice from men like free-born African American David Ruggles, who Douglass describes as “though hemmed in on almost every side, he seemed to be more than a match for his enemies [anti-abolitionists],” Douglass would have had an even more difficult time making the dangerous escape to New York.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although their sympathy for slaves caused free African Americans to do all they could to promote the freedom of slaves, free African Americans developed their own concerns and culture. As one of the few places that African Americans could congregate among themselves without the pressures or prejudices of their white neighbors, churches often became the core of northern African American culture. Churches provided a place for the African American community to coalesce, assist each other, and for those who were most influential, to rise to the leadership positions. In fact, in Philadelphia, social status and church attendance was connected so strongly that “non-church affiliation, rather than poverty, was the distinguishing characteristic of the most disadvantaged group in the community.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Another important institution that nourished African American culture was schools. Many African Americans saw their separated schools as a crucial aspect of nurturing African American identity in the North, while others fought to have integrated schools for the benefits of political recognition and educational advantages for their children. In Boston, this became such a great issue that African Americans were forced to take sides over whether they should fight for integrated schools or keep to the ones they already had, with the African American teachers who would understand their children much better and they would not have to risk the racism a white teacher might bring to the classroom. Even though there would be an educational gain, “it also meant sacrificing an institution that helped maintain community, especially for those parents who had little or no involvement with the city’s black churches.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This was a painful issue that was really only superficially solved by the Boson government deciding to integrate the schools. Rising to positions of leadership through the schools and churches, these first leaders had ideals that stemmed from the Revolutionary War, and they used their leadership to “[press] for equality… and [become] the slaves’ advocate and the great champions of universal freedom.”[[11]](#footnote-11) These leaders would not only influence the free African American community but also would make their voices heard to Northern whites.

While many of the social centers dealt with weighty cultural issues and the way free African Americans would be able to live once they were no longer slaves, there were other not as essential microcosms of social activity and self-expression that occurred in the various northern cities. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the black market for used clothing was lucrative and many African Americans as well as other groups took advantage of this. In fact, while “sometimes blacks stole the garments for their own use…generally items of clothing were quickly resold, being only marginally less negotiable than currency.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Although this illegal quirk was primarily relegated to New York, clothing styles, in general, became ways of expressing free African American culture, whether it was handkerchiefs that women wore on their heads that “reflected continuity with African tradition and demonstrated a high degree of personal pride,” or their hair “styled to resemble the appearance of the fashionable wigs worn by the New York elite.”[[13]](#footnote-13) These varied forms of dress and arrangement show the depth of each small part of African American society was able to distinguish themselves and show their own tastes and preferences both outside and within the norm of American society.

One of the greatest opportunities freedom provided was the ability to create businesses, which many entrepreneurial African Americans saw “not only as a means of escape from the degrading poverty of their lives, but as a basis for improving the socioeconomic status of the race as well.”[[14]](#footnote-14) However, when these businesses were extremely successful, they still only tended to help the creators of the business itself and not others in the community. This can be seen in the free African American society in Philadelphia. A free-born native of Philadelphia, James Forten learned the sailmaking trade and his invention of a better way to make sails he was able to build a business so successful that by 1830, he was thought to be worth $100,000.[[15]](#footnote-15) Another remarkable thing about Forten was that he had an integrated workforce and “by 1820, Forten employed some forty men, black and white, in his sailmaking manufactory.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Not only was he successful within his own free African American community, but he was also able to bridge the dividing line of race in his business relations as he sold to his white customers and in his practice of business at the level of his employees. Because of the opportunities and affluence afforded him by his business, he became an influential figure in the African American community.

Despite Forten’s astounding success, his achievements were rare among free African Americans, particularly in Pennsylvania, where the races were more often divided than integrated. Not all cities were as hospitable to free African Americans as New York had been. Wherever African Americans went once they had gained their independence, they would still have to deal with the twin dangers of poverty and prejudice that threatened to cut off their livelihoods and communities. By the last decade of Forten’s life, in the 1830s, most of the African Americans were struggling to maintain themselves and their families. Forten was a part of the ten percent of free African Americans that possessed seventy percent of the assets of the entire free African American population in Philadelphia.[[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, adding to the difficulties of African Americans at the time, the Philadelphia government passed new restrictions on their liberties, such as disenfranchisement, and the populace rioted against them and Catholic immigrants, leaving many battered, without property, and without the essential meeting places such as schools and churches, which had been destroyed.[[18]](#footnote-18) Unable to vote and possibly effect positive changes for their harried position in society, they were also robbed what little possessions they did have, and at least temporarily deprived of their all-important religious and social centers that allowed their community to be more cohesive.

Life for free African Americans in the South came with unique economic difficulties and social minefields that the African Americans had to navigate in order to live as well as possible without gaining excessive unwelcome attention of whites, who could fairly easily make their lives virtually impossible to live or enslave them again. In the South, one’s skin color was chief in deciding whether one was a free man or a slave. In Virginia, “law operated on the presumption that black skin and slavery were concurrent… it was the black’s burden to prove his freedom.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Yet many mulattos could “pass” as white, which forced slave owners to distinguish other ways to prove that their property should remain slaves. This idea that one drop of African blood would make the individual African American was extended to free African Americans as well since while “they [were] white enough for all ordinary purposes…and would pass in New York for pure white…they are colored [and] stand in the same position under the law here as if their skin was black as ebony.”[[20]](#footnote-20) However, the definitions of whiteness or rather the divisions between white and black, were not always solid, and abolitionists, like Harriet Beecher Stowe took advantage of this. By the end of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a white main character describes the now free mulatto family, who could easily pass as white, in terms of white ideals and culture. The man, George, is “a very fine young man… [with] a first rate character, both for intelligence and principle,” while the woman, Eliza, is “a beautiful, intelligent, amiable girl…very pious…[who] could read and write, embroider and sew, beautifully…and was a beautiful singer.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Moreover, the malleable standards of color and race was occasionally recognized by law, even if most of Southern society held that one could not change their African American heritage no matter how white one seemed. In 1833, due to white nervousness about a slave insurrection a few years before, “the Virginia legislature…allowed clerks to provide certificates of freedom to *whites* of mixed blood who might be taken for blacks and illegally apprehended, detained, and sold into slavery.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Although mainly the lightest mulattos were affected by such legislation, all were affected by perception of color. When the U.S. began to assert its governance of New Orleans in 1804, new laws in practice asserted that “blacks had to prove their freedom in case of dispute, whereas mulattos were assumed to be free.”[[23]](#footnote-23) In this world, white blood made mulattos more likely to be free men as just a drop of black blood was to make African Americans slaves and inferior. Because of these shifting standards, free African Americans were constantly aware of their precarious position between free whites and slave blacks, and had to be careful to maintain their distinction of being free in places where they sometimes had little more rights than the slaves themselves.

Free African Americans had to develop their own community and culture with the idea that they were inherently different from whites, even if they were the same color. Nevertheless, before the tensions over slavery that would lead to civil war became paramount in the minds of white Southerners, particularly in the Lower South, the stark division of free white and slave black was more flexible and allowed for a more comfortable life for free African Americans. Free African Americans mainly had this liminal social space because “many…whites believed free [African Americans] were useful members of society who strengthened, not weakened, the slave regime.”[[24]](#footnote-24) For the most part, whites and blacks were rewarded by this belief. In fact, while free African Americans owned slaves in places throughout the South, they were especially successful in New Orleans.[[25]](#footnote-25) For a short time authority and servitude were not completely divided along the lines of race. Although there were the usual class distinctions between wealthy and poor free African Americans in New Orleans, they were often supportive of each other in the face of white hostility and came together as a community, whether it was “[helping] one another purchase freedom, [protecting] one another from whites in criminal situations, [favoring] merchants of their own color…[holding] public dances on weekends, and [conducting] big funerals attended by blacks of every status.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Through these means, free African Americans were able to build their own rich and thriving community that was more or less successful in defending against any whites who might attempt to ruin their freedoms.

In a radical reverse of ideology from their Lower South compatriots, the Upper South “whites did not merely fear that the blacks would revolt…they fully expected them to…the free Negro’s presence contaminat[ed] slaves with the idea that blacks could be free.”[[27]](#footnote-27) This element of fear was unmatched anywhere in the South, and produced extreme pressure on the free African Americans, most of whom were not interested in encouraging any slave revolts and only keeping what few gains they had made by being free. After Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831, which only confirmed whites worst assumptions, Virginia law not only forbade free African Americans to own slaves, they also could not “own dogs…preach…buy or sell liquor or operate a tavern…keep an inn for fear it might be a brothel…or get an education nor teach another.” [[28]](#footnote-28) By not allowing African Americans to have slaves, restricting the businesses they could build, and forbidding their education, whites solidified their positions as the top socially in authority, ensuring that free African Americans could not rise socially or economically in Southern society.

Nevertheless, there were exceptions to this rule that gave examples of African Americans being able to create successful lives and families within the constraints of Southern society. Nancy West was able to build a productive bakery in Charlottesville, Virginia and create a solid economic foundation with her common law Jewish husband, who was also a businessman. Living in separate households for most of their relationship, their union was tolerated by the white community until they moved in together and economic hardship struck the town. Brought to court for fornication and interracial marriage, West and her husband managed to evade being convicted, yet even with this positive ending they still had to face that “no matter how financially successful they became…they were perpetually vulnerable to legal harassment by whites.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Like Nancy West, African Americans often found ways around the law to create continuity in their communities. Since the laws of the judicial system were fairly prohibitive towards slaves and free-born African Americans, churches’ disciplinary meetings served as a way to settle social, moral, and sometimes judicial grievances among its members.[[30]](#footnote-30) Moreover, “because of the relative lack of legal and institutional mechanisms…the pronouncements of the African churches, the only bodies over which blacks had considerable influence, resonated with extraordinary power.”[[31]](#footnote-31) These church settlements provided a way for African Americans to deal with their own affairs and not involve the possibly biased incursion of whites, and also have their own rules of society. Another way that free African Americans were able to express themselves was through music. Not only did free African Americans sing in their churches, some had the opportunity to learn about music and publically display their music. In Wilmington, North Carolina, African Americans, who wished to polish themselves, “had the opportunity to participate in vocal music instruction in the form of singing schools and classes.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Additionally, although it cannot be proven that free African Americans in Wilmington participated in the annual “John Kuner” festival, it is likely that they alongside slaves went through the city “inventing of many original songs and chants, loudly and very rhythmically performed, to the accompaniment of bones, cows' horns, drums, triangles, and other percussion instruments.”[[33]](#footnote-33) This rambunctious festival as well as the music lessons and church meetings reveal a small part of how free African Americans were able to articulate their own culture and relationship with their community.

Whether they were free-born or recently freed, African Americans faced many difficulties in a world where most white Americans believed that African Americans were inferior and few cared to think of African Americans as much more than slaves. Even though social and economic troubles stalked almost all of free African Americans’ lives, they were able to build strong communities and on rare occasions even gained the height of accomplishment. Yet because they were caught in the perilous position of living between the free white and the slave black communities, distinguishing their own unique identity was often extremely difficult if not impossible. While most free African Americans wished to be completely a part of American society, some wished to “[turn] inward to the black community and…maintained that black people could look only to themselves,” while “others…worked to integrate the black community…becoming among the most eloquent spokespersons for the nation’s founding ideals.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Although these differing opinions would not be resolved for over a hundred years, they provided a starting point for when all African Americans were free to tackle the issue of what relationship African Americans should have with the larger expanse of American society. Despite these hardships, the growth of the free African American communities and individuals that formed these communities, reveals the resiliency and resourcefulness that allowed them to become an influential force during and after the Civil War.

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1. Stephan Talty, *Mulatto America: At the Crossroads of Black and White Culture: A Social History* (Harper Paperbacks, 2004), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Juliet E. K. Walker, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship in the United States Before the Civil War,” *The Business History Review* 60, no. 3 (October 1, 1986), 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ira Berlin, “The Structure of the Free Negro Caste in the Antebellum United States,” *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (April 1, 1976), 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shane White, “A Question of Style Blacks in and Around New York City in the Late 18th Century,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 403 (January 1, 1989), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ira Berlin, “The Structure of the Free Negro Caste in the Antebellum United States,” *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (April 1, 1976), 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Ira Berlin’s 2003 book *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves,* he notes that “Measured by church membership, family formation, wealth distribution, and aspirations, black society was much more of one piece in the Upper South....than in the North” (123). This assertion seems contradictory to the statement I quoted from one of Berlin’s earlier journal articles. While newer scholarship might have caused Berlin to completely change his position, from the necessarily limited research I have been able to do as a college student, other sources have seemed to point to the accuracy of the original quote. Also, by including a discussion of Berlin’s newest assertion, I would be detracting from the focus of the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, 150 Anv. (Dell, 1997), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Theodore Hershberg, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia: A Study of Ex-Slaves, Freeborn, and Socioeconomic Decline,” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (December 1, 1971), 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Scott Hancock, “The Elusive Boundaries of Blackness: Identity Formation in Antebellum Boston,” *The Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 2 (April 1, 1999), 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Shane White, “A Question of Style Blacks in and Around New York City in the Late 18th Century,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 403 (January 1, 1989), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 32, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Juliet E. K. Walker, “Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship in the United States Before the Civil War,” *The Business History Review* 60, no. 3 (October 1, 1986), 370. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Theodore Hershberg, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia: A Study of Ex-Slaves, Freeborn, and Socioeconomic Decline,” *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (December 1, 1971), 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 185,187. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Howard Bodenhorn, “A Troublesome Caste: Height and Nutrition of Antebellum Virginia’s Rural Free Blacks,” *The Journal of Economic History* 59, no. 4 (December 1, 1999), 974. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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21. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Life Among the Lowly* (Penguin Books, 1988), 601. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Howard Bodenhorn, “A Troublesome Caste: Height and Nutrition of Antebellum Virginia’s Rural Free Blacks,” *The Journal of Economic History* 59, no. 4 (December 1, 1999), 795. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Thomas N. Ingersoll, “Free Blacks in a Slave Society: New Orleans, 1718-1812,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (April 1, 1991), 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ira Berlin, “The Structure of the Free Negro Caste in the Antebellum United States,” *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (April 1, 1976), 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Thomas N. Ingersoll, “Free Blacks in a Slave Society: New Orleans, 1718-1812,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (April 1, 1991), 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ira Berlin, “The Structure of the Free Negro Caste in the Antebellum United States,” *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (April 1, 1976), 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Howard Bodenhorn, “A Troublesome Caste: Height and Nutrition of Antebellum Virginia’s Rural Free Blacks,” *The Journal of Economic History* 59, no. 4 (December 1, 1999), 976. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Joshua D. Rothman, “‘Notorious in the Neighborhood’: An Interracial Family in Early National and Antebellum Virginia,” *The Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 1 (February 1, 2001), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. John T. O’Brien, “Factory, Church, and Community: Blacks in Antebellum Richmond,” *The Journal of Southern History* 44, no. 4 (November 1, 1978), 529. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 530. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Nancy R. Ping, “Black Musical Activities in Antebellum Wilmington, North Carolina,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 8, no. 2 (October 1, 1980), 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)