AN INCOMPLETE REVOLUTION

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Slavery was the paradox of the American Revolution.[1] Even as white patriots decried their own political enslavement at the hands of the British, they continued to enslave people of African descent. In the post-revolutionary period, freedom, liberty, and popular sovereignty—that the country be governed by the people for the people—remained a reality for only an elite few, while slavery existed in the land of the free. This made the American Revolution's promise incomplete—Indigenous peoples and people of African descent were afforded little to no rights in the period that followed the patriots' victory. But both enslaved and free people of African descent continued to find ways to seize their own freedom and ensured that with liberty came true political, social, and legal equality.

The Black protest tradition continued long after slavery ended in the United States, with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. In the century that followed, African Americans led the struggle in areas such as education, employment, housing, jobs, and voting to ensure that this nation lived up to its founding ideals and that the U.S. remained a true democracy for all. This essay explores Black protest and the expansion of freedom through three specific themes and time periods: slavery and freedom during the American Revolution, citizenship and the right to vote during the pre–Civil War era, and the fight led by Black women to vote in the twentieth century.

SLAVERY IN A LAND OF FREEDOM

Enslaved communities of African descent were well aware of the rhetoric of the American Revolution (1775–1783) and the language of its iconic document, the Declaration of Independence (1776). The Declaration's appeal that "all men are created equal with certain unalienable Rights—Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" became a focal point for enslaved people securing their own rights.[2] Enslaved people used the chaos of war to advocate for their own freedom. They did so by running away, manumissions, emancipation through self-purchase, petitioning, and serving as Black Loyalists to gain their own freedom.

On January 13, 1777, just two years into the Revolution, abolitionist Prince Hall (1735–1807), the founder of Black freemasonry, together with six other African American men in Massachusetts—Lancaster Hill, Peter Bess, Brister Slenfan, Jack Pierpont, Nero Funelo, and Newport Sumner—presented the state legislature with a petition that drew on the rhetoric and ideology of the American Revolution to question the grounds of their own enslavement.

This was not the first time enslaved people of African descent organized themselves to agitate for freedom. Four years earlier, before the Revolution, four enslaved people in Boston—Peter Bestes, Sambo Freeman, Felik Holbrook, and Chester Joie—wrote to Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, arguing for their freedom as fellow Christians. In the 1777 petition, the writers highlighted the hypocrisy and sin of enslaving a Christian. Furthermore, they drew upon the Declaration's language by arguing they had "in common with all other men, a natural and inalienable right to that freedom, which the great Parent of the universe hath bestowed equally on all mankind." They then explicitly underlined the disparity within the context of the Revolution as they "express their astonishment that it has never been considered, that every principle from which America has acted, in the course of her unhappy difficulties with Great Britain, bears stronger than a thousand arguments in favor of your humble petitioners," and concluded that "freedom . . . is the natural right of all men, and their children (who were born in this land of liberty)."[3]

Black women also radically demanded their own freedom. As early as 1773, Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, distinguished her as the first African American to have her work published. Her poem, "On being brought from Africa to America," in particular, discussed the sin of slavery. In 1780, Elizabeth Freeman sued for her freedom, arguing that if all men were born equal, then the same argument applied to her as well. She would become the first African American to seize her freedom under the Massachusetts Constitution.

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[1] Edmund S. Morgan, "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *Journal of American History*, 59, no. 1 (June 1972): 5–29. https://doi.org/10.2307/1888384.

[2] Declaration of Independence, National Archives and Records Administration, accessed February 27, 2023. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript.

[3] "Petition for freedom (manuscript copy) to the Massachusetts Council and the House of Representatives, [13] January 1777," Massachusetts Historcal Society, https://www.masshist.org/database/557.

Miniature portrait of Elizabeth Freeman, 1811. Massachusetts Historical Society (03.147).

Black women also demanded their legal right to freedom and financial means to support them once it was attained. In 1783, Belinda, an enslaved woman, petitioned the Massachusetts General Court. In the document, she describes her traumatic life as an enslaved person and states her right to a pension as detailed in her slaveholder's will.[4] Massachusetts became the third northern state to gradually abolish slavery (Pennsylvania and New Hampshire preceded it), with New York being the second-to-last northern state to do so.

VOTING AND CITIZENSHIP

In the aftermath of the Revolution, northern states slowly began to dismantle the system of slavery; alongside this, their free Black communities continued to grow. In New York State, slavery took 28 long years to end. During this time, known as the gradual emancipation period, free Black men and women found ways to advocate for their own freedom. Knowing that equality would not accompany emancipation, free Black New Yorkers turned the rhetoric of the American Revolution into action.

In 1817, New York State announced that slavery would officially end on July 4, 1827.[5] In 1821, knowing absolute emancipation was on the horizon, the state legislature made radical changes to its constitution. Before 1821, all men in New York State, regardless of race, had to own $100 worth of property to vote. The changes to the state constitution removed the property qualification for white men and introduced a $250 property requirement for Black men. This was a significant amount for the average working Black man, which equaled about a year's wages.

The U.S. Constitution and the Naturalization Act of 1790 had already restricted citizenship to white men. In the time before the introduction and ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, Black New Yorkers led the struggle for citizenship and voting rights. Many of these activists had generations of history in New York. Their ancestors built the city that transformed from a small Dutch trading outpost to a major port city. They demanded the right to be seen as citizens, with all the privileges and protections of citizenship, including the right to vote. The nineteenth-century self-determined and intentional community of Weeksville, founded as a political project on the outskirts of the city of Brooklyn, New York, fulfilled some of these ambitions.[6]

Following the Panic of 1837 and the subsequent economic downturn, property prices remained historically low. The frenzied pace of urban development that had gripped Brooklyn came to a sudden halt. Black Brooklynites took this opportunity to buy land at historically low prices. And in being able to do so, they would gain the right to vote—and by possessing that right—who could argue that they were not citizens of the United States?

Weeksville was the second-largest free Black community in the United States before the Civil War and the only one with an urban rather than rural base, boasting high percentages of property ownership.[7] At its peak, Weeksville had about 500 residents, and the community built institutions and organizations intended to provide care for and safety to its residents, including schools, churches, a newspaper, a home for the aged, and an orphanage. But free Black communities across the North knew all too well that their freedom remained extremely fragile as long as slavery existed in the United States.

In 1843, abolitionist and New Yorker Henry Highland Garnet urged revolution by calling for enslaved people in the South to rise. "Let your motto be resistance! resistance! RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance," he told the audience at the Black National

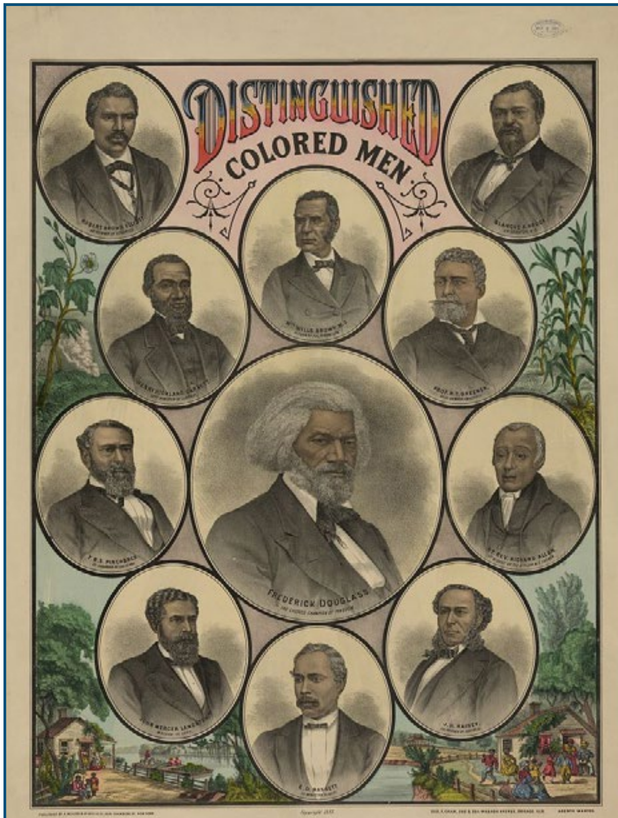
[4] Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: A Bell, 1773); Connop Thilwall, *Primitiae or Essays and Poems on Various Subjects Religious Moral and Entertaining* (London: Printed for the author by T. Plummer, 1809); Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgewick, *Elizabeth Freeman*, miniature portrait, 1811, Massachusetts Historical Society, https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=23&pid=4&ft=%20End%20of%20Slavery; Belinda's Petition to the Massachusetts General Court, February 14, 1783, Royall House & Slave Quarters. https://royallhouse.org/belinda-suttons-1783-petition-full-text/.

[5] Before that, the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1799 had done little to actually free enslaved people in New York and strengthened slaveholding interests in the state instead.

[6] At this time, Brooklyn and New York, or Manhattan, were entirely separate cities.

[7] Judith Wellman, *Brooklyn's Promised Land: The Free Black Community of Weeksville, New York* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

Convention in Buffalo, New York.[8] Centuries of the Black protest tradition and the outcome of the Civil War (1861–1865) laid the foundation for the so-called Reconstruction Amendments. In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in the United States. In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment gave citizenship to anyone born on U.S. soil, and two years later, the Fifteenth Amendment gave citizens the automatic right to vote. It brought to an end decades of Black struggle in the United States. But the right for women to vote, especially Black women, had yet to be addressed.



Print showing prominent African American men, including Henry Highland Garnet (first image on the left in the second row), 1883. Library of Congress (00651115).

BLACK WOMEN AND POLITICS

We are often taught that the Nineteenth Amendment (1920) secured the right for women to vote in the United States. But as historian Martha S. Jones reminds us, not all women could vote after the amendment's passage—Black women remained largely excluded from the elective franchise as the government deliberately deployed literacy tests, poll taxes, and racial violence to prevent them from exercising their constitutional right. Still, Black women launched a multi-faceted campaign in the twentieth century to protest their exclusion, building on centuries of prior activism.

The organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848—often cited as the first women's convention—did not invite any Black women, and none were in attendance. But Black women engaged in the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, demanding an immediate end to slavery and political and legal equality for all Americans regardless of race. Prevented from leadership roles in formal organizations such as William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, Black women formed groups such as the African Dorcas Society, founded in Manhattan in 1828, which fundraised to provide clothing and school supplies for African American children, an act which sought to remove barriers to education.

In 1935, educator and civil rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women in New York City (it would later move its headquarters to Washington, D.C.) to build political power. Members built on the work of late nineteenth-century activists such as Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and Sarah Smith Tompkins Garnet to extend the franchise. The organization fundraised to be able to pay Black voters' poll taxes, provide tutoring to pass literacy tests, and organize mass voter drives. Bethune soon became a member of Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet," advising him and Eleanor Roosevelt on matters affecting Black voters.

Mary McLeod Bethune, leading a long line of girls standing in front of the Daytona Normal and Industrial School for Negro Girls, which later became Bethune-Cookman College (now Bethune-Cookman University), 1905. Library of Congress (2021669923).

At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Mississippi-born Fannie Lou Hamer took to public platforms to protest discrimination at the ballot box. Tellingly, Hamer often cited the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments in her speeches about why voting justice was long overdue but rarely referenced the Nineteenth Amendment, which she clearly did not see as including Black women.

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[8] Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America," published in Henry Highland Garnet, *Walker's Appeal, with a Brief Sketch of His Life* (New York: J. H. Tobitt, 1848), University of Nebraska-Lincoln. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/8/.

[9] Martha S. Jones, *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers Won the Vote and Insisted on Equality for All* (New York: Basic Books, 2021).

[10] Learn more about the Dorcas Society at coloredconventions.org/african-free-schools/legacies/dorcas-society/.

In 1964, Hamer's speech at the Democratic National Committee convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, was broadcast into homes across the country. Like generations before her, she questioned the gap between the United States' founding ideals and its reality. She ended her speech with:

> **"All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?[11]**

Fannie Lou Hamer testifying before the credentials committee representing the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 22, 1964. Library of Congress (2003688126).

Centuries of self-determined grassroots struggle finally culminated in the passages of the Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965), and Fair Housing Act (1968), and its legacy created a very different-looking political arena. In 1972, Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman in Congress, ran for president of the United States. "I am not the candidate for Black America," she said, "although I am Black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman and equally proud of that. I am the candidate of the people and my presence before you symbolizes a new era in American political history."[12]

Representative Shirley Chisholm, photographed at a Black Caucus State of the Union event, January 31, 1973. Library of Congress (2018650328).

The U.S. Constitution, and its subsequent amendments, have not always been fairly applied to all Americans. As such, U.S. history has never been one of linear progress. But glimpses from its chapters illuminate how "we the people," that is, ordinary people doing extraordinary things, have helped shape this nation into "a more perfect union." In this way, the Revolution has become more complete over time. Black protest and organizing have always been at the center of that struggle demanding the country live up to its own democratic ideals even when it frequently fell short, and for that, all Americans, regardless of race, owe them a huge debt.

[11] Fannie Lou Hamer, Testimony Before the Credentials Committee, Democratic National Convention, August 22, 1964. Archives of Women's Political Communication, Iowa State University. https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/testimony-before-the-credentials-committee-democratic-national-convention-aug-22-1964/.

[12] Shirley Chisholm, Presidential Campaign Announcement, January 25, 1972, C-SPAN. https://www.c-span.org/video/?325324-2/1972-shirley-chisholm-presidential-campaign-announcement.