

A Shared Vision and Joint Venture:
Benjamin Rush, Richard Allen, and the Free Black
Community of Philadelphia, 1787-1813

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Introduction:

Post-Revolutionary Philadelphia was a testing ground for what would then have been perceived as racial experimentation. With Pennsylvania having passed the first gradual emancipation act in the United States in 1780, Philadelphia would soon house the largest urban free black population in the country.¹ As a city of refuge in a land of oppression, Philadelphia was seen by blacks as a beacon of light in a land of darkness. Manumitted slaves, free blacks, and runaway slaves all flocked to Philadelphia in the hope of starting a new life, one characterized by liberty, security, and opportunity. Philadelphia's allure and progressive racial attitude had the effect of placing the city on a pedestal for the entire nation to watch. If blacks failed to adapt to their life of freedom, then proslavery advocates would use it as incriminating evidence of innate racial inferiority and black incapability; slavery would become more defensible, and antislavery advocates would be exposed as delusional and maniacal. If the "Philadelphia experiment"² was to succeed however, and blacks were able to prove that they had what it took to make it on their own, then the ideology behind American slavery would be severely undermined. Slavery would no longer find justification based on the color of one's skin. Truly, the fate of black America and the nature of American race relations hung in the balance. Although the future of black America was by no means guaranteed freedom if the experiment proved successful, it most assuredly was guaranteed a more deeply entrenched regime of slavery if the experiment were to fail. The repercussions were by no means equitable; a lot was at stake for black America, and there was no margin for error.

¹ Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Free Black Community 1760-1820* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

² *Ibid.* Nash is responsible for coining this phrase.

Living within this racially charged environment were two men, one white, one black, who played a leading role in overseeing Philadelphia's unprecedented racial project. Benjamin Rush, a leading figure of Philadelphia's white community, signer of the Declaration, and one of the most prominent white physicians of his city, not to mention the country, took it upon himself to play a leading role in fostering a vibrant and healthy free black community. For Rush, improving the lives of blacks through education, religious instruction, and institution building designed to create racial self-sufficiency was "the noblest and most arduous task" before him.³ Having the unabashed and full-fledged support of one of Philadelphia's, not to mention America's, most prestigious and important leading citizens was an inestimable boon for Philadelphia's blacks and the potential success of the "Philadelphia experiment." Richard Allen, a well-known black minister and leader of the nascent free black community, also spearheaded Philadelphia's project of racial "uplift" and black "respectability." He too believed that education, religious and moral edification, and community solidarity were absolutely necessary lest "our enemies [be enabled] to declare that we are not fit for freedom."⁴ Similarly-minded men who were involved in similar social reform efforts, Rush and Allen were able to collaborate on racial affairs because of their spiritual and religious affinity; they were able to relate to each other on a spiritual level without which their relationship would not have survived, let alone have been forged. Living in a pre-industrial, racially integrated *gemeinschaft* community, where face-to-face interaction was an everyday occurrence, and only living a few blocks from each other, the paths of

³ Benjamin Rush to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (January 14, 1795), Lyman H. Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, vol. II (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951): 757.

⁴ William Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America, now styled the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas* (Philadelphia: 1862): 32.

Allen and Rush undoubtedly crossed continually. While the level and depth of this interaction may be unascertainable, their own personal writings and thoughts about their relationship, and their shared vision of racial tolerance and respect are not.

The complexity of Rush and Allen's existence undoubtedly made it hard for them to assimilate, record, or make complete sense of everything that was going on around them; yet, by juxtaposing their lives, we can perhaps come to a better sense of the struggles, hopes, and contact that existed between blacks and whites in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Philadelphia. By revealing the nature of their existence, the historical record will show just how deep-seated and significant the imagined yet ever-present construct of race was in early America. As two men who were similar in almost every respect, the only salient difference between Rush and Allen was the color of their skin. Yet this phenotypic difference made all the difference in the society in which they lived. And whether they acknowledged it or not, the cultural potency of race affected their lives and relationship as well. It shaped their thinking, influenced and constrained their behavior, and ultimately limited the depth and intimacy of their relationship. Although we know from historical hindsight how the story of macro black-white relations would play out, these two men did not. The founding of a new republic, one that proclaimed liberty as its cornerstone, opened up all sorts of possibilities, and Rush and Allen set out to explore, test, and shape these possibilities. By exploring this biracial enterprise, history can illuminate an alliance that transcended racial barriers and a black and white history not entirely separate from each other.

I. Benjamin Rush, Richard Allen and the Historical Literature:

When it comes to the history of American race relations, two historical renditions have dominated. The older and more traditional narrative centers on notions of Anglo-superiority, civilized progress, and manifest destiny. As a highly romanticized version of American history, this tradition places whites at the center of the story and relegates Native Americans, African-Americans, and other minorities to the periphery. Up until the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, this side of the American story pervaded the historical consciousness of America's citizens. This often-referred-to "national amnesia" about the nation's less-than-perfect past was challenged in the mid-twentieth century by the "democratization" of higher education in which underprivileged and marginalized groups began to enter the field of history and see a different and less glorified historical portrait of American society. These scholars pointed out that when traditional historians referred to white American progress, they failed to acknowledge at whose expense this progress had been achieved. And so began the resurrection of a history of people whose story of oppression, victimization, and dehumanization was waiting to be told. During the mid-twentieth century, as America's culture changed, so too did its history.⁵

The resulting tendency of these two disparate historical traditions has been to differentiate "white" history from "black" history. Even scholars who are forced to interweave these two histories, as a result of demonstrable collaboration between the races, often explain historical occurrences through a predominately white or black lens. Every story has a protagonist, and the chapter of American race relations has traditionally

⁵ For more on the changes that have occurred over time vis-à-vis the field of history see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1994). These authors also deal with fundamental challenges facing modern historians such as the influence of postmodernism, cultural relativism, and questions about the nature and purpose of historical scholarship.

adhered to this literary paradigm. Whites or blacks, either personally or collectively, are most often positioned antagonistically against each other, with the former actively or passively oppressing the latter. This trend is often left unchallenged because the pattern typically holds. Whites did consistently violate the rights of blacks through disfranchisement, violence, discrimination, and other forms of mistreatment. But this simplified version of American racial interaction often obscures the complexity in which whites and blacks navigated their daily existence; this was especially the case early on in America where uncertainties and social and moral quandaries were just as much a part of the story. Because the larger book on American race relations is almost invariably violent and racist, its chapter of early interracial collaboration is often relegated to obscurity. Far from being neatly distinct or inevitably disparate histories, black and white America associated with each other, made compromises, and engaged in cultural negotiations along the way.

As a cultural product of the discipline's mid-century shift away from an Anglo-centric perspective to a more diverse, multicultural one—an approach that suffuses the discipline of modern history generally—Gary Nash's comprehensive book *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Free Black Community 1760-1820* chronicles the emergence, growth, and development of Philadelphia's free black community. Nash writes a parallel history of white and black organizations and individuals who responded to, acted against, or sometimes succumbed to the changes happening around them. He includes in his discussion the cooperation among black community leaders such as Richard Allen and sympathetic whites such as Benjamin Rush, points out idiosyncratic personality traits, and even gives a detailed history of individual backgrounds. Yet it is

evident that Nash's purpose is primarily geared towards shedding light on larger community evolutions and transformations rather than highlighting interpersonal biracial cooperative efforts. This type of communal emphasis can be attributed to, and is reflective of, the mid-century emergence of a social history that stresses community development over individual agency. Nash concentrates on "what happened to black communities [as well as] what transpired within them" but fails to seriously consider and methodically evaluate the personal dimension to his story. In short, Nash's work is a community-oriented narrative that fails to truly capture the impact that social change wrought on individuals' personal psyches. Moreover, although his narrative incorporates both black and white characters, his scholarly objective is primarily focused on the evolution of the black community, and how this community sustained itself in the midst of a white racist culture.⁶

In a similar vein, Julie Winch's *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy 1787-1848* analyzes the efforts, effectiveness, and internal conflict of Philadelphia's black elite. She vividly portrays the individual personalities of this elite group and how they attempted to build a cohesive black community while simultaneously responding to the fears, concerns, and demands of the surrounding white community. She weaves a complex multidimensional narrative that provides insight into the decision-making and personal and collective attitudes of this early generation of northern blacks. Yet her scholarly project revolves almost exclusively around this black elite group and as a critic from the *American Historical*

⁶ Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community 1720 – 1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). While this primarily minority-oriented approach should be lauded and sustained, an implicit thesis of this essay argues that failure to methodically and critically evaluate this approach can oftentimes have the same effect that America's "white-washed" history had: falsely creating a racially fragmented history when such fragmentation may not have existed.

Review comments, is “a fine example of black community history.” Her work, as with many scholars’ work on Philadelphia racial interaction—including Jean Soderlund’s collaborative book with Gary Nash in *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath*—is inherently Afrocentric, marginalizing whites to the periphery of the story.⁷

Blatantly missing from the historiography on Philadelphia race relations, or at least grossly underrepresented, is an interracial interpersonal biographical approach to the subject. This is not to say that a personal face is never superimposed on the history of Philadelphia black-white relations. To the contrary; since the emergence of the Civil Rights movement of the 60’s, an abundance of scholarship has been written on the history of the African-American community in general and African-American leaders in particular. But the efforts of minorities to resurrect their own history, one distinct from the “white-washed” history of America, have led to a dichotomous and consequently fragmented history of black-white relations. The history of Philadelphia race relations then must incorporate a biracial biography that can synthesize previous scholarship on the subject and come to a more meaningful and integrative conclusion on the matter.

Recent historians of American racial interaction, such as John Stauffer, Richard Newman, and Paul Goodman, have begun to investigate the personal connections that existed among white and black abolitionists. Richard Newman’s *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* traces the shift in

⁷ Julie Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). It should be noted at the outset that these scholars and many others have provided the racial, cultural, societal, economic, and legal framework that have informed this essay. Furthermore, biographers on the two protagonists of this essay helped place these two men within the context of their times. See Alyn Brodsky, *Benjamin Rush: Patriot and Physician* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), Carol V.R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches 1760 – 1840* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), and Charles H. Wesley, *Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom* (Washington D.C.: Associated Publishers Inc., 1969).

abolitionist sentiment and strategies from the revolutionary period to the end of the antebellum era. Whereas white abolitionists in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Pennsylvania maintained a distant, elitist relationship with blacks and espoused gradualism and traditional notions of republican “respectability,” Massachusetts abolitionists in 1830 became more emotionally involved in the movement, espoused immediatism and “embraced more egalitarian strategies.” According to Newman, racial equality, at least in its most authentic form (i.e. not only envisioning a biracial society but practically living out this vision through an equally shared partnership and relatively equitable power relations between white and black abolitionists) was a product of the 1830s. In short, true intimacy between white and black abolitionist allies characterized the immediatist movement of the 1830s but failed to establish its presence in the early national era.⁸ On a similar note, Paul Goodman demonstrates how white abolitionists of the 1830s “conquered their prejudices” by “working together with free blacks.” At the heart of his book *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* is the notion that what defined a true abolitionist in the antebellum era was his or her progressive ability to see blacks as equals. Expanding the definition of a true abolitionist at heart, Goodman argues that various white abolitionists of this era moved beyond merely articulating racial equality. By working closely with black abolitionists, these white reformers were radicalized, in a sense, and began to see the world through the eyes of blacks. Religion and the influence of black allies were fundamental in fostering this

⁸ Richard Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) as quoted in John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African-American Writers and the Challenge of History 1794-1861* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 28.

transformative change.⁹ Simply put, Newman and Goodman, analyze the gradual and yet radical transformation of the American abolitionist movement during the first third of the nineteenth century; whereas the original movement maintained an elitist and somewhat emotionally reserved relationship with blacks, the latter was imbued with egalitarianism, effusive passion, and true racial equality. To speak of interracial intimacy in the founding era would be anachronistic.¹⁰

John Stauffer's *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* is one of the leading works on cross-racial camaraderie and intimacy. Writing a quartet biography of Frederick Douglass, John Brown, James McCune Smith, and Gerrit Smith, Stauffer accomplishes what very few historians have been able to accomplish on the subject of American race relations: revelation of the existence of deep biracial friendships during a time in which such relationships were few and far between. His work points out that the fervent religious radicalism characteristic of these four men acted as the motivating force behind their desire to wage a war against the institution of slavery; this religious impulse was also the binding force that acted as the cohering agent of their personal friendships with one another and the interracial alliance they eventually formed. Frederick Douglass and James McCune Smith, far from attempting to accommodate to white civil society, assisted John Brown and Gerrit Smith in their quest to acquire a "black heart." Cognizant of deeply-ingrained notions of white superiority, McCune Smith and Douglass recognized the only way whites like Brown or Smith could genuinely abet the African-American cause was for them to see the world

⁹ Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*, 28. Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

¹⁰ This understanding is well-established among scholars today and is universally accepted. Abolitionist approaches and understandings underwent a radical transformation during this period.

through the eyes of “a colored man.” As Stauffer writes, Douglass and McCune Smith realized that “the heart of whites must be changed [and]...whites must learn how to acquire a black heart in order for equality and freedom to occur.” What it meant to acquire a black heart, in a sense, meant to be able to identify and empathize with the African-American experience. This mid-nineteenth century biracial alliance was truly anomalous, yet it also reveals the rare capacity that individuals possess in overcoming, albeit incompletely, the cultural assumptions and social constructions of their day. Stauffer’s racially integrated narrative demonstrates that the propensity to separate “white” history from “black” history can create false dichotomies in the historiographic literature.¹¹

These synthesized and integrative black and white narratives necessitate an investigation into biracial collaboration prior to the antebellum era; for if deep friendships existed between whites and blacks during a time characterized by increasing racial segregation and racial hostility, then black-white relationships antecedent to these demographic and racial developments must have existed as well. This is not to say that gradualists like Rush developed intimate relationships with African-Americans on the same level as John Brown or Gerrit Smith; the nature of black-white abolitionist relations in the antebellum era diverged quite markedly from those that were cultivated in late eighteenth century America. Oddly enough, no scholarship on late eighteenth century America has emphasized a black and white collaboration similar to that articulated by

¹¹ John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001): 162, 148. To demonstrate what Stauffer means by employing the metaphor of attempting to “acquire a black heart,” a letter from Gerrit Smith to Douglass is illustrative: “Think not, my dear Douglass, that it is you colored men alone who suffer from this insane and rampant prejudice. The wound it inflicts on you, it inflicts on us who sympathize with you, and who have identified ourselves and made ourselves colored men with you. In your sufferings, we suffer. In your afflictions, we are afflicted.” According to Stauffer, Smith was trying to understand what it was like to be black and was in the process of acquiring a black heart.

Stauffer, Newman, or Goodman. Again, white-black abolitionist intimacy is invariably the domain of nineteenth century Americanists.¹²

Prior to unearthing a biracial tale of late eighteenth century Philadelphia, a few cautionary words are in order. First, it would be a mistake to overemphasize the cooperation of blacks and whites in the fight for racial equality when this fight has been largely carried out by blacks since their very captivity and bondage.¹³ The struggle of black Americans to end racism has always been just that, a black struggle, one which even the most sympathetic of whites could not fully understand or fully embrace.¹⁴ John Ernest, in light of this reality, rightly states, “I would underscore the importance of black communal self-definition and self-determination in *any* story of racial cooperation” (emphasis added).¹⁵ To quote from him further, “if we fail to hold to a systemic understanding of race, we are in danger of replacing what Marcus Wood has called the nineteenth century’s ‘mythology of white martyrdom’ with a corresponding mythology of white abolition heroism, a form of idealism—promoted for very worth ends—that can obscure the complexity of the African American historical experience and marginalize

¹² For more on abolitionist transformations and changing cultural attitudes towards blacks see Michael Morrison and James Brewer Stewart ed., “Modernizing Difference: The Political Meanings of Color in the Free States 1776-1840” in *Race and the Early Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation Building in the Early Republic* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2002), 113-34.

¹³ The uprisings of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah and other blacks and Africans—hailed as the heroes behind black nationalist thought and the Black Power movement of the 1960s—are just a few examples of how blacks have always led the fight for their own liberation. See Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (NY: Verso, 2005).

¹⁴ The Civil Rights movement in general, and the Black Power movement in particular, see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998) and others. The inability of whites to fully understand the nature of the African-American experience stems from the fact that what it has meant to be African-American has always been different from what it has meant to be Anglo-American, see W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (NY: Modern Library, 2003) and other African-American scholarship on the “twoness” or “double consciousness” of the African-American experience.

¹⁵ John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*, 29.

the story of African American collective self-determination.”¹⁶ The greater story behind this biracial narrative, or any biracial narrative, is the indefatigable spirit of African-Americans in their fight against the oppressive forces that have long subjugated them, and continue to subjugate them, to second and third-class status.

With this in mind, this study seeks to look at individuals who were trapped by these systemic forces and attempts to illuminate how they dealt with these forces on a day-to-day basis and on a personal level. This story attempts to bring the impact of these systemic forces to life, and although there is a “significant difference between reimagining one’s country and changing one’s country, or between transforming hearts and transforming the social order,” the efforts by Benjamin Rush and other whites should not go without notice. White abolitionists such as Rush may have been incapable of truly empathizing with blacks and, as John Stauffer ultimately concludes, as with all whites, may have been incapable of acquiring a “black heart,” a few white abolitionists nevertheless at least attempted to understand the nature of the African-American experience. And blacks such as Richard Allen reached out to whites such as Benjamin Rush to help them understand, albeit incompletely, the struggles of black America.

While this story is a cautionary biracial tale, it is also one that attempts to combat the too frequently segregated historiography of “black” and “white” America. This study attempts to tell both sides of the story, side by side, through the personal lives of Benjamin Rush and Richard Allen, the former being one of the most respected and visible leaders of Philadelphia’s white community and the latter being one of the most influential and revered leaders of Philadelphia’s fledgling free black community. The racially distinct histories of Allen and Rush, characteristic of the macro-historiographic

¹⁶ John Ernest, 30.

tradition, as well as the personal biographies on these two men's lives, necessitate a closer investigation into the intersection of their lives.¹⁷ Although Rush and Allen's experiences were altogether different from each other—most often simply by virtue of their skin color—their concurring existence and parallel histories provide a window through which their experiences, and the interaction of black and white elites, can be better understood than if their stories were told separately. Race may have defined the social relationships and interactions of their time, but it failed to completely define their relationship to each other. To be sure, their relationship may not have been deep-seated, but neither was it significantly different from the abolitionist ties they maintained with people of their own color. Allen and Rush saw each other as partners, engaged in an interracial joint venture to secure for blacks a niche of freedom whereby they could eventually fully participate in civil society. From the very inception of the American nation, Rush and Allen worked together, side by side, to demonstrate the possibility of interracial harmony in the midst of nationwide racial oppression. Rush and Allen's example reveal that far from being inevitably and clearly distinct histories, black and white America, at least in Philadelphia, were attempting to negotiate the terms of future American race relations.¹⁸

¹⁷ No biographer of these two men places either of them in an intimate context with each other. More often than not, Allen's biographers mention Rush in passing and portray his relationship with Allen and Philadelphia's black community as a distant and discontinuous one; Rush's biographers more often than not downplay his involvement with Philadelphia blacks while highlighting his medical and political contributions. Needless to say, no historian has seriously explored the possibility of an ongoing collaboration between the two, despite all the evidence pointing to sustained cooperation.

¹⁸ As will become evident, the focal point of this essay is Benjamin Rush, his relationship with Richard Allen, and his role within the black community. For more detail on the life of Richard Allen, see Richard Newman's upcoming biography entitled, *Black Founder: Richard Allen and the Early Republic* (NY: NYU Press, forthcoming 2007).

II. The Burden of the Philadelphia Experiment and Its Two Protagonists:

Upon the opening of the first African Episcopal church of St. Thomas in 1794, Samuel Magaw, a local white clergyman, reminded the newly formed congregation of its conspicuity and the burdensome responsibility that was now thrust upon it as a result of its newly won independence:

Remember, that you have enemies, as well as friends; that you will be narrowly watched; and that less allowance will be made for your failings, than for those of other people...according to your conduct henceforth, turns out well or ill; your example will be a praise in the view of all around you, - or a reproach. Yes, this very house – or rather, the conversation of those belonging to it, is set for the fall, or rising again of many – of the people of your colour...On the right improvement of your present advantages, depends, perhaps, the fate of your brethren in bondage, in every part of the world.¹⁹

The joyous nature of the occasion, an occasion celebrating the beginning stages of African-American cultural and religious autonomy, was also met with solemnity and gravity. Although the celebratory nature of the occasion undoubtedly outweighed the seriousness of it, everyone present knew in the back of their minds that their unprecedented accomplishment instantaneously conferred on them an onerous responsibility. In a country that tolerated slavery, and a country in which racism was embedded in the culture, the enemies of blacks far outnumbered their friends. Flaws in conduct, which were given “less allowance” than for their white counterparts, had repercussions beyond the lives of Philadelphia’s blacks and beyond the city limits of Philadelphia. In their *Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People*, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, two leading figures of the black community, exhorted fellow blacks that “much depends upon us for the help of our colour more than many are aware; if we are lazy and idle, the enemies of freedom plead it as a cause why we ought not to be

¹⁹ Samuel Magaw, A discourse delivered July 17, 1794 in the African Church of the city of Philadelphia, on the occasion of opening the said church, and holding public worship in it the first time (Philadelphia: Pamphlets on Religion vol. 13, 1794): 21-22.

free...and by such conduct we strengthen the bands of oppression, and keep many in bondage who are more worthy of ourselves.”²⁰ The public image and public perception of St. Thomas’ congregants would be a determining factor in “the fate of your brethren in bondage, in every part of the world.” Wading through uncharted waters, Philadelphia’s blacks would be expected to live impeccable lives. They were dealing with more than just the double standard of their time; they were dealing with an impossible standard, one which made no allowances for error.

As an African-American who purchased his freedom in the mid-1780s, Richard Allen was keenly aware of the scrutiny and surveillance blacks were subjected to as freedmen and as slaves. Even during his days under slavery, his master’s decision to allow him and his brother to attend church services was criticized by local slaveholders. As Allen observed, “our neighbors, seeing that our master indulged us with the privilege of attending meeting once in two weeks, said that Stokeley’s Negroes would soon ruin him.”²¹ In order to combat the belief that education and religious instruction corrupted slaves and made them less obedient, Allen and his brother “attend[ed] more faithfully to our master’s business so that it should not be said that religion made us worse servants.”²² Allen’s desire to expand the opportunities of enslaved African-Americans, which he hoped to accomplish by living a life of integrity and humility, came into conflict with slaveholders’ desires to wield absolute control over the lives of their chattel. By logical extension, the more mobility blacks had, the less control slaveholders wielded. Richard

²⁰ Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793: And A Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1794): 27. It is important to remember that blacks were not only warned by white elites such as Magaw to conduct themselves properly; black elites held their people up to such standards as well.

²¹ Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960): 16.

²² *Ibid.*

Allen, as with all free blacks, posed a threat to the slave regime; and as more African-Americans such as Richard Allen gained their freedom and proved they were capable of living on their own, the less potent the ideology of racial inferiority became.

A necessary precondition for weakening the racial stereotype that African-Americans were incapable of living a life of freedom was for African-Americans to strengthen themselves from within. Black communal solidarity and oversight, in a sense, was a prerequisite for the long-term success of a free African-American community. For Richard Allen, this was especially the case in eighteenth century Philadelphia. Settling in Philadelphia after spending some time as an itinerant Methodist lay preacher, Allen would record in his autobiography “the necessity of erecting a place of worship for the colored people” of the city.²³ The warm reception he received during his itinerant stay in Philadelphia, as well as his desire to continue his ministry by spiritually shepherding the free black population of the city, compelled him to establish residency in the city in 1787.²⁴ As a city that was in the vanguard of abolitionism, and one that would eventually contain the largest concentration of urban free blacks, Philadelphia was the place where Allen would end up assuming a leading position on the nation’s greatest stage for black America.

Allen’s leadership and preeminence within the black community would be carried out in large part through his capacity as America’s first African bishop. He played a leading role in helping to establish St. Thomas’ Episcopal Church in 1791, but because of religious differences, went on to establish a church of his own immediately afterwards:

²³ *Ibid*, 23-4.

²⁴ During an early stay in Philadelphia, Allen was invited to preach at a local, predominately white congregation, and was given a place to stay where a woman kindly washed his “blistered” and sore feet from his travels, travels in which he preached nearly “four to five times a day.” *Ibid*, 20, 24.

Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Absalom Jones, the cofounder of St. Thomas', had worked with Allen and their black counterparts since 1787 in the Free African Society, America's first independent black organization designed to provide racial solidarity and mutual aid and support. Through the courage and organizational dexterity of Philadelphia's black elite, Philadelphia's blacks carved out a space of autonomy by which they could more fully participate in civil society and fulfill notions of black "respectability." Allen's leadership among this elite group would be evident from his primary role in the unprecedented African-American separation from an Anglo-hegemonic church, to his leading role in the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, to the organization of black volunteers during the war of 1812, to the organization of a general conference for black churches in 1816, to the formation of the first National Negro Convention in 1830. Overarching all of these activities and events was his unwavering and indefatigable supervisory role over Philadelphia's fledgling free black community. It was because of his prominence within the black community and his intense involvement with their affairs that Allen was able to speak with such authority within the black community. And it was this representative authority that allowed him to speak on behalf of Philadelphia's blacks and collaborate with sympathetic whites.

One of Allen's most salient characteristics was his deep abiding sense of God's love. Although a former slave, Allen did not harbor bitterness towards slaveholders because of past injustices; instead, he embraced and promulgated Christ's message of forgiveness. He constantly implored enslaved blacks to eschew hatred for their masters but instead to incline their hearts to serve God, which would enable them to "feel an

affectionate regard towards your masters and mistresses.”²⁵ He embraced abolitionism, but only in its gradualist form. Moral suasion, embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ, was always preferable to compulsion or moral coercion. In every respect, Allen was a man motivated by religious sincerity and he hoped that the virtue displayed by himself and his black cohorts would one day win over the sentiments of their white oppressors and thereby provide the groundwork for racial harmony and integration.

Having been born and raised in Philadelphia, and living most of his life in the city, Benjamin Rush was well acquainted with the growing abolitionist sentiment in the North and the leading role his city occupied in terms of black-white relations. Commenting on the change in attitude in the northern colonies, which began to pass gradual emancipation laws in the wake of Pennsylvania’s original initiative in 1780, Rush noted that whereas “Anthony Benezet stood alone a few years ago in opposing Negro slavery in Philadelphia...now three-fourths of the province as well as the city cry out against it.”²⁶ He believed that the sentiment favoring the humane treatment of blacks, which originated with Benezet, Woolman and other Quakers, would continue to spread throughout the northern colonies and would gradually result in American slavery’s complete extirpation. As a resident of the City of Brotherly love, Rush witnessed a gradual demographic shift in the late eighteenth century as many blacks continued to migrate to the city and began to take up residency. As a leading citizen, eminent physician, Christian philanthropist, and sympathizer of the plight of Africans, he took it upon himself to play a leading part in facilitating this demographical transition. His

²⁵ Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *Narrative*, 26.

²⁶ Benjamin Rush to Granville Sharp (May 1, 1773). Lyman H. Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush, vol. I: 1761-1792* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1951): 81. It should be noted here that, according to Gary Nash and other Philadelphia scholars, Rush was overestimating the number of people in his state who abhorred slavery at this time period. Rush’s sentiments were ahead of his time.

unwavering commitment to, and participation in, the revolutionary movement stemmed from his deep-seated belief in the ideology of natural rights. But in Rush's mind, the revolution was far from over; just as Philadelphia was the birthplace of the rhetoric of the American Revolution—embodied in the Declaration of Independence—so too would it be the birthplace of African emancipation.²⁷

Benjamin Rush was a man of science, and he was also a man of deep religious conviction. He was raised in a Protestant home, was indoctrinated with Christian principles, and imbibed notions of human depravity, the limitations of human knowledge and capability, and somewhat more tenuously, the doctrine of predestination. Yet he was also a product of the Enlightenment, an eighteenth century scientific creed that stressed human capability, infinite progress, human equality and agency, and a divine mechanism conducive to absolute human knowledge of mundane affairs. These two conflicting belief systems forced Rush to synthesize his worldview, albeit incompletely and sometimes incongruously. In other words, Rush was a man who struggled to make complete sense of the changes swirling round about him. But his redoubt and security would always be found in the Christian faith, and it was this immovable foundation that acted as the guiding force and moral compass for all of his life decisions. Although modern American historians celebrate Rush as one of the most eminent physicians of his time, and an important founding father and republican citizen, he was most proud of his involvement with his city's free black population, and found the main source of his

²⁷ His desire to get involved in the affairs of Philadelphia's emerging free black community stemmed from his belief that "even should that great end be happily obtained, [i.e. the complete abolition of slavery] it cannot put a period to the necessity of further labor."²⁷ In Rush's mind, emancipation was only the first step towards preparing blacks for a life of freedom. In 1780, Philadelphia was only in the beginning stages of ensuring that blacks would be in a position in which they could fully enjoy their God-given right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

identity in his Christian faith. And it was because of this self-identification that Rush became an unabashed and tireless advocate of Philadelphia's blacks. He too, like Allen, favored gradual emancipation, and for similar reasons. He too was motivated by the love of Christ, and by wanting to abet the efforts of blacks to build institutions of their own, he believed that whites would clearly see that, given the chance, blacks were just as capable as whites.²⁸ And he too envisioned a biracial society, one in which whites regarded blacks as their "brethren" and their equals.²⁹

The political environment surrounding both Rush and Allen was an extremely democratic one, and this democratic spirit often ran counter to their sensibility of "respectability." Democracy, let alone democratic excess, was not always conducive to a well ordered, racially respectable social order. To make matters worse, the city was also experiencing migration from the southern states as well as the Caribbean, due in large part to the Haitian Revolution, and these recent "exotic" and "unpolished" black immigrants posed a threat to the imperatives of black "respectability" that Rush and Allen were trying to create and maintain. Many of these new arrivals were unaware of the racial project that was being conducted, and their habits, attitudes, and mannerisms often conflicted with the vision of black and white elites. Rush and Allen had an onerous and gargantuan project on their hands, in ensuring the success of the "Philadelphia experiment," and these "lower orders" were liable to undermine this entire project. Elite

²⁸ See Rush's antislavery publication entitled, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America upon Slave-Keeping, 1st ed.* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap).

²⁹ Although Rush and Allen were not the only two American figures to envision the feasibility of a biracial society, this sentiment was not overwhelmingly popular and many Americans were not as optimistic about the possibility of the races coexisting. This racial pessimism could be found in the person of Thomas Jefferson and many other whites and would influence the creation of the American Colonization Society in the early nineteenth century.

oversight and community supervision were even more imperative, as a result of these migrations, than at any time before.³⁰

As America's legendary founding fathers were engaged in debates over the Constitution in 1787, two less prominent founding fathers were engaged in work of a different kind: a religious commitment to black "uplift," "respectability" and racial equality. The "harvest [was] great, but the laborers [were] few" (Luke 10:2) in helping to create and sustain a respectable and self-sufficient black community. Allen and Rush were aware of this dearth of laborers and enthusiastically took it upon themselves to satisfy the demand. But they could not do it alone. Only through partnership and assiduous moral commitment would the Philadelphia experiment prove successful. In the late eighteenth century, the genesis of a biracial partnership and a biracial alliance emerged. It was an alliance that would often act as the bridge between the white and black communities of Philadelphia, a bridge built out of religious material and human sincerity. The relationship between these two men was multifaceted. This effort to uncover it reveals stories of hope and frustration, sentiments of optimism and doubt, and miscellaneous efforts by Benjamin Rush and black elites to create an interracial Christian community of mutual regard, self-disciplined citizenship, respectability, and most importantly, love.

³⁰ Post-revolutionary Philadelphia was an extremely democratic society, although by the end of the eighteenth century conservatives reformed the state's political system to cut back on this democratic excess, just as the founding fathers had for the country in 1787. But Pennsylvania's hyper-democratic 1776 constitution had the effect of politicizing and mobilizing the city's "lower orders," black and white alike. Democracy could easily degenerate into a "mobocracy," as Rush would put it, and this concern was shared by both white and black elites alike.

III. The Genesis of a Black-White Partnership: Erection of the First African Church

Richard Allen and his black cohorts had to face the decision of whether to react to their collective mistreatment by resorting to black separatism or whether they should continue to make attempts at racial integration. These dichotomous approaches, embodied in modern comparisons of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.,³¹ were forced upon the black leadership as a result of the incident at St. George's church in which Absalom Jones—one of Allen's closest friends—and other blacks were pulled off their knees during communion because they were not sitting in their proper place: the gallows.³² Consequently, most of St. George's black congregants decided to separate from St. George's and retreat to an autonomous sphere where they would be treated as equals. Far from advocating for black separatism, however, Richard Allen seems to have perceptively recognized that until blacks proved to whites in general, and white benefactors and sympathizers in particular, that they could make it on their own, whites would continue to patronize and disparage blacks. Ironically, in Allen's mind, racial separation was a prerequisite to racial integration and full racial equality.³³

³¹ This author is cognizant of recent scholarship that suggests that the approaches of Dr. King and Malcolm X were not diametrically opposed to each other. In fact, towards the end of Malcolm X's life he began to lose some of his separatist, militant tendencies and partially embraced the approach of Dr. King in seeing the benefits of working within the institutional pathways of power; Dr. King too began to lean more and more in the direction of Malcolm X and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in terms of self-defense and other matters. See Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (NY: Verso, 2005). For purposes of simplicity and for the purpose of this paragraph, however, this dichotomous analogy will hold.

³² The conflict occurred as a result of St. George's growing congregation. As more people began to attend St. George, renovations and additions were required. When black church members assumed that they would sit in their normal place, white church elders properly informed them that their new seats were in the newly constructed gallows at the back of the church. This humiliating gesture, recorded poignantly by Allen, was, to use the cliché, the straw that broke the camel's back.

³³ Allen's departure from St. George's can be interpreted as an attempt to begin a dialogue that was not present in a racially hierarchical church. In a white hegemonic sphere, only formation of, to borrow political scientist Ronald Jacobs' language, a "subaltern counterpublic" would allow blacks to have a voice of their own, a voice that, as John Ernest put it, could operate as an "oppositional discourse." This subaltern counterpublic could, in Allen's mind, pave the way towards future reciprocal black-white relations. Allen's keen sense of character, especially of white sympathizers, also strengthened the deep

Community reactions to Allen and his cohorts' decision to separate from St. George's church illustrate just how deeply entrenched white racial attitudes were, even in one of the most racially progressive states in the nation. One white gentleman expressed his "disapprobation" and concern to Benjamin Rush that the movement "originated in pride;" local preachers said they were "much displeased" with the conduct of the blacks and hoped that things would go back to the way they were.³⁴ Despite white resistance to the idea of an independent black church, Philadelphia's blacks found an ally in the person of Benjamin Rush. In their articles of association, the African Methodist Episcopal Church saluted Rush as "the first gentleman that assisted us with advice [and] manifested his friendship by contributing largely towards building our houses of divine worship."³⁵ Despite A.M.E.'s explicit racial qualification for church membership and its emphasis on economic and communal self-reliance, the institution saw Rush as an ally and deemed his spiritual and financial support worthy of being included in their articles of association, which read that "no person shall be admitted in close connection with [our] classes, or be enrolled on [our] books, but Africans and descendents of the African race."³⁶ Philadelphia's blacks, moreover, "allotted a pew" for both Rush and John Nicholson "on different sides of the pulpit of their church" as a gesture of their appreciation of and trust in Rush and other white benefactors.³⁷ The "number of our friends among the white people" and "spiritual Moseses" who supported the A.M.E., of whom Rush was premier,

trust he had in, and the respect he had for, Benjamin Rush. Rush's gesture of support, and Allen's lifelong embrace of him as a partner, suggests that Rush's attitude toward Allen and other blacks may not have been as condescending as most whites.

³⁴ Benjamin Rush, *Letters and Thoughts* (August 1, 1791).

³⁵ "Articles of Association of the African Methodist Episcopal Church," (Philadelphia: John Ormrod, 1799): 19.

³⁶ "Articles of Association of A.M.E.," 17. This racial qualification was made in order to preserve the independence of the first African church from white paternalism or "spiritual despotism," to use the words of Richard Allen.

³⁷ BR to John Nicholson (August 12, 1793), Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush vol. II*, 636.

played a crucial role in the early stages of black institution building.³⁸ As Allen would record in his autobiography, Dr. Rush was one of the first “gentlemen who espoused the cause of the oppressed, and aided us in building the house of the Lord for the poor Africans to worship in. Here was the beginning and rise of the first African church in America.”³⁹ This year, 1791, was also the beginning and rise of an anomalous reciprocal biracial partnership, one that would transcend the racial categories of the day.⁴⁰

After word spread about the racial schism that occurred at St. George’s, Rush immediately offered his services to the black congregational dissidents. It is not clear whether Rush’s services were requested by the black leaders in charge of the religious independence movement or whether he offered his services on his own initiative, but more likely than not, it was a combination of the two. Allen alludes to a black-initiated request for Rush’s support and advice in his autobiography when he notes that blacks “waited on Dr. Rush” after telling him of “our distressing situation.”⁴¹ Other accounts, such as Rush’s own, indicate that Rush may have taken it upon himself to offer his assistance: “Met about a dozen free Blacks at Wm. Welcher’s in New Street and read to them sundry articles of faith and a plan of church government which I had composed for them. They appeared will [sic] satisfied with it, and agreed to deliberate upon it previously to its being adopted and laid before the public.”⁴²

Regardless of who initiated the contact, Rush was eager to offer his help, and Philadelphia’s blacks, no doubt aware of his role in drafting the Declaration of

³⁸ “Articles of Association of A.M.E.”, 17.

³⁹ Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, 26. Allen records in his autobiography that the separation from St. George’s occurred in 1787, but most scholars acknowledge that more likely than not, it occurred four years later in 1791.

⁴⁰ For more on Rush’s involvement in abolitionism and Philadelphia’s free black community, see Donald J. D’Elia, “Dr. Benjamin Rush and the Negro,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* vol. 30 (3) 1969, 413-422.

⁴¹ Allen, *Life Experience*, 26.

⁴² Rush, *Autobiography*, 202, dated July 25, 1790.

Independence and other political experience and expertise he possessed, welcomed his support. As William Gray, one of the black leaders who was involved in forming and creating the first African church, mentioned in a letter to Rush, “It is not in my power to express the sentiments of gratitude I feel for the many instances of friendships you have been pleased to shew [sic] the African society, but more particularly for the great pains and trouble you have taken in prescribing the rules and regulations which ought to be observed in the African Church.” As busy as he was as a physician, founding father, and pillar of his community, Benjamin Rush went through “great pains and trouble” to help Philadelphia’s religiously dissident blacks organize themselves into a church body. Rush, even in the midst of widespread community disapproval, displayed no shame in his willingness and enthusiasm to draw up a plan of governance for America’s first black religious establishment. This sincerity compelled Allen, Gray, and other blacks to articulate the hope that “the Church may flourish under your patronage and protection.”⁴³ Just as Philadelphia’s blacks were attempting to separate themselves from an Anglo-dominated religious and cultural sphere to “preserve us from that spiritual despotism which we have so recently experienced,”⁴⁴ they simultaneously requested Rush’s “patronage and protection.” This type of cross-racial trust during a time of heightened racial consciousness presupposed a religious sincerity between the two that transcended mundane racial categories.

Rush collaborated with blacks in soliciting funds for the erection the first African church and he also assisted them in drafting up articles of association. Rush’s centrality as a white figure in a historiographically almost exclusively black narrative, which has

⁴³ William Gray to BR (October 24, 1792), *Benjamin Rush Manuscript Correspondence*, vol. 24, 116. HSP.

⁴⁴ Allen, *Life Experience*, 35.

emphasized black self-help and communal self-sufficiency, justifies quoting his thoughts on the matter in full:

I have at last opened my plan of an African Church to two black / freemen who called upon me at 7 o'clock in the morning a few days ago. They received the proposition with a joy which transported one of them to take me by the hand as a brother. I am to meet a larger body of them on Monday evening upon the business, and expect agreeably to their request to lay before them a plan for executing it in the course of a few months. Never did my heart expand or triumph more upon any subject...The clergy and their faithful followers of every denomination are *too good to do good*. The Quakers objected to the blacks' making a temporary use of one of their schoolhouses as a place of worship, because part of their worship consisted in singing psalms. Alas! poor human nature. I shall keep my name from the public eye in this business, not because I am ashamed of it, but for other reasons. I know my reputation is as safe as my life in the divine protection, but I know the work will prosper for the better for my keeping myself out of sight.⁴⁵

These reflections, corroborated by the writings, pamphlets, and sermons of African-American leaders, place Rush in the center of the story of the black community and demonstrate his progressive attitude towards Philadelphia's blacks. Rather than meddling in the affairs of the black community in an overbearing manner, which was typical of most whites, he was "called upon" by Philadelphia's blacks for guidance and responded in kind. Rather than being "too good to do good," he practically assisted black religious dissidents in drawing up a plan for an African-led church. Benjamin Rush expressed his disappointment in the unwillingness of the larger Philadelphia community to get involved with or at least support the efforts of its black citizens. No doubt he must have been dismayed that his beloved city, which was allegedly leading the nation towards racial harmony, failed to equip the inchoate black community with the tools it needed to succeed. As Richard Allen would astutely questioned, "Will you, because you have reduced us to the unhappy condition our color is in plead our incapacity for freedom...as a sufficient cause for keeping us under the grievous yoke?"⁴⁶ The hypocrisy of whites was so embedded in the culture that most whites could not even see it. The ostensible

⁴⁵ BR to Mrs. Rush (July 16, 1791), Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush vol. I*, 599-600.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Bacon Press, 1995): 98. Also, see Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *Narrative*, 25.

inferiority of blacks was directly attributable to the refusal of whites to allow blacks cultural autonomy and educational opportunity. Simply stated, whites continued to blame the victim.

There is little room for doubt that Rush's random personal interactions with, and attitudes towards, Philadelphia's blacks went above and beyond the customs of his day. Whereas one gentleman described Richard Allen in a demeaning light, comparable to the way whites viewed blacks as a whole, as an individual who has a "disfortunate itch for talking & if I had opened intercourse with him I should have been dreadfully annoyed—Like his people generally he abuses the language unmercifully & seems to be insensible of his deficiency;"⁴⁷ Rush observed that "In all my intercourse with the blacks, I have found them affectionate and grateful."⁴⁸ The virtually inescapable white supremacist lens through which most whites viewed blacks was noticeably absent in Rush. Writing to Granville Sharp, an active abolitionist in London whom Rush continually solicited financial support from in support of the African church, Rush confidently stated of blacks, "Such is their integrity and quiet deportment that they are universally preferred to white people of similar occupations."⁴⁹ Rush, as early as 1785, in a letter to Richard Price, pointed out that "the slaves who have been emancipated among us are in general more industrious and orderly than the lowest class of white people...we have the pleasure of seeing them improve in religion and morals."⁵⁰ He was fully cognizant, as a proponent of environmentalist thinking, that the choices of

⁴⁷ Jonathan Roberts to Elizabeth Roberts (February 19, 1816), *Jonathan Roberts Papers, Box 7*. HSP.

⁴⁸ BR to John Nicholson (August 12, 1793), Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush, vol. II*, 636.

⁴⁹ BR to Granville Sharp (August 1791), Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush vol. I*, 608.

⁵⁰ BR to Richard Price (October 15, 1785), Butterfield, *Letters vol. I*, 371.

individuals were influenced by their background and social surroundings.⁵¹ Any deficiency on the part of blacks could be directly attributed to this fact; for abolitionists, innate racial inferiority arguments were as absurd as believing that the world was flat. Ostensibly, and superficially, based on the appearance of things, blacks were inferior to whites. But things were not always as they seemed. As Rush would put it, blacks would be the same as whites if only they were nurtured the same. Nature guaranteed the capacity and potentiality for mental and physical equality, but nurture actualized this potentiality.⁵²

Rush's motivation for supporting the religious independence movement of Philadelphia's blacks was manifold. He believed that "men are more influenced in their morals by their equals, than by their superiors" and therefore religious, educational, and moral edification would be more efficacious among blacks themselves than under the supervision and exclusive leadership of whites.⁵³ His faith in a democratic process among blacks, whereby they could choose their own leaders rather than having their leaders chosen for them, necessitated the establishment of an African church. In conjunction with this belief, Rush observed that the "many hundred blacks...who now

⁵¹ Environmentalism, here, is being used in the sense that abolitionists employed the word. That is, rather than being innately inferior, the condition of blacks in America was the direct result of denying them opportunities to educate and improve themselves. In other words, nurture, not nature, determined human potentiality.

⁵² See Rush's *An Address to the Inhabitants*. Also, for more on his religious optimism and environmental philosophy, see Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Abzug coherently analyzes Rush's millennial vision and how this vision played out in his reform efforts of prison reform, abolition of capital punishment, extermination of slavery, female education, humane treatment for the mentally ill, publicly funded universal education, and other forward thinking practices.

⁵³ BR to Granville Sharp, "Extract of a Letter" (London: James Phillips, 1792): 7. Rush also emphasized the "attraction and relationship which are established among the Africans and their descendents, by the sameness of colour, [and] by a nearly equal and general deficiency of education [in addition to the] the line drawn by custom, as well as nature between them and the white people" justified religious separation. This natural distinction between the races, so enigmatic and complex in the mind of this Enlightenment thinker, will be explored later on in this essay.

spen[d] [Sundays] in idleness” would be pulled into the black religious establishment. White objections to the proposal of a black church satisfied Rush “more than ever of the necessity of an African Church.”⁵⁴ Thinking in a vein similar to Allen’s, Rush realized that white racism would persist so long as blacks remained under the control of whites. The republican ideals and habits so crucial for a healthy democratic society meant that close supervision of Philadelphia’s blacks by members of their own race, as well as benefactors such as Rush, would be more conducive to a progressive and civilized American nation. Contrary to most of his contemporaries, Rush envisioned a republic comprised of whites and blacks. Conduct, not the color of one’s skin, should be the determining factor of one’s place and role in America’s destiny.

IV. White-Black Elite Concerns over the Lower Orders: the Threat to the Race Project

With all that was at stake in the Philadelphia experiment, the conduct and behavior of Philadelphia’s blacks was a concern that both Rush and Allen shared. Allen constantly admonished the black community to “fear the living God, and walk in his commandments;” he condemned “Drunkards and swearers, Whoremongers and Sabbath-breakers” and called on blacks to never again attend a “frolic” and forsake going to the “tavern.”⁵⁵ These constant reminders and exhortations stemmed from his belief in original sin and human depravity, but also from his apprehension of the vices and habits that ex-slaves carried with them from their former lives of bondage. Black leaders recognized that habits acquired during slavery, such as “servile fear” and other “irreligious and uncivilized” characteristics that “oppression and bondage trained us up

⁵⁴ Benjamin Rush, *Letters and Thoughts* (August, 1, 1791) HSP. He also wrote to his son that “by building churches, we shall be relieved from the necessity and greater expense of building jails for them.” BR to James Rush, *Rush Papers, Box 11* (October 19, 1820). HSP.

⁵⁵ “Confession of John Joyce” (Philadelphia, 1808): 4-5. LC.

in,” were incompatible with the requisite characteristics of a republican citizen.⁵⁶ This understanding acted as one of the primary catalysts behind the formation of the Free African Society, the first black mutual aid organization in America, and its committee on the Suppression of Vice and Immorality.⁵⁷ “Racial synecdoche,” to borrow Patrick Rael’s terminology, in which the mistakes of a handful of blacks would lead to “opprobrious slander...lavishly bestowed on the whole people,” made it necessary for blacks to remain thrifty, industrious, sober, and respectful.⁵⁸ Their fate, after all, and the fate of black America, rested in the hands of a predominately white male democratic citizenry. Allen and Rush were both fully cognizant that the behavior of blacks was under intense surveillance, and they took it upon themselves to align the conduct of blacks with the republican standards of their time.⁵⁹

Upholding these standards, however, proved extremely difficult over time. Increasing numbers of black immigrants from the southern United States, Haiti, and other areas created a heterogeneous, multicultural black population in Philadelphia that was at odds with Allen and Rush’s vision of a homogeneous, morally universal republic. On the one hand, Rush and Allen had to preserve the reputation and legitimacy of the “Philadelphia experiment.” New black immigrants were undoubtedly unaware of the racial project that Rush and Allen were spearheading and all that was at stake for black

⁵⁶ William Douglass, “Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America” (Philadelphia: 1862): 15, 94. LC.

⁵⁷ Members of the Free African Society were required to pay monthly dues that went to support indigent members of the black community. House inspections were also conducted to ensure that black community members were living sober, frugal, moral, and industrious lives. FAS members were also financially punished for missing too many meetings with the money going towards the society. See William Douglass’ *Annals of the First African Church*.

⁵⁸ PAS, “The Present State and Condition of the Free People of Color of the City of Philadelphia” (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838): 31. LC.

⁵⁹ For more on Rush, Allen and other elite concern over the ‘lower orders’ see Clare A. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

America; the non-conformist behavior of these recent immigrants, which included sexual promiscuity, conviviality, late night dancing, frolicking, and other cultural expressions, reflected poorly upon free blacks who were always considered libidinous, indolent, and unfit for freedom in the white mind.⁶⁰ Philadelphia's Free African Society (FAS), established by Allen and Jones to function as a mutual aid organization and an organization of community oversight, exhorted their fellow blacks time and again:

We beseech you...in much brotherly love, to lay aside all superfluity of naughtiness, especially gaming and feasting; a shameful practice, that we as a people are particularly guilty of. While we are feasting and dancing, many of our complexion are starving under cruel bondage; and it is this practice of ours that enables our enemies to declare that we are not fit for freedom, - and at the same time, this imprudent conduct stops the mouths of our real friends, who would ardently plead our cause.⁶¹

To encourage culturally diverse blacks to perpetuate these cultural forms of expression, expressions which were at odds with a republic that necessitated, as a result of the overthrow of the British monarchy, individual self-control and moral virtue, Philadelphia's black elite would be derelict in their role as leaders of the black community. The health and longevity of the black community depended on the conduct of blacks and Philadelphia's black elite charged blacks to live up to the "utmost circumspection of conduct."⁶² For Allen and Rush to condone the behavior of the 'lower orders' would be equivalent to ensuring the failure of the "Philadelphia experiment." Just as many founding fathers believed the success of the American experiment with democracy hinged on classical republican ideals of civic virtue and individual self-restraint, so too Rush and Allen, as the founding fathers responsible for carrying out the "Philadelphia experiment," knew that black liberation was predicated upon moral

⁶⁰ See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

⁶¹ William Douglass, *Annals*, 31-2.

⁶² PAS records, General Meeting; Minute Book vol. 2, 1800-1824: 101. HSP.

propriety. In a world of universals, cultural and moral relativity would do more harm than good to black America.

As a result, the FAS adopted strict rules of discipline among its members and attempted to regulate and enforce these disciplinary rules. In a letter to William Tilghman, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, the FAS explained the purpose behind its committee for the suppression of vice and immorality “among the people of our own race”:

[We have] for a long time viewed with a painful anxiety, the multiplied evils that have occurred and do daily occur, for the want of such advice and instruction as [we] feel desirous of giving, by visiting some of the more dissipated parts of the city and suburbs, on proper occasions, and using such persuasive measures as may be best calculated to produce reformation of manners among [us].”⁶³

The conflict between the black elite and lower class blacks is manifest in the FAS’s attempt to use “persuasive measures” to change the behavior of seemingly recalcitrant blacks who refused to jettison cultural practices deemed inappropriate by black leaders. Philadelphia’s black leadership invested its time “in visiting and strengthening the members in a virtuous life.”⁶⁴ But where black elites saw their moral standards as what was best for blacks individually and collectively, lower class blacks perceived these standards as burdensome and undesirable. Conflict did not always play out along racial lines; far from being monolithic, cultural resistance and conflict existed within the black community. More than just resisting the moral standards imposed on them by paternalistic whites and the culture at large, many lower class blacks resisted the moral standards imposed on them by members of their own race.

Beyond the cultural conflicts that existed within the black community and the anxiety of the black elite over the outcome of the “Philadelphia experiment,” the

⁶³ William Douglass, *Annals*, 113.

⁶⁴ William Douglass, *Annals*, 41.

republican standards espoused by Allen and Rush stemmed from their belief in moral absolutes. They were men who believed in a morally universal code of behavior, a code which was divinely ordained and sanctioned. As has already been evident, this moral universality came into conflict with the lower orders' desire for cultural expression. Yet it was Allen and Rush's shared understanding of human morality and individual responsibility that informed their thinking about the "Philadelphia experiment." Their antipathy vis-à-vis alcoholic consumption, at least in excess, and sexual and moral unrestraint allowed them to see eye to eye on the proper way to go about ensuring the success of the "Philadelphia experiment." That is, they not only agreed with each other in terms of the end goal of the "Philadelphia experiment," but the means as well. Their shared understandings of morality, in addition to the cultural assertiveness of the lower orders and the threat these groups posed to undermining the "Philadelphia experiment," strengthened the ties between Rush and Allen. In essence, were it not for the perceived threat the lower orders posed to the race project Allen and Rush were overseeing, the project would not have been as important as it was. Were it not for perceived immorality of the lower class, Allen and Rush would not have had to collaborate to the extent and degree that they did. The morality of Philadelphia's blacks was central to the race project, and it was central to the sustained partnership of Allen and Rush.

It is within this context that the genesis and sustained partnership of Rush and Allen not only makes sense; it explains why this partnership existed in the first place. Rush's support for and contribution towards the African church stemmed not only from his desire to debunk racist beliefs in African-American inferiority by showing whites that blacks were just as capable as whites if only they were given the chance to be; he also

saw the need to curb the vice, immorality, and crime prevalent among lower class blacks. He believed “great things are [being done] for the melioration of the condition of the blacks in our city” as a result of black church institution building and would remove the “necessity and expense of having to build jails for them.”⁶⁵ Erection of African churches of all denominations would “collect many hundred Blacks together on Sundays, who now spen[d] that day in Idleness.”⁶⁶ Likewise, Allen recorded in his autobiography that his initial encounter with Philadelphia’s blacks led him to see “the necessity of erecting a place of worship for the colored people.”⁶⁷ He too would express time and again his concern that not enough blacks were attending church, largely as a result of the dearth of African churches. “Habits of idleness and dissipation,” which stemmed from the absence of moral virtues and religiosity, led John Joyce, an African-American man, to murder Sarah Cross.⁶⁸ As a highly publicized and salient trial, the murder of Sarah Cross by a black man and his accomplice “injured” the reputation of the African-American community and confirmed to Allen and Rush, who were both present at the trial, the necessity of reinvigorated moral inculcation.⁶⁹ Normatively speaking, in Rush and Allen’s minds, the church and morality should be at the heart of the nascent free black community.

⁶⁵ Benjamin Rush (October 19, 1810), *Rush Papers Box 11*. HSP.

⁶⁶ Benjamin Rush, *Letters and Thoughts* (August 1, 1791). HSP.

⁶⁷ Richard Allen, *Autobiography*, 24.

⁶⁸ *The Fate of Murderers: A faithful Narrative of the Murder of Mrs. Sarah Cross, with the Trial, Sentence & Confession of John Joyce & Peter Mathias, Who were executed near Philadelphia on Monday 14, 1808* (Philadelphia: 1808) 17.

⁶⁹ *Confession of John Joyce, alias Davis, who was executed on Monday, the 14th of March, 1808, for the Murder of Mrs. Sarah Cross; with an Address to the Public and People of Colour* (Philadelphia 1808): 11.

V. Religion as a Worldview and Spiritual Connection

While both Rush and Allen supported the African church for virtually the same reasons, their religiosity extended beyond the pragmatic. The religious understanding of Rush and Allen allowed them to connect on a level that would have otherwise been unlikely. They constantly employed the same language, referring to each other directly or indirectly as “brethren.” In his address to the “Friends of Him Who Hath No Helper,” Allen lauded Rush and other white benefactors who were “not ashamed to call the most abject of our race brethren, children of one Father, who hath made of one blood all the nations of the earth.”⁷⁰ The transcendental ability of Rush and other white advocates to look past the noticeable difference of skin color and see a human being of equal importance and worth can be attributed to their belief in a single creation. Rush wrote to Jeremy Belknap effusively about his love for “even the name of Africa” and pleaded that white abolitionists would “continue to love and serve [blacks], for they are our brethren not only by creation but by redemption.”⁷¹ Rush’s frequent reference to blacks as his “brethren” no doubt affirmed Allen’s trust in Rush’s partnership and commitment to black uplift. The two saw each other as brothers of the same eternal family, and it was this belief that acted as the glue of their relationship.

Truly, there was no stronger tie between the white and black leaders of Philadelphia, or between Allen and Rush for that matter, than that of religion; it was the bridge that connected them, the language that united them, and the commonality that

⁷⁰ Allen, *Life Experience*, 75.

⁷¹ BR to Jeremy Belknap (August 19, 1788), L.H. Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush vol. I: 1762-1792* (NJ: Princeton, 1951): 483. John Parrish, a well-known Quaker contemporary of Rush, brought attention to the fact that “but few” individuals “are willing to acknowledge [blacks] as brethren, or cordially disposed to espouse their cause.” Rush’s firm belief in a universal family and his commitment to take this premise to its logical conclusion was something that few individuals were willing to do. Rush was unequivocally in the minority. John Parrish, *Remarks on the Slavery of the Black People* (Philadelphia: 1806): as quoted in his preface.

bound them. Those who subscribed to a liberal reading of scripture, such as Rush and Allen, saw a God of liberation and compassion who abhorred the effects of American slavery, a system in which the “separation of the dearest ties in nature, husband from wife, and parents from children” were an everyday occurrence.⁷² Contrary to proslavery arguments that maintained that these evils were unfortunate side effects of a necessary institution, abolitionists like Allen and Rush believed that these evils were at the very core of the institution itself.⁷³ Their religious understanding of Christian charity and universal benevolence informed their attitudes against the fundamentally unchristian underpinnings of American slavery.

Benjamin Rush believed that slavery was antithetical to the spirit of Christianity because Christ commanded believers to not only “love our neighbors as ourselves” but to “love them better than ourselves.”⁷⁴ The systemic violence and torture necessary to sustain the institution of slavery violated this central commandment; no slaveholder treated his slaves better than himself. Citing the same portion of scripture in his address to the white supporters of the black community, Allen summed up what he believed was the essence of the gospel. “A new commandment...I give unto you, that ye love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples.”⁷⁵ The golden rule of scripture required that slave-owners not only treat their slaves with love and humility, as they themselves would want to be treated, but esteem their slaves “better” than

⁷² John Parrish, *Remarks on the Slavery of the Black People* (Philadelphia, 1806): 50. LC.

⁷³ For more on the proslavery and antislavery divergent perspectives on the effects of the institution of slavery see Walter Johnson’s *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁷⁴ BR to Mrs. Rush (September 30, 1793). *Ibid*, 688. Writing within the context of the yellow fever epidemic, Rush explained to his wife, “I did not dare to desert my post (i.e. flee the city and cease taking care of the sick due to the hazards involved) [because] I believed even *fear* for a moment to be an act of disobedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Religious duty was something that Rush took very seriously.

⁷⁵ Richard Allen. *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, 77.

themselves. The avarice, rape, and brutality of American slavery, so inherently a part of the system and necessary for its continued existence, egregiously violated the precepts of Christianity because they precluded slaveholders from living a life of self-sacrifice. The Christianity proclaimed by American slaveholders and the nation at large was a religion altogether different from the Christianity promulgated by Allen and Rush; the former stemmed from eisegesis, a personally biased reading of scripture employed by the majority of Americans who defended slavery as a divinely sanctioned institution; the latter was exegetical, an interpretation in which scriptural verses were placed within their context and the overall spirit of the gospel. According to Rush and Allen, slavery and all of its concomitants were in direct opposition to the teachings and example of their savior.

Yet the most challenging obstacle to Rush and Allen's faith was the transportation of millions of human souls across the Atlantic and their subsequent enslavement in the Americas. The unspeakable horrors endured by slaves—individuals kidnapped from their families for monetary gain, deplorable slave ship conditions, raping, slaughter and perpetual bondage—were so widespread that Allen and Rush could not help but to try and make sense of it all.⁷⁶ The existence of these evils inevitably brought God's justice and plan into question. Many of Philadelphia's black leaders grappled with God's justice through rationalization. Absalom Jones, during a sermon of thanksgiving preached on the abolition of the slave trade on January 1, 1808, attempted to make sense of the historical injustices endured by his people:

It has always been a mystery, why the impartial Father of the human race should have permitted the transportation of so many millions of our fellow creatures to this country, to endure all the miseries of slavery. Perhaps his design was, that a knowledge of the gospel might be acquired by

⁷⁶ For more on the horrors endured by Africans as a result of the transatlantic slave trade and American slavery see Anthony Benezet, *Observations on the Inslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes 2nd ed.* (Germantown: Christopher Sower, 1760). LC.

some of their descendents, in order that they might become qualified to be the messengers of it, to the land of their fathers...⁷⁷

In the end, Jones and many other blacks rested on God's omniscience and overall goodness, reconciling the inscrutable will of providence with scriptural assurances of God's benevolence, faithfulness, and justice.

Rush's wrestling with his faith mirrored that of the black community. In fact, his support of the African church emanated from his hope that it would be the "means of sending the gospel to Africa, as the [A]merican Revolution sent liberty to Europe... Then perhaps the Africans in America may say to those who brought them here as Slaves what Joseph said to his brethren when they condemned themselves for selling him into Egypt."⁷⁸ Touching on this subject in other parts of his correspondence, he asked "when shall the mystery of providence be explained which has permitted so much misery to be inflicted upon these unfortunate people? Is slavery here to be substituted among them [i.e. blacks] for misery hereafter?" At the end of the day, Rush entertained the possibility that the sufferings of the African race were transitory hardships permitted by Providence so that blacks could be introduced to the gospel rather than enduring an eternity of hellfire because of ignorance. Reconciliation of God's omni-benevolence with the evils of slavery rested on teleological appeals for Rush, Allen, and many of the leaders of the free black community of Philadelphia. In a Hegelian way, they tenaciously held on to the concept that God's plan for the world *was* progressive, even though their finite existence rendered this plan inscrutable to their human imaginations. Rush and Allen's experiences may have been altogether different from each others', but their grappling with religious

⁷⁷ Absalom Jones, *A Thanksgiving Sermon Preached January 1, 1808 in St. Thomas's, or the African Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Printed for the use of the Congregation: 1808): 18. LC.

⁷⁸ Benjamin Rush, *Letters and Thoughts* (August 1, 1791). HSP. BR to Jeremy Belknap (August 19, 1788), L.H. Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush vol. I: 1762-1792* (NJ: Princeton, 1951): 482.

questions connected their joint enterprise in a way that their differing life experiences failed to.

VI. A Celebratory Interracial Banquet

While it was easy to get caught up in perplexing theological and teleological inquiries, the incremental successes of Philadelphia's black community were cause for celebration. The fulfillment of black aspirations towards religious and cultural autonomy through the establishment of the first African church was cause for such celebration. The black-led protest against the discriminatory practices of St. George and their fundraising efforts to build a church of their own, in conjunction with the financial, spiritual, and advisory support of Rush and other white sympathizers, served as a paradigm of biracial collaboration for the rest of the nation to imitate. Dinner invitations were sent to Rush and other benefactors to celebrate "the raising of the roof of the African church" in which Rush gave a toast that "African churches everywhere [would] soon succeed to African bondage."⁷⁹ After the whites were served by the blacks, the dinner attendees did a role reversal and "the black people took our seats. Six of the most respectable of the white company waited upon them." During this role reversal, Rush and three other white gentlemen symbolically recognized blacks' equality when they "were requested to set [sic] down with them, which we did, much to the satisfaction of the poor blacks."⁸⁰ The joyous nature of the occasion, with its celebration of black religious and cultural self-determination and independence, caused one important black leader, William Gray, and other blacks present "to shed tears of joy." For Rush, "never did I see people more

⁷⁹ BR to Mrs. Rush (August 22, 1793), *Ibid vol. II*, 639.

⁸⁰ BR to Mrs. Rush (August 22, 1793), *Ibid vol. II*, 639.

happy;”⁸¹ this occasion was one of which he was extremely proud, and a “day to be remembered with pleasure as long as I live.”⁸²

Many scholars have astutely pointed out that role reversals of this kind are symbolic gestures of recognizing people’s worth and humanity, but not their equality. Deciding to not dine with blacks indicates that this may have been the case for some of the whites present. Moreover, blacks’ request for Rush and a few other gentlemen to sit with them more likely than not was a gesture of appreciation and reflected the trust and intimacy these white supporters had gained from the black community as a result of their financial and emotional support. In the case of Benjamin Rush, he exhibited no qualms with acknowledging the equality of blacks by choosing to dine with them, and the dinner invitation and request to sit with blacks reflected his close connection with Allen and Philadelphia’s blacks.⁸³

VII. Microcosmic Interactions: Rush and the Black Community

The contact between Rush and Allen and other leaders of the black community originated in 1791 with black dissidence and institution building, and was made evident through a dinner celebrating the symbolic completion of these efforts, but these formal interactions and get-togethers were only part and parcel of what took place on an

⁸¹ Benjamin Rush, “The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His “Travels Through Life” together with his *Commonplace Book* for 1789-1813” (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948). Rush recounts this event twice, one in a letter to his wife, the other in his commonplace book. There are no discrepancies between the two accounts.

⁸² BR to Mrs. Rush (August 22, 1793, *Ibid vol. II*, 639. To get a better sense of Rush’s character and humanitarian spirit, immediately after the dinner celebration “in order that my other class of friends, the criminals in jail, who overheard or witnessed the raising of the roof of the church, might sympathize a little in the joy of the day, I sent them about one o’clock a large wheelbarrow full of melons” with a note to remind them “that while they are partaking of this agreeable fruit they will remember that BEING who created it still cares for them, and that by this and other acts of kindness conveyed to them by his creatures, he means to lead them to repentance and happiness.” BR to Mrs. Rush (August 22, 1793), *Ibid vol. II*, 640.

⁸³ Richard Newman and other scholars have astutely uncovered the dynamics and underlying meanings behind black-white interactions. For more insight on the dynamics behind black and white celebrations and festivals, see Shane White, “It Was a Proud Day: African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834,” *Journal of American History*, vol. 81, no. 1 (June 1994), pp. 13-50.

everyday basis. In a pre-industrialized city, or what has often been referred to as a “walking city,” in which racial residential segregation had not yet occurred, Philadelphia’s blacks and whites ran into each other daily walking on the street, going to the market, or sitting around on the street corner. To cite one such incident, on April 29, 1800, Rush wrote, “A black woman of the name of Ruth, who once lived with an old friend of mine...called upon me this morning on business while I was at Breakfast. She was desired to sit down in my study. When I came to her, after some conversation she said, the first thing that struck her in my study was, ‘Here is time, place, and opportunity to worship God.’”⁸⁴ This African-American woman felt completely comfortable calling on Rush and conversing with him in his private quarters about spiritual affairs, and Rush reciprocated her affability and sentiments of spiritual praise.

As a “walking city,” the physical proximity of Philadelphian society was even more palpable in the case of Allen and Rush, who only lived a few blocks away from each other. They were neighbors in the narrow sense of the word, and contact between the two, as with all neighbors, could be casual, unexpected or preplanned. Rush noted in his diary on at least two occasions dining at Richard Allen’s house, infrequently attending church at Mother Bethel—Allen’s church—and even attending the funeral of an important black leader who was a close friend of Allen’s. On December 27, 1797, Rush recording dining “this day at Richd. Allen’s with Dr. Coke and seven other [M]ethodist ministers. My son Richard was with me.” On April 20, 1800, he attended “Richard Allen’s church” and “heard Dr. Coke preach,” after which he “drank tea with him at Richd. Allen’s.” These explicit diary entries only touch the surface of a larger reality. Rush was formally involved in the affairs of the black community, but he could also be

⁸⁴ Rush, *Autobiography*, 250.

found conversing with blacks on the street, eating with them, attending church with them, and interacting with them in various capacities. Far from being a distant and emotionally indifferent abolitionist, he was down-to-earth, sincere, and emotionally attached to the African cause. He was one of the most accessible and trustworthy abolitionist allies the black community had.⁸⁵ And he was a close partner of Richard Allen in the abolitionist cause.

VIII. An Impervious Interracial Partnership in the Midst of Suffering and Censure

It was this cross-racial trust that Rush had with Allen and his contemporaries, and they with him, that allowed Rush to summon the black community to one of its most arduous and challenging tasks yet: responding to the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793. This intermittent plague, created by Philadelphia's warm summer climate, standing bodies of water, and relatively primitive sanitation, was a recurring problem in Philadelphia during its early history. But the yellow fever that hit the city in the summer of 1793 was the worst the city had ever seen. The fever originally broke out in a lower-class neighborhood in the month of July, and *ipso facto* "attracted little attention."⁸⁶ After city officials could no longer deny the existence of the disorder and the fever began to spread to other parts of the city, individual evacuations, for those who could afford it, took place "for some weeks [and] almost every hour in the day, carts, wagons, coaches, and chairs, were to be seen transporting families and furniture to the country in every

⁸⁵ For specific diary entries on these explicit interactions, see Rush's *Autobiography: His "Travels Through Life" Together with his Commonplace Book for 1789-1813*, ed. George W. Corner (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948): December 27, 1797, April 20, 1800, June 18, 1792, July 25, 1790, April 29, 1800. See also L.H. Butterfield's *Letters of Benjamin Rush*.

⁸⁶ "A History of Philadelphia from the Time of the First Settlements on the Delaware to the Consolidation of the City and Districts in 1854," vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Thompson Westcott, 1886).

direction.”⁸⁷ Philadelphia became a ghost town, and as affluent Philadelphia citizens and large numbers of physicians abandoned the city, the sick and dying were left behind with hardly anyone left to take care of them.

It was within this context that Rush called on the black community to render their services to their “suffering fellow mortals.”⁸⁸ As Philadelphia’s premier physician, Rush was looked to by the community as a leader during the crisis and was expected to alleviate and remedy the situation; his credibility and outstanding reputation as a physician flooded him with anywhere from forty to eighty patients a day. There was simply too much work to be done with too few people willing to offer their services. This reality, combined with the widely accepted empirical belief that blacks were immune to the disorder, a scientific belief which Rush subscribed to, but that turned out to be false, compelled him to write a letter specifically addressed to Richard Allen, as well as other leaders of the black community, requesting their help.⁸⁹ Rush’s letter somberly called on blacks to not only lend a helping hand, but to lead the way:

My Dear Friends,
It has pleased [G]od to visit the city with a malignant & contagious fever, which infects white people of all ranks, but passes by persons of your color. I have therefore taken the liberty of suggesting to you whether this important exemption which God has granted to you from a dangerous & fatal disorder does not lay you under an obligation to offer your services to attend the sick who are aff[licted] with this malady. Such an act in your society will ~~render you acceptable~~ to be very grateful to the citizens, and I hope pleasing in the light of that god who will see every act of kindness done to creatures whom he calls his brethren, as if done to himself.
From your sincere friend,
B. Rush⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia* 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1793): 26.

⁸⁸ Allen and Jones, *Narrative*, 2.

⁸⁹ Scientific assumptions held by Rush and others that blacks were immune to yellow fever proved to be false. According to Julie Winch, over two hundred blacks lost their lives as a direct result of their service to the white community. Allen and Jones made a point of revealing this reality to show the white community just how heroic their efforts really were.

⁹⁰ BR to Richard Allen, *Mss. Correspondence of Dr. Benjamin Rush*. Yellow Fever, Part IV (vol. 38) (1793).

Divine immunity or “exemption,” civic duty, and religious altruism were the appeals that Rush relied on in his effort to persuade the black community to assist the victims of the yellow fever. The dire circumstances necessitated his summons; those who were wealthy enough had fled to the countryside, “of those who remained, many shut themselves up in their houses, and were afraid to walk the streets,” and the need for nurses to attend to the sick was great.⁹¹ But Rush also saw this crisis as a divinely appointed opportunity for the black community to win the hearts and minds of Philadelphia’s white community. In biblical terms, “no greater love has any man than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends.”⁹² Love in the face of hatred and incessant racism would animate the black community’s response.

Rush’s peculiar editing in his letter to the black community, in which the crossed out “render you acceptable to” appears, can be construed two different ways. On the surface, some might interpret it as a prejudicial comment based on the assumption that blacks must exert themselves in a way that would deem them worthy of white acceptance and affirmation. However, there is reason to believe this is not the case. Consistent with his character, Rush recognized the opportunity blacks had to win the approbation of the white community through their service during a time of crisis; yet, perhaps recognizing the limitations of white benevolence, he was forced to concede that no act of heroism on

⁹¹ Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia 3rd ed.* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1793): 32. To get a truer sense of the hopelessness and apprehension surrounding Philadelphia during this time, anecdotes reported by Mathew Carey will hopefully suffice. As he reported, “Many men of affluent fortunes, who have given daily employment and sustenance to hundreds, have been abandoned to the care of a negro, after their wives, children, friends, clerks, and servants, had fled away, and left them to their fate.” *Ibid*, 34-5. Stories of parents throwing their children out of their homes after discovering their child was infected with yellow fever abound. To quote Carey again, fear of contagion was so heightened that “people shut up their houses” for weeks, churches were “almost deserted, and some wholly closed” and the “streets wore the appearance of gloom and melancholy.” *Ibid*, 26-32. Allen and Jones described the atmosphere as so melancholy and apprehensive that “it was a rare instance to see one neighbor visit another, and even friends when they met in the street were afraid of each other.” Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *Narratives*, 19.

⁹² *The Bible: New International Version* (Chicago: International Bible Society, 1973): John 15:13.

the part of the black community, however great, would ever “render” them “acceptable” to white civil society. Racism was too potent to use such a strong word as “acceptable”; “grateful” was more fitting.

Little did the black community know that censure and blame would be thrust upon them as a result of their assistance during the epidemic. Mathew Carey accused some of the “vilest of the blacks” of “extort[ing] two, three, four, and even five dollars a night” for their services which “would have been well paid by a single dollar.” He also noted that some were caught “plundering the houses of the sick.”⁹³ It is within this context that Allen and Jones published their defense of the actions of the black community and, in the words of Richard Newman, offered “their own story of black heroism to correct the historical record.” They conceded that “extravagant prices were paid” but this could be attributed just as much to supply and demand market forces as irresponsible conduct. The shortage of nurses and plethora of victims meant that individuals naturally factored price into their assistance. Who could blame people in such “low circumstances to accept a voluntary bounteous reward; especially under the loathsomeness of many of the sick.” But neither Jones nor Allen condoned the actions of these individuals and attributed it to their lack of control over the situation and their inability to restrain the avarice of such individuals. What upset them the most was that Mathew Carey’s public account aspersed “blacks *alone*, for having taken advantage of the distressed situation of the people” (emphasis in original). This statement had the effect of not only excluding whites from public condemnation, but even worse, casting

⁹³ Mathew Carey, *A Short Account*, 78.

censure on the black population as a whole.⁹⁴ Allen and Jones' account attempted to show how the majority of blacks rendered services "at the peril of our lives" and far from profiting from the epidemic, blacks incurred significant debt as a result of their assistance. At the end of the day, blacks understood that any admiration they would receive would be ephemeral.

God and a soldier, all men do adore,
In time of war, and not before;
When the war is over, and all things righted,
God is forgotten, and the soldier slighted.⁹⁵

Rush was quick to advocate for the conduct of the black community when he wrote Mathew Carey about his observations of the whole fiasco. He described the blacks as "indefatigable...sacrificing whole nights of sleep without the least compensation."⁹⁶

Allen, Jones, William Grey and other blacks "did their duty to the sick with a degree of

⁹⁴ Allen and Jones remarked "had Mr. Carey said, a number of white and black wretches eagerly seized on the opportunity to extort from the distressed...it might extenuate, in a great degree, the having made mention of the blacks." His failure to do so "will prejudice the minds of the people in general against us...Is it not reasonable to think the person will be abhorred, despised, or perhaps dismissed from employment?" Carey's remarks had the effect of making "us blacker than we are" and forever tainted the racial attitudes of Philadelphia's whites. The Philadelphia experiment was in danger of becoming further unraveled as a result of one man's unqualified statement. (Black, here, is employed by Allen and Jones in the conventional sense of the word, as understood by whites), see Winthrop Jordon, *Black over White*.

⁹⁵ Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *Narrative of the Proceedings*, 6-20. Even in the midst of the calamity, whites continued to harass black who were rendering aid. The *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser* continuously ran this advertisement: "To the Citizens. The persons who are employed to remove the dead, have been frequently interrupted, insulted and threatened, whilst performing their business, by persons who appears to possess no sentiments of humanity, but such as particularly concern themselves...prosecutions will be instituted against all those who shall offend herein." This warning, originally sent Sept. 17, 1793 reappears again and again, and in light of the fact that it first appeared just a few weeks after blacks voluntarily offered their help burying the dead and acting as nurses, there is little doubt that this warning was intended to minimize the harassment blacks faced when attempting to help the white community. Even as whites were suffering and dying, and the only help that was truly alleviating their suffering was the assistance of Philadelphia's blacks, they still had no qualms insulting the African-American community. *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia: Andrew Brown, September 17, 1793). LC. For evidence that Philadelphia's blacks were all that was keeping the community together during this catastrophe, see Benjamin Rush's writings in which, after receiving news that "the Negroes are everywhere submitting to the disorder," he ominously noted that "if the disorder should continue to spread among them, then will the measure of our sufferings be full." BR to Mrs. Rush (September 25, 1793) Butterfield, *Letters vol. 1*, 684. Truly Philadelphia's blacks were the last hope for alleviating the pain and saving the lives of Philadelphia's citizenry.

⁹⁶ BR to Mathew Carey (October 29, 1793) *Letters of Benjamin Rush vol. 1*, 731.

patience and tenderness that did them great credit.”⁹⁷ What enhanced the “merit” of the blacks even more so was the discovery that blacks were not “exempted from the disorder” and yet still served with courage and faithfulness.⁹⁸ He was proud of the activities of the black community during the yellow fever epidemic and threw his reputation behind them.

Rush not only summoned the black community to action during the beginning stages of the epidemic, and came to their defense afterwards, he also worked closely with Richard Allen and his black cohorts during the epidemic. On October 29, Rush recorded that “At 3 o’clock this afternoon I received a visit from Richd. Allen and Absalom Jones.”⁹⁹ He instructed black volunteers on how to nurse the sick and administer purges, and continually consulted with them on the progress of their patients and their overall efforts to restore health to the city. Jones and Allen recalled afterwards that “that good man, Doctor Rush, called us more immediately to attend upon the sick...he told us we could increase our utility, by attending to his instructions...”¹⁰⁰ Acknowledgement of Rush’s leadership during the epidemic caused them to “publicly thank Doctor Benjamin Rush for enabling us to be useful to the sick.”¹⁰¹ They went on to laud Rush, whose “benevolence...we were willing to imitate, who, sick or well, kept his house open day and night, to give what assistance he could in this time of trouble.”¹⁰² Philadelphia’s black leadership portrayed Rush as a paragon of virtue and republicanism, one whose

⁹⁷ BR to Carey (Oct. 29, 1793) vol. 1, 731.

⁹⁸ BR to Carey (Oct. 29, 1793) vol. 1, 731.

⁹⁹ BR to Mrs. Rush (October 29, 1793) vol. 1, 732.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *Narratives*, 3.

¹⁰¹ Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *Narratives*, as quoted in William Douglass’ *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: 1862): 40.

¹⁰² Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, *Narratives*, as quoted in William Douglass’ *Annals of the First African Church, in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: 1862): 40.

exemplary behavior they were willing to “imitate.” This reciprocal feeling of honor and admiration for each others’ activities during the epidemic strengthened the bond that originated in 1791. Whether it was celebration of the opening of America’s first African church or the horror and controversy of the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, Rush, Allen, and the rest of the black community stood by each other; their alliance was unshakeable, impervious to external circumstances.

IV. The Real Benjamin Rush: Reconciling Thought with Action

After the yellow fever passed in the fall of ’93, Philadelphia affairs went back to normal. Rush continued to practice medicine, although his practice of bloodletting during the yellow fever was brought into question by many physicians and tainted his reputation for a brief period. He continued to fulfill his secretarial duties for the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and was eventually elected President of the Society in 1803, a capacity he would hold until his death in 1813. And he continued to cultivate his relationship with the black community. Chronicled and unrecorded meetings undoubtedly took place, micro interactions with black community members abounded, and sustained efforts to improve the conditions of free blacks continued to characterize Rush’s life. He continued to write to domestic and overseas abolitionists in soliciting funds for the African church; corresponded with abolitionist groups and organizations such as his own, the PAS, in his effort to sustain the war against slavery by “instituting...annual or other periodical discourses or orations to be delivered in public on the subject of slavery and the means of its abolition;”¹⁰³ and even donated a tract of land—5, 200 acres in Bedford County—in the hope of allowing blacks, who as “a matter of regret among the friends of the free blacks [were] employed chiefly as servants and

¹⁰³ BR to PAS (January 14, 1795), Butterfield, *Letters vol. II*, 757.

sailors,” to engage in labor more “congenial to their knowledge and former habits.”¹⁰⁴

This proposed settlement, would give blacks the opportunity to fulfill the Jeffersonian dream of virtuous, independent farmers and would further enhance African-American autonomy. Rush stipulated that land should be set aside for the building of a church and school while the rest of the acreage would be divided up among families, with fifty acres being apportioned to each family. Consistent with his previous efforts, Rush continued to fight for increased African-American independence and racial uplift.

Yet, underneath all of these benevolent activities and efforts at black uplift and racial equality resided the enigmatic mind and seemingly hypocritical practices of Benjamin Rush. On the one hand, Rush was fervently involved in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and its sustained effort to elevate blacks on an equal level with whites. Yet, despite the PAS’s explicit mandate that “no person holding a slave shall be admitted a member of this society,” Rush held a slave during his involvement with the PAS.¹⁰⁵ Rush’s motivation for keeping his slave, William Grubber, longer than he originally avowed may have been pecuniary, or it may have been paternal.¹⁰⁶ But in a world where one either followed the principled path of Washington, who freed his slaves upon his death, or the hypocritical path of Jefferson, who trembled over the horrors of divine retribution for slavery and yet failed to manumit his own slaves, Rush’s principled antislavery stance was in jeopardy of being brought into question. This is not to say that Rush was not a vociferous critic of slavery; he was, but being a critic of slavery and fully

¹⁰⁴ BR to PAS (1794), Butterfield, *Letters vol. II*, 754-55.

¹⁰⁵ “The Constitution of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery,” (Philadelphia: Francis Bailey, 1788): 6. As Gary Nash notes in *Forging Freedom*, Rush allegedly promised Grubber freedom by the year 1788, but didn’t free him, for whatever reason, until 1794, eight years longer than Rush conceded in his autobiography. See David Freeman Hawke, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971).

¹⁰⁶ For more on Rush and his slave see David Freeman Hawke.

embracing the implications of antislavery ideology were two different things. In the end, Rush's involvement with the black community and his evolving uncompromising antislavery ideology eventually compelled him to manumit his slave:

being fully satisfied that it is contrary to reason and religion to detain the said slave in bondage beyond such a time as will be a just compensation for my having paid for him the full price of a slave for life, I do hereby declare that the said William shall be free from me and from all persons claiming under me, on the twenty-fifth day of February on the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety four.¹⁰⁷

Clearly present in Rush's manumission papers is the Lockean conflict over individual property rights, a principle at the heart of the American Revolution, and inviolable personal sovereignty rights. Steeped in the philosophy of the American Revolution, and consistent with his gradualist abolitionist stance, Rush probably felt justified in keeping his slave until he received "just compensation" for his purchase. At the same time, he recognized that not only was it immoral of him to hold a slave, but by asserting his right to "just compensation," he was simultaneously robbing his slave of his property rights by denying him the fruit of his labor. This cognitive dissonance and Lockean internal contradiction inhibited Rush and other Enlightenment antislavery thinkers from fully acting on their antislavery convictions.¹⁰⁸ In the end, Benjamin Rush's psyche and personal thinking on the matter is indefinite.

In addition to holding a slave, Rush's racial views, must also be explored; for if one is going to argue that he envisioned a biracial society of any kind, with blacks and whites working, eating, and living together side by side, any subtle form of racism on his

¹⁰⁷ As quoted in David Freeman Hawke, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly* (NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1971): 361.

¹⁰⁸ This conflict between property rights and physical integrity rights, both of which are guaranteed by Lockean natural rights philosophy, manifested itself throughout American history over the slavery problem. Immediatists in the 1830s like William Lloyd Garrison adopted an intransigent position in regards to slavery to avoid the conflict: they refused to compensate owners in exchange for releasing their slaves; to do so would have been to concede that slaves *were* property, rather than full human beings unjustifiably held in bondage. This stance polarized the two tenets of Lockean liberalism with southern slave-owners affirming their property rights and northern immediatists affirming the rights and dignity of slaves.

part brings into question such an interpretation. Rush, as an Enlightenment scientist, was forced to grapple with blacks' skin color, just as many of his predecessors and successors invariably had or would. In late eighteenth century America, few were arguing that the state, condition, and skin color of blacks were natural and good. Quite the opposite was the case. Rush came to his own conclusion on the matter. The physical features of blacks, such as "big lip[s]" and "flat nose[s]," as well as their unnatural skin color derived from a simple disease: leprosy. His basis for making this claim, while empirical and somewhat scientific, was not divorced from or incongruous with his personal sentiments. First off, he believed that exposing the fallacy of "claims of superiority of the whites over the blacks, on account of their color" would be accomplished as a result of this medical explanation.¹⁰⁹ This "scientific" reality would also induce whites to cease "tyranniz[ing] over them" and "entitle them to a double portion of our humanity" and sympathy.¹¹⁰ Lastly, and fitting with his times, this leprous understanding would "teach white people the necessity of keeping up that prejudice against such connections with them, as would tend to inflict posterity with any portion of their disorder."¹¹¹ Rush, clearly talking about matrimonial "connections" or miscegenation schemes, unequivocally expresses his disapprobation of such connections.

Many scholars have argued that Rush's racial theories about the skin color of blacks precluded him from envisioning a biracial society in which whites and blacks could coexist. Robert H. Abzug writes that "few, including Rush, believed that blacks could be made equal and full partners in the new nation." By scientifically classifying

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin Rush, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society vol. 4* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1799): 295. LC.

¹¹⁰ Rush, *Transactions*, 295

¹¹¹ Rush, *Transactions*, 295.

the skin color of blacks as a contagious disease, “Republican America could act in humane and Christian fashion and at the same time isolate blacks as one might isolate others with a serious illness. Indeed, within the notion of their maintaining a largely separate community until cured of their leprosy, he championed free blacks in Philadelphia and kept up his campaign against slavery.”¹¹² Yet this interpretation is incongruous with the demographics of Philadelphia, contradicts Rush’s own involvement with, and actions toward, Allen and the black community as well as his own writings on the matter. Reflecting back on his attendance at the funeral of William Gray’s wife, he optimistically rejoiced in the presence of whites: “The sight was a new one in Philadelphia, for hitherto (a few cases excepted) the [N]egroes alone attended each other’s funerals. By this event it is hoped that the partition wall which divided the Blacks from the Whites will be still further broken down and a way prepared for their union as brethren and members of one great family.”¹¹³ Just as Allen, Jones and other blacks reminded whites that the God of Christianity was no “respector of persons,”¹¹⁴ so too Rush, in his antislavery pamphlet *An Address to the Inhabitants* distained laws “which allow exclusive privilege to men of one color in preference to another.”¹¹⁵ Rush’s continual contact with Philadelphia blacks either violated his own scientific beliefs and placed his own life in danger, or he perceptively recognized that his scientific conclusions would have a salutary effect on the treatment of blacks. In other words, if science is in

¹¹² Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 25.

¹¹³ Benjamin Rush, *Autobiography*, 221. Rush, confirming the demographic dynamic of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Philadelphia, pointed out that “the white attendants were chiefly the neighbours of the deceased.” To speak of racial separation during this time would be anachronistic, in a sense. The very nature of Philadelphian society was interracial.

¹¹⁴ Douglass, *Annals*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America upon Slave-Keeping* 1st ed. (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1773): 28.

fact not divorced from culture and is a belief system that is a reflection of the larger culture, then Rush's own racial theories invariably emanated from his own hope that blacks would one day be seen through the same lens as whites. Just as the creator viewed all of humanity in the same light, and had "made of one blood of all nations of men,"¹¹⁶ so too whites would come to see that "claims of superiority of the whites over the blacks, on account of their color" were erroneous and unfounded.¹¹⁷

In light of these public and private sentiments, as well as the sustained contact that existed between Rush and Philadelphia's black community, Rush's legacy defies historical interpretations that equate his racism with that of Thomas Jefferson's. Rush, like most whites of his day, was racist, but contrary to Thomas Jefferson, he attempted to overcome his racism by cultivating relationships with Allen and other blacks and by abetting the autonomous efforts of Philadelphia's free black community. His rhetoric and actions indicate that far from envisioning a segregated society, like Thomas Jefferson did, he hoped that blacks and whites would work together in fashioning a morally virtuous republic. Unlike Thomas Jefferson, who doubted the mental capacity of blacks and ultimately categorized them as a race devoid of reason, Benjamin Rush believed that any insufficiencies on the part of African-Americans were the direct result of systematized oppression. Mental aptitude was no greater in whites than in blacks; given the same educational opportunities, African-Americans who were supposedly devoid of reason would be just as intelligent as whites. Jefferson's inability to reconcile his belief in a single Creation and the equality of mankind with the presence of what he saw as a

¹¹⁶ Absalom Jones, *A Thanksgiving Sermon Preached January 1, 1808 in St. Thomas's* (Philadelphia: African Episcopal Church, 1808): 20. LC.

¹¹⁷ Benjamin Rush, *Transaction of the American Philosophical Society, held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge, vol. 4* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1799): 295.

degraded, inferior, and animalistic race, differed markedly from Rush. Where Jefferson was reluctant to acknowledge the full humanity of blacks, Rush was quick to embrace it; where Jefferson imagined a distinct creation, one which excluded blacks, Rush adhered to his belief in a single creation. In short, the ambivalences and paradoxes of Jefferson's racial thinking far outweighed those of Rush. And most importantly, unlike Jefferson, who was quick to employ rhetoric about the injustices of American slavery and American race relations but do nothing about it, Benjamin Rush acted on his belief. Faith without works was dead, and Benjamin Rush took this scripture to heart.

Benjamin Rush's ability to act on his faith does not mean he was free from all prejudices. To the contrary, as has already been mentioned, as with most whites, fear of miscegenation was something that was always in the back of his mind. Writing in a vein that would resonate with Thomas Jefferson, Rush wrote to Jefferson that his medical theory on the leprous nature of blacks' skin color would reinforce "the existing prejudices against matrimonial connections with them."¹¹⁸ In his lecture to the American Philosophical Society, he recited rumors of a story in which "A white woman in North Carolina not only acquired a dark color, but several of the features of a [N]egro, by marrying and living with a black husband."¹¹⁹ He also received letters retelling anecdotes similar to his own from individuals who were conversant with his scientific explanations of the Negro's skin color.¹²⁰ As forward of a thinker as he was, interracial sexuality was

¹¹⁸ BR to Thomas Jefferson (February 4, 1797), Butterfield, *Letters vol. 1*, 786. Preceding this comment was Rush's firm belief that his theory, just as important in his mind, would "be in favor of treating [blacks] with humanity and justice."

¹¹⁹ Benjamin Rush, *Transaction of the American Philosophical Society, held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge, vol. 4* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1799): 294.

¹²⁰ One peculiar letter from Moses Jaques detailed his close friend's wife's bad experience upon seeing a visiting Negro. As she entered the room, his "odd appearance so effected her that she became alarmed and left the room in which he was." She continued to express a weird feeling throughout her pregnancy and when the child was born, it had "wooly" hair that resembled that of the Negro visitor. She became very

still anathema to him. It is here where Rush most blatantly exhibits the limitations to his progressive attitude. Unable to fully extricate himself from the culture, interracial sexuality still retained its place as America's most reprehensible social and sexual taboo in Rush's mind. Fitting with his times, Rush was incapable of transmuting his racially egalitarian ideas into full practice. Yet it is precisely within the context of his times that Rush should be judged; for no individual is capable of transcending historical constraint. Although inexcusable and by no means comparable, the paradigm of late eighteenth century America in which the unnaturalness of miscegenation was held up as an axiom parallels modern Western beliefs in the superiority of capitalism and democracy. Rush was inescapably a product of his times, but he was also one who broke away in some respects from the cultural norms and social mores of his day. Trapped between a black and white paradigm, Rush found himself being pulled towards the former, but he was still incapable of removing his foot entirely from the latter.¹²¹

frightened by this but as the child grew up the mother's "apprehension" dissipated when she saw the child's "complexion is fair and beautiful" and "the gray hairs have pretty much disappeared." This frightening experience, in which the mere sight of a Negro could affect the health of a baby, caused Moses to question Rush's leprosy theory. He questioned how the manifestation of a "disease" could gradually and "arbitrarily" disappear. No response by Rush, at least to the knowledge of this author, is known to exist. Moses Jaques to Benjamin Rush (June 5, 1800), *Rush Manuscript Correspondence vol. 8*, 42. HSP.

¹²¹ Rush's biracial vision and abolitionist efforts are not incompatible with his anti-miscegenationist sentiments. First off, as many abolitionists astutely pointed out, interracial copulation was more prevalent among slaveholders than where the institution of slavery did not exist. The presence of mulattos proved this point and showed just how ubiquitous slave rape was among slaveholders. Secondly, the alleged leprosy of blacks, as well as strong social taboos, would deter whites from engaging in sexual relations with blacks—even in a racially integrated community such as Philadelphia—but not necessarily from socially engaging with blacks. It would be absurd to argue that Rush's scientific explanation for the color of blacks' skin was designed to segregate the races. How could he and other whites show "sympathy" and "humanity" to blacks by distancing and disassociating themselves from them? How could they show "benevolence" to blacks or improve their condition by avoiding contact with them? Rush's intimate contact with Philadelphia's blacks disproves that his theory was designed to polarize the races. On the contrary, he hoped that whites would follow his lead as he ventured into the black community, ate dinner with them, sipped tea with them, attended church with them, and held conversations with them.

XI. Conclusion: The Allen-Rush Legacy

Despite Rush's alleged hypocrisy of holding a slave and subscribing to anti-miscegenation, Allen saw Rush as a partner in the crusade to abolish slavery and abet the emerging free black community of Philadelphia. Seeming contradictions abound in every individual's philosophy and behavior, and Richard Allen and other blacks undoubtedly appreciated what Rush did do for the black community, instead of focusing on his limitations and what he did not do. Philadelphia's blacks ultimately knew that Rush, like all whites, was incapable of "acquiring a black heart." His belief in the property rights of slaveholders such as himself, and his derision of interracial sexual relationships, reflect his intellectual conformity with a white racist American culture. But, to employ Stauffer's metaphor, where Rush's head was white, he was in the transformative process of at least attempting to acquire a "black heart."¹²²

As history would tell it, however, Rush and other whites' benevolence could only be stretched so far, and the possibility of a harmonious, biracial society being formed ended before it ever really began. Rush and Allen imagined a republic, or at least a community in Philadelphia, where mutual regard and respect between the races existed and one in which the conduct of one's character, and not the color of his or her skin, determined his or her place in the social order. This religiously inspired vision emanated from their belief in the unity and equality of the human race and was cemented in the biracial alliance formed in 1791 with the building of the first African church. The alliance was sustained despite the vicissitudes of northern life and the growing

¹²² This is not to say that Rush should be placed in the category of John Brown or Gerrit Smith. Their ability to identify with African-Americans surpassed that of Rush. However, Rush was from a different time, was not affected by an economic panic, and was an "insider" rather than a social "outsider" like Brown or Smith. This different context, however, makes Rush's attempted transformation of the heart all the more remarkable.

hostility—witness the Yellow Fever Epidemic and white aspersions against the black community—of white America. The optimism expressed by Rush in 1773 in his belief that slavery was on the path to extinction proved to be an illusion; as one of the greatest ironies in history, the abolition of the slave trade in 1808, which Rush and Allen and other abolitionists worked so hard to accomplish, actually further entrenched the institution of slavery rather than weakening it, like black and white abolitionists thought it would.¹²³

Despite this illusion and the incapability of gradualist abolitionists such as Benjamin Rush and Richard Allen to elevate blacks to social and economic parity with whites, their efforts should not go without notice. Allen and Rush's sustained partnership demonstrates that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century historiography on black and white America has at least in part created a false dichotomy. Although the nature of black-white alliances and the strategies and vision of these alliances differed markedly in the pre-antebellum period in comparison to the antebellum era, the point is that an alliance *was* formed in the post-Revolutionary era. Simplistic black and white narratives are simply inadequate in the case of post-Revolutionary Philadelphia. Moreover, although the emotional fervor and commitment of abolitionists in the 1830s was more radical than the sentiments of abolitionists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Benjamin Rush's intimate contact with Philadelphia's black community debunks the notion that all abolitionists during this period were emotionally distant from African-

¹²³ With the closing down of the slave trade came the rise of paternalistic justifications for slavery; not that paternalism wasn't present before the closing down of the slave trade. Rather, slave-owners recognized that they would be forced to treat their slaves better, began to more enthusiastically encourage families among slaves, and began to see themselves as protectors and benevolent caretakers of their slaves. In short, southern slaveholders began to see slaves as an extension of themselves, as part of their family, and consequently perceived northern abolitionists as meddling in a healthy and reciprocal relationship between master and slave.

Americans. Beyond legal, legislative, or other characteristically traditional efforts by whites to lift African-Americans out of the degraded conditions caused by slavery, Rush went into the black community, had fellowship with the black community, and established personal down-to-earth relationships within the black community. This is not to say that Rush and Allen, or for that matter Rush and other African-Americans, were intimate friends; rather, Allen and Rush were partners, colleagues, and social peers engaged in an effort to try and create an autonomous sphere for black Americans that would enable blacks to demonstrate to whites that given the opportunity, they too could excel and achieve self-sufficiency. The cause of racial uplift that Allen and Rush were committed to, and their conviction of the necessity of creating a moral republic, brought them together and allowed them to collaborate on the level that they did.

As far as the legacy of Rush and Allen is concerned, Rush continued his abolitionist work until his death in 1813, and Allen carried the torch of freedom until his death in 1831. The strategies, tactics, and vision espoused by Allen and Rush would be emulated in some respects by immediatists in the 1830s, radicalized in others, and transformed in still others, but ultimately, the torch of African-American self-determination and freedom would continue to be carried by the African-American community and a minority of impassioned whites. Although the fight for social justice and racial equality is far from over, the efforts and indefatigable commitment of black *and* white abolitionists should inspire future generations of blacks and whites to combat the segregating tendencies of human nature and U.S. domestic policies. The fight against racial injustice must be led by those groups who are suffering most from it, but these groups must also follow the lead of Richard Allen in showing the beneficiaries of

systematized oppression, such as Benjamin Rush, just how prejudiced and complacent they really are. Then and only then can black and white America come together in the fight to rectify the injustices of America's racist past.

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