

“The Sleeping Prisoners of the American Republic:
Race, Space, and Independence in the Post-Revolutionary Urban Atlantic”

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The following essay offers a re-interpretation of the African-American experience during the Revolutionary Era through an exploration of the dynamic legal and cultural spaces that both limited and facilitated expressions of black independence. By centering the analytical focus upon the interplay between race and the “politics of space,” this paper suggests some new ways of answering old historical questions about agency, community formation, and racial consciousness. In a more particular sense, the thematic focus on race and space also exposes the remarkable degree of commonality that linked patterns of racialization throughout the Atlantic World, too often obfuscated by narrower geographic, social, or political categorization.

This paper is part of a panel organized in homage to Edmund Morgan, whose quest to resolve the “American Paradox” of slavery and freedom led him to the history of colonial Virginia. In order to widen the scope of inquiry (and in honor of our host city), this paper adopts a comparative, Charleston-centric framework, describing three overlapping moments in the relationship of race and independence, as they played out in Charleston and many other urban centers of the Atlantic World. From the world of opportunity exposed by the end of colonial rule, through the persistent extension of racial boundaries and spaces of black independence, to the cultural construction and legal affirmation of whiteness, Americans negotiated the meanings of race and independence in spatial terms. The spatial legacy of independence – domestic authority linked to the mastery of productive property – survived the historical turbulence of these moments to afford African-Americans a consistent, if variable, means to contest the social bounds of white supremacy during the post-Revolutionary era.

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Twenty years after he framed the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, John Locke consolidated his philosophy of human will into an essay organized around a series of parables, the most potent of which was that of the sleeping prisoner. Locke directed his audience to imagine the confined space of a prison cell, into which a sleeping man is carried without his consent, to meet upon waking a “person he longs to see and speak with.” Upon waking, the prisoner prefers to stay and talk than to demand his release. Thus his stay is voluntary, but not free – the prisoner can, and does, elect to remain in the cell, but according to Locke, liberty consists in having the power to do “as the mind shall choose or direct.” The prisoner could choose to stay, but he could not choose *not* to stay.¹

¹ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) Book II, Chapter 11 accessed at: <http://enlightenment.supersaturated.com/johnlocke/BOOKIIChapterXXI.html>.

The broad definition of liberty provided in this excerpt from Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* also embodied the spirit of the term as understood and deployed by Revolutionary South Carolinians. In 1769, William Henry Drayton summarized the Carolinian sense of liberty as absolute control over "one's own property," and the possession of "an undoubted right to think and act for himself." But Drayton also added a spatial modification to his definition, noting that these powers extended to "all cases, *where* the laws of our country do not restrain them." Drayton's reflections were part of an insurgent argument against the illegitimate restrictions on American liberty imposed by British authorities. As argument transformed into action over the next decade, Carolinians leagued with other colonists to fight for absolute control over their property, to carve out independent spaces free from outside intervention.²

By declaring their independence from the illegitimate restrictions of the British, Creole patriots exposed a potentially unlimited space of American liberty. From all ranges of the social spectrum, post-colonial Americans interpreted the abstract rhetoric of liberation into the immediate spaces of their everyday lives. John Adams reported that "our struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their masters." The overthrow of colonial law promised new rights and opportunities, and as my fellow panelists will demonstrate, African-Americans throughout the former colonies fought vigorously to pursue this promise.³

In South Carolina, the legal space occupied by African-Americans was cloudy. Even where the letter of the law was clear on rights and restrictions, black and white Carolinians rendered these dead letters upon conventional practice. Electoral privilege was notoriously exclusive in colonial South Carolina, but the Carolinian elite regularly brought the historically disfranchised to the polls – "Jews, servants, common sailors and Negroes" – whenever it suited their ends.⁴ Colonial and post-colonial authorities consistently strengthened laws to restrict the spatial and temporal liberties of Carolina slaves – establishing curfews, requiring tickets for traveling, working, or living out – but these were just as often ignored as followed.⁵ As they looked forward from the Revolution, Carolinians envisioned a state divided into two socio-political categories:

² Jack P. Greene, "'Slavery or Independence:' Some Reflections on the Relationship among Liberty, Black Bondage, and Equality in Revolutionary South Carolina;" *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 80, No. 3 (Jul., 1979), p. 16-17.

³ John Adams, letter to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776.

⁴ Daniel Defoe, *Party-tyranny: or, An occasional bill in miniature; as now practised in Carolina* (London, 1705).

⁵ *South Carolina Gazette*, September 17, 1772, cited in Robert Olwell, "Authority and Resistance: Social Order in a Plantation Society, the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1739-1782," (Ph.D. dissertation: Johns Hopkins University, 1991), p. 191-92. An anonymous letter-writer quantified the remarkable degree of non-compliance in his observations of the foot traffic on the roads between Charleston and the outlying plantations. For example, of the 400-700 slaves he observed passing by on an average weekend, only 40-50 carried the ticked required for travel.

“citizens,” meaning “free white men” above age 20, and “inhabitants or residents,” meaning dependents and those incapable of good judgment⁶.

The latter category included women, children, the unpropertied, those “fit for Bedlam,” and all people of color, slave and free. Slaves were by definition legal dependents, thus incapable of autonomous participation in a republican government; Carolinians also understood their Revolution to be “‘a family quarrel among equals,’ in which ‘the Negroes naturally had no concern,’” and thus no right to inclusion in the affairs of a post-revolutionary government.⁷ During the revolution and afterwards, African-Americans in South Carolina and throughout the former British colonies regularly contradicted legal definitions of dependence and historical assumptions of inequality. In and around the cities of the Atlantic seaboard, slaves and free people of color developed subcultures and structures of community that “transformed circumscribed space” into separate but unequal spaces of black independence.⁸

African-Americans in Newport, Rhode Island claimed neighborhood spaces around the geographic periphery of white society and filled these with separate institutions that paralleled those of the white center. Between 1780 and 1826, black leaders organized separate schools, churches, and other independent structures that demonstrated the “creativity of African Americans adapting to freedom.”⁹ The growing free black population of Philadelphia was even more active in pursuit of communal independence. Recently emancipated slaves there formed the nation’s first free black mutual aid association in the 1780s to facilitate the transition of their colored brethren “up from slavery.” The precedent set by the Free African Society inspired black Philadelphians to push for the establishment of independent black churches, which in turn became sites of social organization and political mobilization. Over the next several decades, petitions, school plans, and society charters flowed out of the institutional space afforded black Philadelphians by the independent church.¹⁰

⁶ Greene, p. 28; The relevant clause from Section VIII of the of the South Carolina Constitution of 1778 reads: “The qualification of electors shall be that every free white man, and no other person, who acknowledges the being of a God, and believes in a future state of rewards and punishments, and who has attained to the age of one and twenty years, and hath been a resident and an inhabitant in this State for the space of one whole year before the day appointed for the election he offers to give his vote at, and hath a freehold at least of fifty acres of land, or a town lot, and hath been legally seized and possessed of the same at least six months previous to such election, or hath paid a tax the preceding year, or was taxable the present year, at least six months previous to the said election, in a sum equal to the tax on fifty acres of land, to the support of this government, shall be deemed a person qualified to vote for, and shall be capable of electing, a representative or representatives to serve as a member or members in the senate and house of representatives, for the parish or district where he actually is a resident, or in any other parish or district in this State where he hath the like freehold.”

⁷ Greene, p. 29, 41.

⁸ Myra B. Young Armstead, *Lord, please don't take me in August : African Americans in Newport and Saratoga Springs, 1870-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁹ Akeia Benard, “The Free African-American Cultural Landscape in Newport, R.I.: 1774-1826,” (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Connecticut, 2008); see also Figure 1.

¹⁰ Gary Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison: Madison House, 1990), p. 68; claim to first free African Benevolent society also made by Newport (<http://www.colonialcemetery.com/Home.htm>).

Beneath the level of community, African-Americans also demonstrated their independence through the extension and preservation of individual and family spaces. Skill, financial autonomy, education, piety, and consumerism provided ostensibly color-blind signifiers of independence and respectability. James Forten carved a substantial space of independence as he navigated his way through the economic wake of the Revolution to develop a tidy stake in his family's sail-making trade into one of the most successful shops on the Philadelphia waterfront. By the end of the century, he was one of the city's most respectable residents, whose wedding was attended by the wealthiest members of the white community.¹¹ In Philadelphia and other U.S. cities, free people of color devoted themselves and their families to the "pursuit of refinement," according to the latest standards of bourgeois conduct and consumption. Cosmopolitan African-Americans demonstrated their respectability through education, moral restraint, industry, and cultivated these virtues through refined familial spaces – the separate sphere of domesticity – protected by and dependent only upon the productive capacity of family members.¹²

These markers of independent African-American space could also be observed in South Carolina. Institutional and spatial expressions of independence at both the communal and individual level were just as common among free people of color in Charleston as they were in northern cities; and many of these idioms, though modified and often sublimated, also found their way into the social vocabulary of urban and even plantation slaves. Much like their northern counterparts, some black Charlestonians were able to manipulate the economic climate and cultural transitions of the post-Revolutionary Era to carve out spaces of communal, familial, and personal independence. Richard Holloway filled every valence of black space available to his generation. Holloway was a self-made man, who arrived in Charleston in 1797 a propertyless "seaman, a free mulatto...citizen of the United States," and died in 1842 as owner of one of the city's largest estates. Through his skill in carpentry and business acumen, Holloway grew from carpenter to builder to real estate magnate so that by the 1820s, he was one of the wealthiest non-planters in Charleston. As his sphere of economic influence grew, Holloway was able to guide other people of color on their own path to independence. He accumulated sufficient property to guarantee each of his fourteen children their own homes and spaces of domestic independence. Through leadership roles in the Methodist Church and other organizations like the Minor's Moralists Society, Holloway helped his colored brethren to cultivate individual spaces of spiritual and intellectual independence. During the 1820s and 30s, Holloway and his sons led most of the colored Methodist Sunday schools, teaching their students not only the principles of Methodism, but also to read the scriptures for themselves.¹³

The segregated Methodist class system and Minor's Moralists Society afforded black Charlestonians circumscribed spaces of independence homologous to the developing cells of northern cities. As Margaret Gillikin demonstrates in her contribution to this

¹¹ Nash, p. 64

¹² Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred a Knopf, 1992), p. 434-440.

¹³ Holloway Family Scrapbook, Avery Research Center Archives, College of Charleston.

panel, Charleston's leading men of color organized several mutual aid societies, like the Brown Fellowship Society, that demonstrated their position along the national vanguard of black leadership. Black religious leaders also stood at the crest of the independent churches movement. Among the first crop of ministers licensed by the independent African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 were Charlestonians Morris Brown and Henry Drayton.¹⁴ The following year, Brown, Drayton, and several other class leaders from Charleston's bi-racial Methodist Churches founded an independent African Church in the city's northern suburbs. In a scene reminiscent of Richard Allen's dramatic exit from St. George's, Brown, Drayton, and "nearly every (black) leader delivered up his class papers, and 4367 of the members withdrew."¹⁵

For five years, the African Church was an independent black space of worship and communion. Most of the Church's class leaders were free people of color, but some were slaves, as were most of its members. As such, the African Church represented only the most chapter from a long saga of black spiritual independence in South Carolina. Since the dawn of slavery in Carolina, most slaves lived outside the boundaries of the white religious establishment and participated in spiritual communities of their own making, "separate from the control, but not the influence of the slave society." Lowcountry evangelists gradually grafted these sacred spaces onto the hub of the white church, but the meanings taken from slave religious experience remained essentially distinct from those intended by white Christian dogma. Slaves roughly incorporated the ritual and rhetoric of white evangelists into the dynamic spatial ordering of knowledge and power that informed their own religious (moral) consciousness. Thus segregated spaces of belief consistently overlapped. After an enslaved woman was sentenced to death for poisoning her master, she confessed to her white minister that despite what she had done, "she still hoped to be saved because she believed in Christ." Though most of the master class would have condemned such aspirations as heresy, there was plenty of room in Afro-Carolinian circles of belief for such professions.¹⁶

As the white authorities of South Carolina and other states became aware of the counterhegemonic potential of these independent or semi-dependent black spaces, they initiated campaigns of spatial reform, designed to restore a rightful sense of racial hierarchy to the social order. In South Carolina, racial reformers observed manifold transgressions, and lobbied steadily to police the most salient of these. In 1820, a number of estimable Carolinians petitioned the state legislature for "curtailment of certain rights granted to free blacks, persons of color and slaves" from the state legislature. In this petition, they named the mobility, literacy, and "success" of black Charlestonians as trends that threatened civic well-being, and centered their claims on the dangerous precedent set by "a spacious Building...lately erected in the immigrant neighborhood of Charleston for the exclusive worship of Negroes and coloured people, from money supplied them by Abolition Societies in the Eastern and Northern States."¹⁷ Though the

¹⁴ Daniel Alexander Payne, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* [DocSouth] p. 26.

¹⁵ Francis Asbury Mood, *Methodism In Charleston* (Nashville: Stevenson and Evans, 1856), 132.

¹⁶ Olwell, p. 199. also immanent space of Christ / Kingdom of God – cf. Levine, 1850s, p. 36

¹⁷ Jas. Lowndes, et al. "Petition for the Curtailment of Certain rights Guaranteed to free blacks, persons of color, and slaves," 16 October 1820, General Assembly Petitions, SCDAH.

petitioners were wrong about the financing of the African Church, they were right about its out-of-state connections. An openly antislavery national denomination set up shop in the backyard of the Carolina slavocracy, and the petitioners succeeded in bringing this anomaly to the attention of state authorities. The African Church was razed by public order in 1821, but the more basic and nebulous patterns of racial transgression proved more difficult to police.¹⁸

Literacy, mobility, respectability, and piety persisted as markers of status that permeated racial boundaries. In 1822, all these markers coalesced around the sinister persona of Denmark Vesey, who rose to national infamy as an accused insurrectionist and presented racial reformers with the symbolic means to advance their agenda through the statehouse. The state satisfied public demand for racial restriction with the execution or banishment of Vesey and his accused conspirators, and threw up a new slate of laws designed to protect its internal spaces from the encroachment of subversive influences. Internal spaces of black independence survived, and these did not go unnoticed. In the wake of the Vesey scare, white Charlestonians cast a wary eye upon the degrees of independence enjoyed by black residents like Richard Holloway. During the 1820s and 30s, white Methodists chroniclers noted that Richard Holloway was “conspicuous for his intelligence and zeal,” but also noted that “his zeal...was sometimes ill-judged.” Holloway’s “zeal” became apparent, and perhaps “ill-judged” through extension of his family’s status through communal markers of respectability, including their regular seating among the affluent whites on the ground floor of the Methodist Church.¹⁹

Though nominally reserved for white Methodists, custom and overcrowding gradually led a few congregants of color beyond their established spaces along the church margins into seats in the front-and-center ground floor pews. As one of the wealthiest, most pious, and longest-tenured members of a majority-black congregation, Holloway seemed entitled to sit wherever he pleased. Most Methodists, black and white, did not think twice about the fluid racial boundaries of worship space, but a select few white Methodists did. On a sweltering June Sunday in 1833, a set of younger congregants, frustrated at their church’s refusal to correct the “mulattoes, or a certain set of them, (who) had encroached on the privileges of the white members,” took matters into their own hands. In what they considered a necessarily violent expression of the popular will, the “arrogance of the mulatto offenders (Richard Holloway among them) was rebuked by thrusting them from the seats they occupied.” The tension between two generations of white Methodists, generated by the pretext of racial order in the sanctuary, grew into a year-long struggle for control of the church, and ultimately wrought a schism of the Charleston churches, when the younger party seceded to form their own independent church in 1834.²⁰

In their efforts to carve out a segregated white worship space, the Methodist insurgency reflected a larger nation-wide trend towards rigidification of racial boundaries and

¹⁸ Richard Wade, “The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Southern History* 30 (May 1964), 143-161.

¹⁹ Mood, p. 155.

²⁰ *Report of the Committee of the South Carolina Conference of the M.E. Church on the Subject of the Schism in Charleston* (Charleston, 1835)

racialized spaces. Several months after the Methodist schism, the South Carolina state legislature passed a “law in relation to slaves and free persons of colour” – a seven-layer cake of racial restrictions, designed to segregate the intellectual, economic, and recreational spaces of black Carolinians from their white counterparts. The law prohibited teaching slaves to read, prevented vendors from selling liquor to slaves without an order from their master, strengthened laws against bartering with slaves, and prevented all blacks and persons of color from working as clerks or “gaming” with whites. Slaves and free people of color had overextended their independence into the white realm, so the state acted to remind its black residents of their dependent status, and whiten the recreational and professional spaces of the local working class.²¹

The egalitarian push of Jacksonian Democracy interpenetrated an ideological ascendance of racial essentialism to yield a dynamic and violent discourse of race and space in American cities. Throughout the late 1820s and 1830s, working class rioters regularly targeted the black neighborhoods and churches in New York and Philadelphia. Bourgeois Philadelphians rudely caricatured respectable blacks as pretentious and infantile copycats of white gentility. [pic] De facto and de jure racism consolidated to restrict African-American access to political and socio-economic resources. Most northern and western states revised their constitutions to disenfranchise black voters.²²

In Rhode Island, blacks lost the right to vote in 1822, but continued to demonstrate their civic viability until an egalitarian impulse of constitutional revision opened another window of political opportunity in 1841. A faction of immigrant-friendly Rhode Islanders demanding looser property restrictions on the franchise vied with the reigning “Law and Order” party for the right to author a new state constitution. Both parties flirted with the notion of re-enfranchising their black neighbors, but the egalitarian insurgents decided that their agenda would be better served by playing the race card, advancing whiteness over property or nativity as the necessary qualifications for responsible political participation. An editorialist wrote that their “Law and Order” opponents “would rather have the Negroes vote than the damn Irish.” The “Law and Order” constitution, which restored voting rights to black Rhode Islanders and conceded a half-measure of looser property restrictions to their white opponents, was approved by a narrow majority.²³

The legal trend towards restriction or diminution of African-American civic space was consistent with early patterns of state formation initiated during the colonial era, but entered a new phase during the early nineteenth century. The Revolution opened new spaces of independence, in which Creole patriots moved to claim the rights previously denied to them as colonists. Even where the letter of post-colonial law restricted access to residents on racial or other grounds, the extent to which these laws should be enforced

²¹ Edward R. Laurens, “A letter to the Hon. Whitemarsh B. Seabrook of St. John's, Colleton; in explanation and defence of "An act to amend the law in relation to slaves and free persons of color" (Charleston: Observer Press, 1835).

²² James Brewer Stewart, “The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790-1840,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 18 (Summer 1998), 185-217; Bushman, p. 440; see also Figure 2

²³ Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, “Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island,” *Common-Place* 10:2 (January 2010).

remained an unanswered question. For the first decades of independence, post-colonial Americans were generally left to figure things out for themselves. The emergence of other priorities left race an unexamined distinction - racial consciousnesses were fluid and racial boundaries were permeable. The tensions generated by the consolidation of a white working class and sectional antagonism over the expansion over slavery instigated a reexamination of race and its place in the American social order. Everyday interactions with those of different pigmentation continued to inform racial consciousness from the ground up, but by the 1830s, new patterns of abstract scientific, legal, and cultural racialization tipped the balance towards a new racial order implemented from the top-down.

Even as abstract racisms gained currency throughout the early republic, the lived experience of race continued to contradict and compromise their implementation on the ground level, opening (exceptional) spaces of opportunity like that which facilitated the belated enfranchisement of black Rhode Islanders. The Law and Order party in Rhode Island acted not out of any high-minded objection to prevailing racist sensibilities, but out of a pragmatic recognition of the social space occupied by African-Americans in their state. They articulated the nativist agenda to black civic space to enlarge their share of the voting public, and were rewarded for it by the black voting bloc during the next round of elections.

Similarly, in the slave south, whites oscillated between impulses towards articulation with and segregation from black spaces and interests. As suggested by the racial restrictions enacted by the South Carolina legislature in 1834, the legal trend ran towards segregation of southern spaces, but Carolina's white residents continued to teach their slaves to read, gamble, drink, and trade, with slaves and free people of color nonetheless. The ready-made system of human classification inherent in racial slavery did not insulate southerners from the duality of white structure and black agency that determined the course of racialization in the northern states. Contemporary with their northern counterparts, southern whites realized that "proof of personal independence and public virtue no longer rested in the ownership of productive property," and mobilized to demand legal distinction of their independence and virtue on the grounds of whiteness. In dialectic with this legal contradistinction, black southerners paralleled the ambiguous engagement of African-Americans in the free states, resisting or accommodating the expansive social space of whiteness in ways they felt best suited to their own interests.²⁴

From a distance, these slices of black life constitute an impressionistic history of racial consciousness in the early republic. Connecting these dots in a chronological fashion suggests a pattern of racial rigidification – the gray areas of postcolonial racial flux segment into essentially distinct spaces of black and white. Cast in a different light, some prominent threads of continuity are also apparent. The structuration of a social or racial order involves a constant process of negotiation. The inherent instability of race as an essentialist category, or of space as a moving target of social regulation, consistently

24 Lacy K. Ford, Jr. "Making the 'White Man's Country' White: Race, Slavery, and State-Building in the Jacksonian South," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (Winter, 1999), pp. 713-737

compromised authoritarian efforts to clearly delineate the boundaries of either. Though trends towards rigidification or essentialism may be visible from the topside of the structural coin, the ways in which social structures were produced and reproduced through everyday interaction imbued the underside of structuration with a remarkable degree of continuity.²⁵

In the light of abstraction, the national integration of black spaces emerges to confound the conventional wisdom of sectionalism. Most Americans of African descent lived in the slave states, and the social spaces they occupied were not only homologous, but also thoroughly connected to the spaces inhabited by the black minority north of the Mason-Dixon line. In extension of the Lockean anecdote that opened this paper, Africans living in post-colonial America were the quintessential sleeping prisoners – thrust against their will into the cells of American communities where they should find the welcoming presence of Christian civilization. African-Americans consistently pressed against the walls of their confinement. During the early stages of resistance, they met with physical reinforcement – the brute force of the state and legal containment. Once the Revolution tore down the edifice of imperial restriction, African residents had a clearer view of the world outside of their cells. Those that slipped through the apertures of the prison wall found a new space of independence, but quickly learned that this was also delimited by a more nebulous and durable set of social walls.

Whether African-Americans like James Forten and Richard Holloway lived beyond these metaphorical prison walls or in fact lived as waking prisoners remaining in cells with those they wished to share their time is a worthy question that cannot be fully answered within the bound of this paper. More pertinent here is the fact that many black Americans refused to subsist in the ample spaces afforded men like Forten and Holloway, no matter what post facto metaphorical category we might ascribe. As the post-revolutionary decades wore on, many black Americans came to the realization that they would never find an adequate space of independence (let alone freedom or equality) within the political boundaries of the United States. (The protagonist of Mr. Mandell's paper) Prince Hall wrote to his state legislature that the children of Africa suffered under "disagreeable and disadvantageous circumstances" which would persist as long as they remained in America, so he requested support for "a return to Africa... where we shall live among our equals and be more comfortable and happy than we can in our present situation." Three decades later, Richard Holloway received a letter advocating emigration to Liberia as "a country which we may settle... and call our own... and there praise God according to the dictates of our own consciences under our own Vine and Fig Tree and none to molest us or make us afraid." The impetus for African colonization was born of spatial experience on the American continent. Postcolonial policy-makers bent to the will of the white common folk to preserve the whiteness of the "white man's republic," and some African-Americans recognized in colonization an opportunity to realize a continental space of black autonomy.²⁶

²⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: U.C. Press, 1984), pp. 25-6, 376.

²⁶ Nash, 66; Holloway Family Scrapbook.

Most Americans of African descent chose not to return to their homeland, or were not offered the choice. The sons and daughters of African prisoners, fully awakened to their conditions of confinement, instead engaged the circumscribed social spaces of their confinement on their own terms. The cultural space of blackness evolved throughout the nineteenth century to meet the evolving needs of inhabitants ascribed varying degrees of legal sub-status. Slaves, servants, free people of color, residents, and even citizens, according to the law, cultivated resources of survival through spatial negotiations with their neighbors and their environment. Centuries before Edmund Morgan phrased the question for American historians, people of color struggled to resolve the paradox of slavery and freedom in their own American spaces.