

1.

The Emergence of the Elite, 1787–1822

After 1830, the members of Philadelphia's black elite were able to assert their claims to leadership of the black community at the national level. They played an active role in promoting abolition, and for more than a decade they were effectively in control of the black national convention movement. Nor was this the full extent of their activism. They opposed legislation intended to undermine the rights of free blacks, they took the lead in promoting a wide range of moral and social reforms, they mounted a successful and well-publicized campaign against the American Colonization Society, and they attempted to safeguard their community from the impact of racial violence. Their ability to pursue their social and political goals owed much to the fact that they could draw on the leadership skills developed at the local level, as Philadelphia's black community established its earliest social and religious institutions.

The growth of an institutional framework within Philadelphia's black community was in part a response to racial hostility. The treatment they were accorded in most of the city's white churches induced blacks to form their own congregations. The fact that charitable foundations frequently refused them aid prompted blacks to establish benevolent societies for their own welfare and that of their families. However, black Philadelphians were not simply reacting against the prejudice and indifference of whites. The growth of black churches, in particular, owed much to the black Philadelphians' wish to have a degree of autonomy over their own affairs.

It was through the development of community organizations that certain individuals emerged as spokesmen for the city's black population. Ministers such as Richard Allen, John Gloucester, and Absalom Jones gained leadership experience while serving the needs of their congregations. By building upon this experience, they were able to assume

leadership over the larger black community. It was not only ministers, however, who established themselves as leaders. Laymen such as James Forten, Cyrus Bustill, William Gray, and Robert Douglass gained prominence within the community because they were officers of the various social and benevolent institutions, and because they were prepared to speak out on issues of general concern.

In their attempts to assert themselves as leaders, Allen, Jones, Forten, Gray, and their colleagues were aided by the recognition accorded them by prominent members of the white community. During times of common danger, it was crucial that city authorities be able to mobilize the entire population. Their ability to involve the black community hinged on their identification of individuals who wielded influence within that community. Recognition by the white elite served to confirm black activists in their leadership role.

Blacks who spoke for the community soon realized that there were certain fundamental contradictions involved in asserting leadership. Coordinating aid during emergencies presented no problem. On other occasions, however, they were confronted with a dilemma about the way in which they should exercise their authority. If they failed to be responsive to the needs of their constituents, they could be rejected as leaders, but persisting in a course of action that the white community opposed could lead to restrictive legislation and even violence. From their early experiences, Philadelphia's black leaders were well aware that leadership entailed far more than the enjoyment of social recognition. Complex problems faced those who claimed to be community spokesmen. It was this understanding of their leadership role, gained through their activism at the local level, that the Philadelphians were able to apply to their attempts to assert authority at the national level.

The Free African Society (FAS), formed in 1787, was the first community institution for free blacks in Philadelphia. The FAS was the brainchild of the two men who were to become the city's first black ministers. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones observed that they had "beheld with sorrow . . . [the] irreligious and uncivilized state" in which many of the city's newly freed blacks lived. Their initial intention had been to establish a religious congregation, but, finding little support for that scheme, they had concluded that the needs of the community could best be served by the creation of a nondenominational mutual relief association.¹

The significance of the FAS did not lie primarily in its function as a relief organization, although it did mark the first step in a development that resulted in the establishment of more than one hundred benevolent societies by the 1830s. The FAS was more significant as the first independent black organization in the city and as the forerunner of the black churches. To the emerging elite the FAS and similar societies offered "companionship, recreation, recognition and prestige . . . unity and solidarity . . . a

feeling of worth and dignity."² It also fostered the growth of a leadership group composed of individuals who considered themselves best able to speak for the rest of the community.

In many respects the social profile of the members of the FAS was markedly different from that of most blacks in the city. Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and Cyrus Bustill had experienced slavery and therefore could identify with those who had recently gained their freedom. Economically, however, they were far removed from the majority of black Philadelphians. A sympathetic white observer declared that most blacks were "very poor and destitute" and generally to be found in occupations "of the most laborious and menial kind."³ In contrast, Allen, Jones, and Bustill were all wealthy entrepreneurs with wide-ranging business interests.

Membership in the FAS was confined to men who enjoyed a certain degree of affluence. In addition to the initial membership fee, there were monthly dues and fines to be paid. From the beginning, the officers of the society were selective in determining who would be admitted to membership. Only those of proven respectability were allowed to join. Anyone departing from the strict moral standards imposed by the society's code of conduct faced expulsion.

In disciplining recalcitrant members, the officers of the FAS demonstrated their affinity with the principles of the Society of Friends. Those facing expulsion were to be "tenderly dealt with" by fellow members. A form of marriage drawn up by the FAS was substantially the same as that used by the Quakers, and when the FAS came to consider the propriety of starting each meeting with an act of worship, members decided that silent worship, after the manner of Friends, was the most appropriate. The decision to adopt Quaker practices can clearly be traced to the fact that many of Philadelphia's most prominent white abolitionists were members of the Society of Friends. Moreover, FAS officer Cyrus Bustill had been converted to Quakerism by the man who purchased and then freed him.⁴

The growing Quaker influence within the FAS was not welcomed by all members. In May 1788 founder Richard Allen was censured for having called a meeting contrary to the rules. After repeated efforts at reconciliation, he was finally disowned for "attempting to sow division" among the members.⁵ A convert to Methodism, he was convinced that it had more to offer blacks than any other form of worship. In spite of his expulsion from the FAS, Allen did not forfeit his membership in the city's black elite.

As the FAS came to represent the views of the leadership, it gradually moved from regulating the lives of its members to defining the standards of behavior which were acceptable for the community as a whole. Free blacks were urged to "lay aside . . . gaming and feasting" and to remember that many blacks were "starving under cruel bondage." The officers of the FAS maintained that any lapses on their part would be seized upon by "our enemies to declare that we are not fit for freedom."⁶ Because there were as

yet no separate black churches, the FAS increasingly assumed the functions of religious and social control. Early in 1790, members approached the mayor, aldermen, and Common Council with a request to rent a section of the potter's field, since blacks were not welcome to bury their dead in white-owned cemeteries.⁷ Their direct approach to the city authorities helped to convince those authorities that members of the FAS spoke for the black community and that the black community could be mobilized through the agency of the FAS.

The FAS was far more than a mutual benefit society. It gave its members, drawn from the ranks of the city's black entrepreneurs, the opportunity to associate with one another and establish themselves as leaders. Yet, despite their affluence, the members of the FAS were not divorced from the majority of blacks in Philadelphia. The programs and policies of the FAS were aimed at the social betterment of the entire community. The projects on which the FAS collaborated with the city's white abolitionists were intended to promote education, employment, and religion. If the members of the FAS secured for themselves positions of influence, they recognized that they had responsibilities. However, a parallel organization within the elite apparently had no goals of social betterment for the wider community. Freemasonry functioned to define and strengthen the elite.

By the end of the eighteenth century, membership in the secret fraternal order represented elite social status on both sides of the Atlantic. In Britain freemasonry enjoyed the patronage of the royal family, while in America, Franklin, Washington, John Adams, Paul Revere, John Hancock, and many of those most closely associated with the revolutionary cause were Freemasons. (Franklin had founded the first lodge in America in 1730 in Philadelphia.) The growth of Prince Hall Masonry was also a concern of the elite. The Prince Hall Lodge had its roots in the aspirations of a group of free blacks in and around Boston to be initiated into the "craft" on an equal footing with whites. Led by Prince Hall, a West Indian immigrant with wide-ranging interests in community improvement, the group applied in 1775 to a British military lodge in Boston. The members of the group were promptly "tried" and formed into a lodge. Problems arose when the black lodge attempted to secure recognition from white lodges in America. After repeated rejections, Hall, as master of the lodge, determined to apply to Britain for a charter.

The first contact the Philadelphians had with Hall was through the Free African Society. In 1789 the FAS sent one of its members, Henry Stewart, to consult with similar societies in New England. In Newport he met with the leaders of the African Union and listened to their plans for African emigration. He then traveled to Boston, where he met Prince Hall, who gave him a letter for the FAS containing "some Masonic proposals."⁸

By the spring of 1797 Freemasonry was firmly established among the

members of Philadelphia's black elite. On behalf of ten associates, Peter Mantore wrote to Hall to congratulate him on receiving his warrant from Britain and to assure him that blacks in Philadelphia needed only a dispensation to enable them to begin work. He described how they had been successfully "tried" by five Royal Arch Masons, only to be rebuffed when they applied to white lodges for a dispensation. The reason given for rejecting them had been the fear "that black men living in Virginia would get to be Masons too."⁹

Hall, remembering well the difficulties that he and his fellow Masons had experienced, came to the assistance of the Philadelphians. Expressing the hope that they had "received the light of masonry . . . in a just and lawful manner," he gave them permission, under his warrant from Britain, "to assemble and work." In the fall of 1797 Hall traveled from Boston to install the officers of the African Lodge. Absalom Jones became Worshipful Master and Peter Mantore, Senior Warden. Richard Allen was elected Treasurer, with James Forten serving as Senior Deacon and Thomas Depee as Tiler.¹⁰

Freemasonry had a strong appeal within Philadelphia's black community. By 1815 the parent organization in Boston had been called upon to charter three more lodges in the city: the Union (1810), the Laurel (1811), and the Phoenix (1814). On St. John's Day, December 27, 1815, the lodges met at the Masonic Headquarters at 155 Lombard Street to establish their own state organization. The subordinate lodges surrendered their warrants, which were then regranted by the new state lodge. The elite was still firmly in control: the Master of the Pennsylvania lodge was Absalom Jones.¹¹

The composition of the African lodge between 1797 and 1818 reveals much about the early leadership in Philadelphia. The lodge clearly had its roots in the Free African Society: no fewer than twenty-two Masons had been members of the FAS. The appeal of Freemasonry was interdenominational. Episcopalian Absalom Jones was a Mason along with Methodist Richard Allen and Quaker Cyrus Bustill. Membership in the lodge clearly put an individual in contact with the elite. Here prosperous sail-maker James Forten met successful caterers Robert Bogle and Caesar Cranchell, grocer William Gray, sweep-master Jonathan Trusty, and brewer Cyrus Bustill. However, membership in the lodge was not a prerequisite for establishing elite status. Absent from the roster were Robert Douglass, Joseph Cassey, and Russell Parrott, all men of the same social standing as Forten, Bogle, and Gray.¹²

As an institution the Masonic lodge in Philadelphia, at least during its early years, did not direct its energies toward improving conditions within the black community. Many of its members were actively concerned with promoting education and fostering the development of separate black churches, but they evidently did not attempt to implement their reform

programs through the Masonic lodge. In this elite organization, influential members of the community had an opportunity to associate with one another. Philadelphia's black churches, in marked contrast, developed in direct response to the needs of the community.

Richard Allen arrived in Philadelphia in February of 1786, in response to the invitation of the local white Methodist elders to work with the growing numbers of black Methodists in the city. Allen already had a reputation as an effective and energetic preacher. Converted to Methodism while still a slave, he had secured his freedom and then spent several years traveling through the South and the Middle Atlantic states, frequently preaching to interracial gatherings.¹³

In Philadelphia Allen was authorized by the elders of St. George's Methodist Church to exhort the black members of the congregation at special early morning meetings. Encouraged by the attendance at these meetings, and at other less formal gatherings, Allen suggested the creation of a separate black church, but this suggestion met with little enthusiasm from the white Methodists or from "the most respectable people of color" in the city. As an alternative, Allen joined with three fellow members of St. George's—Absalom Jones, William White, and Dorus Ginnings—to establish the nondenominational Free African Society.¹⁴

After the formation of the Free African Society, the four men continued to attend St. George's until, in a confrontation with several of the white trustees, they "went out of the church in a body," vowing never to return. The increase in the number of black worshippers had already led to tensions about seating arrangements, and the issue resurfaced with the construction of a gallery. When Allen and his friends took the seats in the new gallery that they assumed had been set aside for blacks, they were ordered to move. They asked to be allowed to stay where they were until prayer was over, but they were pulled from their knees and once more told to move. Rather than submit to such treatment they walked out.¹⁵

Tradition places the exodus from St. George's in the fall of 1787, shortly after the founding of the Free African Society. As Milton C. Sernett has demonstrated, however, St. George's did not have a gallery until May of 1792. By then plans for a separate African Church were far advanced. Significant though the gallery incident was for demonstrating the way in which the white Methodists regarded their black coreligionists, it did not precipitate the formation of a separate "African Church." In seeking to establish a church of their own, Allen, Jones, and their associates were doing far more than responding to a specific act of prejudice.¹⁶

In the summer of 1791 the white physician and reformer Benjamin Rush recorded that "two black freemen" visited him and that he discussed with them the building of a church to serve the needs of their community. According to Rush, the two men "received the proposition with a joy which transported one of them to take [him] by the hand as a brother." Rush