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The New Haven Negro College and the Meanings of Race in New England, 1776-1870

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The New Haven Negro College  
and the Meanings of Race  
in New England, 1776–1870  

JAMES BREWER STEWART  

IN 1831, a group of black and white abolitionists embarked on a pathbreaking experiment: they would establish an academic institution devoted to educating young African Americans, and, most unprecedented, it would be funded by philanthropists of both races. Modeling their scheme on the manual labor schools already popular in Germany and England, the planners adopted a curriculum designed to help students “cultivate habits of personal industry and obtain a useful mechanical or agricultural occupation, while pursuing classical studies.” Organizers expected to attract talented candidates from all parts of the North, and they focused as well on the British West Indies, whose “respectable” free colored families might be persuaded to choose the school for their sons. For

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Over the years, my steadfast friend and co-author George Price has generously shared with me his invaluable work on the Easton family. Without his collaboration, this article would not have been possible.

“I have been persuaded to abandon my practice of using quotation marks around the terms “black,” “white,” and “race” in most cases. My instinct to use them has something to do with the familiar academic assessment that “race is a social construction,” a “signifier” rather than a fact. More important, however, I wanted to acknowledge the problem of addressing a wide range of belief on the topic, with some people regarding race as a self-evident fact and others, conscious of their “mixed” backgrounds, resisting the dialectic of black vs. white. I hope readers will keep these crucial distinctions in mind as they proceed through the essay.

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their innovative institution, the founders chose a prime location in the city of New Haven, twenty acres close by Yale College, whose presumably benevolent faculty would offer instruction at nominal cost. Supporters as well as detractors soon began referring to the proposed institution as the "Negro College."

The plan for the college was unveiled in Philadelphia on 11 June 1831 at the First Annual Convention of the Free People of Color by three freshly minted white abolitionists: Arthur Tappan, an affluent New York merchant; William Lloyd Garrison, militant editor of a new, Boston-based abolitionist newspaper, the Liberator; and Simeon Jocelyn, a minister who served the African-American parishioners of New Haven's Dixwell Congregational Church. The convention representatives who rose to applaud the idea included wealthy Philadelphia entrepreneur James Forten; Bishop Richard Allen, the free states' most prominent African-American cleric; and Samuel E. Cornish, editor of the nation's first African-American newspaper, Freedom's Journal. Forten, Allen, and Cornish, the North's most visible activists of color, had led their communities with distinction for decades.

The energized delegates adjourned to drum up subscriptions for the Negro College. Never before in the nation's history had racial activists worked together so closely and enthusiastically on a project of such ambitious scope and in an alliance that brought together young and old, black and white. Arthur Tappan pledged an initial gift of one thousand dollars, and, joined by his equally wealthy brother Lewis, promised to match additional gifts up to a total of twenty thousand dollars. To facilitate his firsthand involvement, Tappan bought a house in New Haven just after the convention adjourned. Simeon Jocelyn, a

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proud booster for his city, confidently asserted that “the literary and scientific character of New-Haven renders it a very desirable place for the location of the College.”

Jocelyn’s optimism, however, proved woefully misplaced. In late August 1831, only a week after he praised the municipality, news of Nat Turner’s bloody slave insurrection in Virginia hit the North, just as New Havenites were convening their town meeting to consider the Negro College. In recent years, white New Havenites had grown increasingly distrustful of “vagabond Negroes.” As ever greater numbers of African Americans entered the city, residents accused them of undermining moral order and undercutting the “white” labor market. In the midst of these national and local racial crises, townsmen voted 700 to 4 to condemn the college proposal and, moreover, to resist it “by every legal means.”

Some quickly foreswore legalities and formed themselves into an angry mob. They stoned Arthur Tappan’s house, yelled obscenities at passing “blacks,” and then moved into New Haven’s colored community (“New Liberia,” as detractors liked to call it) for two nights of mayhem. The mob vandalized several black-owned establishments and assaulted the “white” patrons present; when the marauders finally dispersed, several dwellings occupied by African Americans had been damaged. Yale’s officialdom, whom the abolitionists had naively failed to consult before announcing their plans, expressed regret over the rioting but also voiced hostility toward the Negro College. Not a single professor joined Jocelyn and Roger Sherman Baldwin, a New Haven attorney, to argue in its favor. With the sole exception of Ezra Stiles Ely, Connecticut’s Congregational clergy were equally unresponsive. With brutal clarity, white New Havenites delivered their all-but-unanimous opinion that they simply would not tolerate a large number of young colored men, sponsored by militant abolitionists, congregating in their midst. 3

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3A narrative of Yale’s and New Haven’s responses to the Negro College project is found in Warner’s New Haven Negroes, pp. 50–55.
A venture begun so hopefully thus ended in angry defeat. Abolitionists deplored white New Havenites’ failure to overcome their prejudices, and white New Havenites condemned abolitionists’ inability to grasp the practical limits of reform. Despite the short and bleak history of New Haven’s Negro College, the episode offers some telling perspectives on historical questions germane to the history of race in New England. One might wonder, for example, why veteran black leaders James Forten, Richard Allen, and Samuel E. Cornish so eagerly joined forces with the Tappan brothers, William Lloyd Garrison, and Simeon Jocelyn, all inexperienced white idealists. On the other hand, why did the white citizens of New Haven so easily set aside their own compelling social and economic differences to mount a united front against the Negro College? And finally, in what ways did the controversy surrounding the Negro College serve as a critical point of departure as these activists and contending social groups struggled over issues of skin color during the next three decades? By addressing these questions, we can understand more fully just how differently and complexly black and white New Englanders approached the problem of race during the antebellum decades.

The Politics of Race in Post-Revolutionary America

For free black activists like James Forten, the path to the 1831 Convention of the Free People of Color, and thence to New Haven, proceeded directly from the American Revolution. In that earlier struggle, Forten and his associates claimed, “colored” patriot combatants (that is, anyone with dark skin: Indians and people of “mixed blood” as well as African Americans) had secured the right of citizenship for all men, including those of color. Seeking to reconfirm that right, African-American leaders advocated sobriety, thrift, piety, hard work, and education, and they exhorted free people of color to “uplift” themselves to attain high levels of “respectability.”

From the 1790s onward, the ideology of uplift and respectability proved an effective strategy for developing strong communities of color in Northern cities as adherents carefully husbanded resources and invested them for the common good. The handsome brick churches, well-attended schools, active Masonic lodges, and earnest temperance groups arising from these investments served to advance free African Americans’ claims to equality. To live respectably was to elevate oneself to parity with even the most elite whites and to claim the authority to criticize slaveholders, racial bigots, and the lower orders in general. Moreover, insofar as the black community exemplified virtue, it exposed as grossly prejudicial whites’ tendency to implicate all people of color in the behavior of a “degraded” few. Finally, the respectable head of household could proudly assert his manhood by displaying strength of character and protecting his home and family from attacks by the racially prejudiced—a right and a responsibility categorically denied to Southern slaves. To “colored Americans,” “uplift” and “respectability,” which embraced all these meanings, bespoke powerful abolitionist values. It is therefore little wonder that men like Forten and Cornish hailed the prospect of establishing the Negro College in New Haven and scorned proposals by the American Colonization Society that free blacks abandon their claims to citizenship and “return” to their “homeland” halfway around the globe.

Founded in 1816 by prominent white ministers, politicians, and philanthropists from both North and South, the American Colonization Society severely compromised African-American activists’ quest for equality. In New Haven its members set themselves adamantly against the establishment of the Negro College. At the heart of the colonizationists’ project was a conviction that Northern free blacks, considered to be “turbulent” and “degraded,” and Southern slaves, potential runaways and insurrectionists, both threatened to undermine the new nation’s

fragile stability. Securing full voting and civil rights for people of color in the socially segregated and politically discriminatory free states was simply unthinkable given this logic. However, the “benevolent” resettlement of free black volunteers in the West African colony of Liberia held great promise. To leading black activists, on the other hand, the society represented a far-flung conspiracy among powerful white “respectables” to drive black Americans into exile, a charge they persistently leveled throughout the antebellum period.5

In the South, of course, a “free” society had long been grounded in a heavily enforced white supremacy. The racial tensions that emerged in the North during the 1820s, however, had a different origin and so posed new perils for the black struggle to achieve equality by affirming respectability. In Northern cities like New Haven, industrialization forced a rapid transition from artisan work to wage labor, which, in turn, attracted unprecedented numbers of immigrants from the British Isles. When encountering the traumas of acculturation, these newly arrived English and Irish workers saw in the skin color of their black neighbors unwelcome competition in a tightening labor market and, still more important, a mirror of their own diminishing ability to shape their futures as independent men. Fearing personal “enslavement” to the bosses who dictated their wages, immigrant workers joined the native born when claiming themselves to be white, the irreducible hallmark of full citizenship, and then “asserting” their citizenship in acts of aggression against free blacks.6

Most whites attributed the “turbulence” and “degradation” stirred by this mounting social unrest not to increasingly big-


6These developments are explained in depth in David Roediger’s The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (New York: Verso, 1997). For an expansive explanation of the cultural roots of white supremacy and racial identities in New England, see Melish’s Disowning Slavery.
oted immigrant and nativist workers but to the African Americans who were becoming their victims. Imposing a racial tyranny that at every turn met respectable colored Americans' struggles for equality with repression, white mobs attacked urban black communities with increasing impunity and ferocity. The most vicious of these events was the Cincinnati race riot of 1829. Returning to black neighborhoods on three successive nights, armed mobs reduced homes and churches to rubble, left several people dead, and sent more than six hundred African Americans fleeing into exile, some settling permanently in Canada.

As less disastrous incidents disrupted other major cities—Hartford, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York among them—state legislatures across the North opened the franchise to all white males while simultaneously enacting prejudicial laws that all but stripped free people of color of what remained of their citizenship. "Black codes" restricted the civil rights of people of color, and voting requirements blocked their access to the ballot box. Newspapers, barrooms, and theaters suddenly teemed with racist cartoons and slurs, a trend in popular culture that closely mirrored the dominant ideology of the nation's emergent two-party political system as it courted a much expanded white, male electorate. Rousing unprecedented numbers of voters with speeches, parades, and barbecues, the Democratic and Whig parties offered sharply contrasting approaches to any number of fiscal and public policy issues, but when it came to supporting slavery and preaching white supremacy, their differences, for obvious reasons, were never more than superficial. Slaveholders, of course, held positions of great influence in both parties, and the federal Constitution's three-fifths clause gave planters a magnified presence in the House of Representatives. Northern bankers and businesses increasingly invested in slavery, while industrialists founded textile mills throughout New England that turned slave-produced cotton into fabric that clothed millions. By the 1830s, enslaved humans were, second only to land, the nation's largest capital investment. 7

7 The fullest overview of racist violence and discrimination in the early 1800s remains Leon Litwack's North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860 (New York:
light of these circumstances, the white supremacist biases both of political parties and of elite groups throughout the free states are easy to explain. So are white New Havenites' rejection of the proposed Negro College and Northern black activists' enthusiasm for it.

When Simeon Jocelyn, William Lloyd Garrison, and Arthur and Lewis Tappan first pledged themselves to the idea at the 1831 convention, the black delegates who also warmly endorsed it had just survived a decade of aspirations blasted, claims denied, and communities besieged. Yet here, quite suddenly, even providentially, were earnest white philanthropists who denounced colonization, not recommended it, who solicited African Americans' opinions, not sneered at them, who offered interracial collaboration, not mob violence, and who, above all, believed deeply in the efficacy of racial uplift and declared dark-skinned people to be their equals. Viewed in this context, the alliance struck in 1831 between black and white activists on behalf of the New Haven Negro College marked a truly revolutionary turn in the history of race relations in the United States.

What brought these extraordinary white reformers to the Convention of the Free People of Color and thence to New Haven? It was not, as it was for Forten and other black activists, the legacy of the Revolution but instead the power of religious enthusiasm translated into a revolutionary demand for immediate slave emancipation. Inspired by evangelical revivalists' belief that each individual could freely choose to renounce sin, strive for personal holiness, and then, once saved, bring God's truth to the unredeemed, Garrison, Tappan, Jocelyn, and other young enthusiasts discovered in slaveholding the most God-defying sin of all. In what other system, they asked, were the defenseless more brazenly exploited? For those who thought slaveholders benevolent caretakers, let the facts speak for

themselves. In no place was sexual wantonness more rampant than on the plantation, where debauched masters forced themselves on their helpless female slaves. In no place was brutality more thoroughly inflicted than in Southern fields, where masters and overseers freely applied their whips. In no place was impiety more deliberately fostered than in Southern slave quarters, where men, women, and children were denied the ability to read the Bible. The remedy for all these terrible evils was “immediate” emancipation pressed urgently with earnest exhortation on the slumbering consciences of all white Americans, slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike.

Although the nation’s most powerful institutions and elite groups were tightly aligned in support of slavery and Northern political culture was suffused as never before with white bigotry, young white abolitionists nonetheless saw their battle over slavery as divinely guaranteed. And as the drama of emancipation played out toward its inevitable, glorious end, Christian duty compelled them to combat white supremacy in the North (“colorphobia,” they called it) as vigorously as slavery in the South. Such bigotry, they argued, blinded Northerners to the most obvious truth of all—that God had created all of his people to be equal. At the center of this logic of equality, however, was a crucial assumption: that along with the common humanity that all people shared, the Almighty had also divided his children into distinct races, in this particular instance, into black and white. White abolitionists therefore never questioned the very idea of race, their own included. Instead, they devoted themselves, self-perceived whites, to securing equality for an unjustly oppressed and therefore “degraded” race of blacks.⁸

Veteran activists of color such as Samuel E. Cornish and James Forten did not share white abolitionists’ optimism nor their instinct to sort people into races. Long and bitter trials

with racial tyranny confounded expectations of a quick victory and turned racial categorizations into pernicious fictions. Yet black activists felt compelled for a number of reasons to make common cause with Garrison, Tappan, and Jocelyn on behalf of the Negro College. Here, after all, were whites whose condemnations of slavery and colonization expressed everything black leaders had longed to say but could not for fear of being branded as insurrectionists and suppressed. The mysterious death of David Walker in 1831, following the publication of his militant Appeal in 1829, all too convincingly confirmed that fear. In addition, these white reformers shared colored activists' cherished moral values of racial uplift—piety, thrift, sobriety, education, and self-improvement. Most important of all, white abolitionists were eager to contribute their cash as well as their energy and to encourage black participation in all aspects of an ambitious project on behalf of equality. Therefore Forten, Allen, and the rest happily joined Garrison, the Tappan brothers, and Jocelyn in laying plans and raising funds for the New Haven Negro College, the most visionary interracial project yet attempted in the nation's history.

For this reason alone, the brief, unfortunate history of the Negro College should not be understood as a lesson in failed idealism nor as an opportunity lost. Instead, it can be properly regarded as a crucial point of departure. As Louis Masur has argued about so many other events of 1831, the attempt to found the Negro College in New Haven that year had powerful repercussions that spread throughout the antebellum era. As individuals who had first been involved in the Negro College controversy acted out their prejudices, ideals, and convictions in New England's next three decades of struggle over questions of race and social justice, they set the terms for larger, ongoing controversies over the meanings of skin color and the challenges of equality, conflicts that in the North did not resolve neatly into polarities of black and white. The lives of these individuals—some exemplary, some not—have significance for our


understanding of the region's continuing struggles over race and can help set the terms of our ongoing discussions of the meanings of race in this country.

The New Haven Negro College: Narratives of Engagement

The New Haven Rioters

It seems fair to conclude that those who took to the streets in opposition to the Negro College had little cause to regret their actions at the time and even less reason to do so as years went by. Indeed, as we can extrapolate from the findings of historians Paul Gilje and Leonard L. Richards, who have studied nineteenth-century mobs, the 1831 New Haven rioters neither invented white violence against blacks nor did they exceed white norms for lower-class public behavior. Unlike the bloodlust let loose on Cincinnati's black community the year before or New York's three years later, restraint characterized the attack in New Haven, as it did in most Northern race riots of the period. That rampaging whites had not resorted to arson nor killed anyone was, however, small comfort to terrified and demoralized African Americans.

Riots swept across the free states in the 1830s, flared anew after the compromise of 1850, and rose again in the aftermath of John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry. Each cycle of violence reasserted the dominant culture's conviction that, in the "free" states, an overbearing majority of whites upheld two biologically incontestable and sharply exclusive modes of racialized existence, the black self-evidently inferior to the white. Critical foreign visitors such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau, William Abdy, and George Thompson easily glimpsed the troubling lesson to be drawn from these successive waves of violence, writing bitterly that whites in the antebellum North built their democracy by molesting and intimidating their darker-skinned neighbors.11 As will be discussed below, a

certain Hosea Easton also came to just these conclusions. An activist who traced his mixed ancestry to Indian, African, and English origins, Easton saw his life destroyed by people much like the New Haven rioters who treated him as just another "nigger."

White Moderate Leonard Bacon

The demise of the Negro College project left the Reverend Leonard Bacon so profoundly torn over issues of race and social justice that only with the onset of the Civil War was he able to resolve his ambivalence. Precisely the sort of benevolent "Christian gentleman" whom abolitionists expected would give weight to the Negro College proposal, Bacon was a longstanding New Havenite, a Yale stalwart, and a luminary of Connecticut Congregationalism. He publicly deplored slavery and lamented the dreadful treatment of free people of color. In the mid-1820s, Bacon had become active in the Negro Improvement Society, an association of benevolent whites headquarted in Philadelphia. In New Haven, the society took credit for hiring Simeon Jocelyn to pastor the United African Congregational Church as well as for establishing a library, a Sabbath school, a savings bank, a temperance society, and academies for both children and adults in the black community. But as Hugh Davis's fine biography makes clear, Bacon's devotion to colonization compromised his otherwise impressive commitment to racial uplift. As he himself declared in 1828, attempts to "produce a general and thorough amelioration of the character and condition of the free people of color" would inevitably be essentially "fruitless."12

Numerous white abolitionists-in-the-making—Garrison, the Tappans, and Jocelyn among them—had once held views akin to Bacon's. In the early 1830s, however, as a means of sealing their commitment to immediatism, they vociferously attacked

colonization as a sop to conscience that served to strengthen slavery all the more. For any number of personal and ideological reasons, Bacon could not make so radical a transition. By temperament, he was a moderate. Two of his closest friends, Yale College luminaries Benjamin Silliman and Nathaniel Taylor, were dedicated colonizationists. Several pillars of Bacon’s Center Church were colonizationists who cultivated mercantile interests that were entwined with Southern markets. Moreover, in Bacon’s opinion, immediatism was unsupported by Scripture, subversive of denominational unity, and uncharitable to planters of “good conscience,” who deserved compassion and Christian fellowship.

Genuinely disturbed by racial injustice but constrained by both internal and external forces of conservatism, Bacon reacted to the Negro College controversy by condemning both the rioters and the abolitionists. He felt “mortification and sorrow” that New Havenites had “rushed together to blot out this first ray of hope for the blacks,” and he deplored the behavior of the mob. Still, he believed that Garrison and his kind “would smile to see conflagration, rapine and extermination sweeping with tornado-fury over half the land,” and he thought that the college proposal had been rightly rejected. Only “discreet men” like himself—certainly not Garrisonians—were qualified to direct the educations of “their colored brethren” away from the “spirit of wrath and insurrection.” Set in the immediate context of Nat Turner’s uprising, Bacon’s remark suggests that by lumping into one violence-prone race both New England’s free people of color and the Africa-descended slaves of the South, he, like the rioters, sorted the nation into black inferiors and white superiors.

Bacon’s uncomfortable ambivalence over the Negro College question continued to afflict him in subsequent years. During the 1840s, he alternated between reaching out to those he called “good slaveholders,” those he hoped might solve the problem of slavery, and campaigning vigorously to preserve western territories as “free soil.” In the 1850s, however, Bacon finally concluded that the “slave power” was a perilous conspiracy, and he abandoned his search for “good slaveholders.”
Never again did he promote colonization; instead, he advocated resisting the Fugitive Slave Law and putting rifles in the hands of Kansas free soilers. In 1859 he praised John Brown for his raid on Harpers Ferry. By 1862, wartime exigencies and his long-held belief that African Americans could be uplifted persuaded him to support emancipation and to call for political equality between blacks and whites. In 1863 he favored black enlistment, and by 1866 he championed black male suffrage (within Connecticut as well as nationally) and education and civil rights for freedpeople. Bacon’s family may have influenced the evolution of his thought. Two of his children moved south at the end of the war, and for several years they taught freedpeople at the Hampton Institute, a school whose goals were reminiscent of the proposed New Haven Negro College.

Leonard Bacon had long been hampered in his attempts to assist free people of color by his conflicting desire to conserve the social order. Only when sectional crisis and civil war destroyed that order did he finally find himself free to advocate equality between blacks and whites, just as did other moderates who joined the Republican Party out of fear of the “slave power” and who, during the war, found themselves compelled by the same logic of equality. In the absence of people with histories like Bacon’s, the war that brought about emancipation and the peace that ultimately led to black Reconstruction would be difficult to imagine and harder still to account for. So would the overwhelming conviction throughout the North that the destinies of two sharply distinguished races defined the politics of the sectional conflict.

**White Radical William Lloyd Garrison**

At the time of the Negro College controversy, no white person in the North had closer ties to free people of color than William Lloyd Garrison. Free blacks with whom he had lived in Baltimore had schooled him in anticolonizationism, the harsh truths of racial tyranny, and the values of racial uplift. He drew inspiration from religious services in colored churches, and he delighted in speaking before colored audiences. Free blacks welcomed him in turn, inviting him into their homes and domi-
nating the subscription list for his new venture, the *Liberator*. Without their crucial support, the newspaper would have quickly failed, a fact Garrison fully appreciated as he opened the *Liberator*'s pages to writers of color, a practice unprecedented in the history of American journalism. The New Haven debacle, however, had permanently negative consequences for Garrison's close relationship with darker-skinned activists and his direct involvement in their causes. By the end of the 1830s, Garrison had established himself as abolitionism's most creative ideologist, but never again would he collaborate as closely with dark-skinned associates as he had during the Negro College controversy.13

As a prime mover in the Negro College scheme, Garrison threw himself wholeheartedly into fundraising, issuing appeals in the *Liberator* and making numerous personal appearances. When the project collapsed, no one was more deeply shocked and angered than he. Bitterly he observed that "the Christian people of New Haven behave no better than they do in South Carolina." Distressed but undaunted, Garrison next championed the ill-fated cause of Prudence Crandall, whose attempts to open a school for "colored girls" in Canterbury, Connecticut, in 1833 were thwarted by opponents much like those who had blocked the Negro College. At the same time, however, the white abolitionist movement and Garrison's role in it were expanding rapidly. In 1833 the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded. That same year, the British government legislated the abolition of slavery throughout its West Indian colonies. Garrison, who now saw himself as the most prominent representative of a budding national movement, felt charged with the responsibility of introducing American antislavery to British abolitionists, the most powerful and successful crusaders of all.

Garrison lacked resources for overseas travel, and so he embarked on a creative fundraising campaign. In the March 1833 *Liberator*, he announced that he would be visiting England as a

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special agent of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, a regional affiliate of the American Anti-Slavery Society. His goal, he declared, was to raise funds from British abolitionists to support the establishment of a “manual labor school” for “colored” youth, and so he appealed directly to free people of color to support his travel. Promising to revivify the dream that had given rise to the New Haven Negro College proposal, Garrison launched a six-week American city tour that brought him before black audiences. They received him warmly and gave generously, over six hundred dollars in total. Garrison’s reflections on the tour, conveyed in a letter printed in the Liberator, are laced with self-congratulation and paternalism:

The highest interest and the most intense feelings were felt and exhibited by the audience. They wept freely—they clustered around me in throngs, each one eager to receive the pressure of my hand and implore Heaven’s choicest blessings upon my head. You cannot imagine the scene, and my pen is wholly inadequate to describe it. As I stood before them, and reflected that this might be the last time that I should behold them together on earth—the last time that I should be permitted to administer advice and consolation to their minds—the last time I should have the opportunity to pour out my gratitude before them for their numerous manifestations of confidence in my integrity, and appreciation of my humble service in their cause.  

Once in England, Garrison apparently forgot about fundraising and devoted himself to the far more rewarding tasks of ingratiating himself with England’s elite abolitionists and denouncing the American Colonization Society. The role of supplicant, evidently, did not square with Garrison’s understanding of his position as the leader of the American abolitionist movement. There are no records of income solicited during Garrison’s England trip, but there is clear evidence that he overran his budget and was obliged to borrow two hundred dollars for his return passage from the black activist Nathaniel Paul, who was also touring England to raise money for a manual labor school for blacks to be sited in lower Canada. From beginning to end,

14I quote from my Garrison and the Challenge of Emancipation, p. 63.
funds earmarked for the benefit of people of color had been spent instead for the benefit of William Lloyd Garrison’s reputation.¹⁵

To be clear: Garrison was no hypocrite. Neither was his paternalism remotely comparable to the profound bigotry that infected most white Americans. Yet by 1834, the “blackest” white activist in the United States had come to regard himself as a cosmopolitan and global visionary, closer in outlook to aristocratic British abolitionists than to the ordinary people of color who had helped launch his career. In subsequent decades, black leaders less deferential than James Forten or Richard Allen—men like Frederick Douglass, James McCune Smith, and Henry Highland Garnet—openly rebelled against Garrison’s heavy-handedness and moralistic abstractions. As blacks in his home city of Boston shouldered the day-to-day burdens of agitation, Garrison offered supportive publicity and occasional editorials but devoted the vast majority of his attention to the more personally congenial work of proclaiming disunion, condemning church and political leaders, and preaching religious perfectionism. As historian Bruce Dain has demonstrated, the unreflective Garrison believed deeply in the principle of racial equality but never questioned his primary assumption that the world was divided into two distinct races, one clearly in need of the ongoing patronage of the other. For all their other differences, then, Garrison and Bacon shared the view that Southern slaves and Northern free people of color together constituted one unitary “black” race.¹⁶

In 1865, with the Thirteenth Amendment’s dissolution of slavery, Garrison shocked many of his closest colleagues by announcing that their crusade had ended in victory and that

¹⁵Intent on presenting Garrison’s understanding of problems of race as invariably grounded in clear moral insight, Mayer (All on Fire, pp. 127–87) fails to consider Garrison’s misuse of his black supporters’ funds or what that matter might imply about his approach to interracial abolitionism. Garrison’s finances during his trip to England are detailed by John L. Thomas in his The Liberator, William Lloyd Garrison: A Biography (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), pp. 163, 175–76.

abolitionists should dismantle their organizations. Freedpeo-

ples' civil and political rights, he insisted, were not the proper

concerns of abolitionists, a view Douglass, Wendell Phillips,

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and many others considered unhink-
able. Perhaps it is too much to suggest that Garrison's abrupt
departure from abolitionism in 1865, just as the day-to-day
business of empowering freed communities in the South was
beginning in earnest, had its roots three decades earlier in the
aftermath of the Negro College controversy. But perhaps it is
not. In either case, in the long run, the more radical egalitarian
turned out to be not Garrison but his old antagonist Leonard
Bacon, the former colonizationist who supported black Recon-
struction.17

White Benefactor Lewis Tappan

For Lewis Tappan, the New Haven debacle inaugurated an
expansive abolitionist career during which he perpetuated, as
Garrison could not, the promise of the Negro College. Under-
soring the contrasting personalities and circumstances of the
two men, Bertram Wyatt-Brown's superb biography of Tappan
helps us understand their differing commitments. Tappan en-
joyed vast wealth and a secure social position, whereas Garrison
had suffered poverty and for a lifetime battled to be heard.
Tappan, the canny merchant, had ample bureaucratic skills and
excelled at institution building; Garrison, the intransigent ideo-
logue, had difficulty managing even his personal affairs and de-
lighted not in building organizations but in criticizing them.
While Garrison stood on principle, Tappan pursued practical
solutions. Among his abolitionist ventures were the American
Missionary Association, the Liberty Party, and most important
for our purposes, Oneida Institute and Oberlin College. Essen-

17 For the basic works on which I base my generalization, see Eric Foner's Free Soil,
Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War (New
York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Richard H. Sewell's Ballots for Freedom: Anti-
slavery Politics and the Coming of the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press,
1983); and James M. McPherson's The Struggle for Equality: The Abolitionists and the
Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1984).
tial to both institutions was the mission of uplifting young black men, but the manner in which that goal was to be effected paradoxically confirmed both the power of racial tyranny and the promise of interracial collaboration.\footnote{Wyatt-Brown's Lewis Tappan informs this paragraph and the two that follow.}

Founded by and sustained with gifts from Tappan and his brother Arthur, the Oneida Institute and Oberlin College differed significantly from the New Haven venture. Oberlin and Oneida admitted only small numbers of people of color. While the vast majority of students at both institutions were white, however, they were from families predisposed to supporting reform; indeed, Tappan himself sent his sons to Oneida. Such arrangements were certainly less ambitious and less threatening than the all-black student body of the proposed New Haven Negro College. It was also no accident that Oberlin and Oneida were located in isolated rural settings in Ohio and New York, respectively, far from the racial, ethnic, and class struggles of the urbanized North. While the Negro College was to be funded in large part with grassroots contributions generated by an interracial alliance, Oberlin and Oneida were sustained by white philanthropy and by the tuition of those capable of paying it. In short, black education at Oneida and Oberlin relied on elitist funding, escapist locations, and careful restriction of the number of students of color admitted. Even as they turned white altruism and black activism in conservative directions, however, the ventures could not stave off strenuous racist opposition and, in the case of Oneida Institute, ultimately bankruptcy. The institute folded in 1843, having survived for less than a decade.\footnote{For details of the histories of both colleges, see Robert Samuel Fletcher's A History of Oberlin College from the Foundation through the Civil War (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin Press, 1943) and Milton Sernett's Abolition's Axe: Beriah Green, the Oneida Institute and the Black Freedom Struggle (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).}

Despite such disappointments, one must nevertheless concede the wisdom of Lewis Tappan's pragmatism. Oberlin and Oneida did uplift a significant number of African-American graduates, men whose vital leadership energized black abolitionism from 1840 onward. Rather than elevating the race in
general, as those who sponsored the Negro College had hoped to do, Oberlin and Oneida empowered a rising elite, a group of men including John Mercer Langston, John B. Vashon, Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummell, Amos Beman, Jermaine Lougen, and William Howard Day. Tappan had gained a valuable lesson from the failure of the New Haven experiment, and he worked imaginatively to renew its promise by modifying its design and moderating its goals. In so doing he opened pathways to leadership for a new generation of dark-skinned abolitionists who found themselves prepared, as Leonard Bacon was but William Lloyd Garrison was not, to face the extraordinary challenges of emancipation and Reconstruction.

**Black Victim Hosea Easton**

Hosea Easton was among the delegates at the Convention of the Free People of Color who applauded the establishment of a manual labor school in New Haven. Once the project had been approved, he hastened home to Boston to begin raising funds. His obvious enthusiasm arose from deeply engrained experiences and poignant memories that freighted the Negro College project with intense personal meaning. For Easton, the Negro College was destined to revive the "uplifting" vision of his father, James Easton, a pioneer black educator in his own right.20

As an extension of his successful family business, an iron foundry (located just outside Boston in Bridgewater, Massachusetts), James Easton had established a manual labor school for African-American youth, the first such institution of its kind, around 1810. At the Good Samaritan Society—the name James gave to his school—twenty or so students divided their time between academic study and vocational training in smithing, farming, and shoemaking. In his teens at the time, Hosea had studied along with them. Stern moral codes and "rigid econ-

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20My treatment of James and Hosea Easton is drawn from To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 1–47, written by George R. Price and myself, and from Dain’s Hideous Monster of the Mind, which insightfully discusses Hosea Easton’s anti-racial thinking on race without, however, considering the influence of his multiethnic heritage.
omy” were “enforced with surprising assiduity,” Hosea recalled, and “ardent spirits found no place in the establishment.” Despite its success and the “many thousands of dollars” invested by James and his partners, the school collapsed in the late 1820s. To Hosea, his father’s magnificent creation—indeed his father himself—had been destroyed by white racial tyranny.

James Easton died in Boston in 1830, the year before Hosea traveled to Philadelphia and learned of the New Haven Negro College project. His bitter recollections of the demise of his father’s “noble” experiment suggest how the grieving Hosea must have responded to the mob that tore through New Haven’s black community only a year later:

By reason of the repeated surges of the tide of prejudice, the establishment, like a ship in a boisterous hurricane at sea, went beneath the waves, richly laden, well manned, well managed, and all sunk to rise no more. . . . It fell, and with it fell the hearts of several of its undertakers in despair, and their bodies into their graves.  

In 1831, Hosea Easton lamented the defeat of the Negro College both as a defilement of his father’s legacy and an affront to America’s creeds and aspirations, for which his father had fought. Once again, white racial tyranny had betrayed the promise of the American Revolution and stripped free people of color of their citizenship and dignity.

James Easton chose to denominate himself a man of color—as did many other indigenous, mixed, and Africa-descended patriots in Revolutionary New England—when he served in the siege of Dorchester Heights and at the fall of Fort Ticonderoga. Easton’s bloodlines were English, African, and Wampanoag, and that mixed heritage deeply affected his world view and that of his offspring. James and his children were closely associated with the famous mixed-blood shipping entrepreneur Paul Cuf-

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fee; James’s son Caleb married into a prominent white family in Bridgewater; other branches of the Easton family elected to remain attached to Wampanoag and Narragansett communities; and still others, including James and Hosea, preferred the designation “colored,” a term they took to mean multiethnic, not black or African. By every measure of their experience, discrete racial categories of “black,” “red,” and “white” made absolutely no sense to the Eastons. As his subsequent actions made abundantly clear, moreover, James Easton had fought in the American Revolution to equalize opportunities for all men, whatever their color.  

Following the Revolution, James Easton emphatically demonstrated that he despised discrimination and would resist it whenever he encountered it. Once, in 1796, when white parishioners decreed that their colored co-religionists must accept segregation, Easton, his wife, four sons, and two daughters sat in the aisle and refused to move. The impasse continued for several Sundays until church officials revoked the Eastons’ membership. At another church, Easton purchased a family pew in the whites-only section from a sympathetic congregant. When angry church members tarred the pew, the Eastons returned weekly, carrying their own chairs, until once again they were expunged from the church rolls. In all, records indicate at least six such incidents during the early 1800s, and perhaps there were others.

Young Hosea Easton learned early and quite dramatically that it was no easy matter to uphold family honor by defying

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"George Price, “James Easton: Forgotten Crusader for Racial Equality,” in The Human Tradition in American History: The Revolutionary Era, ed. Michael Morrison (New York: Gale Publishing Co., in press). Evidence for James Easton’s antiracist understanding of the term “colored,” though indirect, is strongly confirmed by Hosea’s Treatise, which begins, “I conclude it is a settled point with the wisest of the age that no constitutional difference exists in the children of men, which can be established by hereditary laws. If the proposition be granted, it will follow, that whatever differences exist, are casual or accidental. The variety of color in the human [sic] species, is the result of the same laws which variegate the whole creation. The same species of flower is variegated with innumerable colors, yet the species is the same, possessing the same general qualities, undergoing no intrinsic changes from these accidental causes. So it is with the human species” (Price and Stewart, To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice, p. 67).
racial tyranny, but still it must be done. It likewise became abundantly clear to him that the very classification of dark-skinned people as "black" and light-skinned people as "white" did terrible violence to history, to human dignity, and to his own lived experience. In sharp contrast to other leading figures in the New Haven Negro College debacle—urban rioters, Leonard Bacon, William Lloyd Garrison, and Lewis Tappan—Hosea Easton was a living embodiment of the complications to which the idea of "race" gives rise if simplistic, falsifying polarities are set aside. Given his heritage and circumstances, he had no choice but to reject the very idea that God had divided His people into "races."

In January 1834, Hosea Easton was called to minister to the Talcott Street Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut, a city in which racial tensions ran unusually high. As soon as he arrived, Easton tried to raise funds for a "colored uplift" organization, the Hartford Literary and Religious Institution, but white mobsters attacked one of his parishioners and, after three days of rioting punctuated by gunfire from a black resister, several families were left homeless. From then on, Easton and his congregants lived in terror of their white neighbors. Street-corner harassment was constant, and in three years mobs overran the neighborhood on three occasions. In June 1835, hecklers provoked a black resister to take up arms. Three days of looting and arson ensued, and neither the constables nor the state militia could save black neighborhoods from devastation. English visitor Edward Abdy remarked that never before in all his travels had he encountered such brutality as he witnessed in Hartford:

Throughout the Union there is, perhaps, no city, containing the same amount of population, where blacks meet more contumely and unkindness than in this place. Some of them told me that it was hardly safe to be out on the streets alone at night. . . . To pelt them with

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23See Emancipator, 17 February 1835, and Price and Stewart, To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice, p. 22.
stones and cry out "nigger!, nigger!" as they pass, seems to be the pass-time of the place.  

Then, in 1836, Easton's church burned to the ground. Although the cause of the fire remained unexplained, Easton had no doubt about its origins. Soon afterward, he registered in his writings just how personally devastating the episode had been for him. In 1837, just before he died at age forty-one, he published his angry and deeply pessimistic Treatise on the Intellectual Character and the Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U[nitid] States, a fifty-eight-page pamphlet in which he asserted, in part, that white prejudice was so intractable that people of color would never be able to overcome it; indeed, it had already reduced once highly civilized African peoples to inferiors incapable of helping themselves. While arguing strenuously that differences in skin color were but superficial "accidents," variations found throughout one single human race, Easton also demanded that those who called themselves white take full responsibility for the horrors they had perpetrated and act with deepest Christian charity to redress them.  

In his final thoughts on his lifelong struggles against racial tyranny, Easton could do no more than issue a plea based on the same parable of the Good Samaritan that had once inspired the name of his father's school. Yet it was a plea he knew would be ignored. In the aftermath of the Negro College controversy, his father's example and his multiethnic heritage could not sustain an agonized Hosea Easton.

Colored Vindicators Benjamin Franklin Roberts and William Nell

Benjamin Franklin Roberts, James Easton's grandson, responded very differently to his family's traditions than had his uncle Hosea. Whereas Hosea Easton died believing himself a failure, his nephew ultimately took satisfaction from and pride

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in his struggles against white tyranny. Roberts's lifelong collaborator in black activism, William Nell, shared those feelings, both for himself and his friend. Thanks largely to their leadership, the Massachusetts state legislature outlawed school segregation throughout the commonwealth in 1855. It was a victory over white supremacy of an order neither James nor Hosea Easton could have ever imagined. It was, for Roberts and Nell, moreover, a victory of egalitarian principle over the invidious concept of race itself.26

Benjamin Roberts was nineteen years of age during the New Haven Negro College controversy. In earlier years, he had spent considerable time in his grandfather's manual labor school, which he described in a memoir many years later.27 Though not directly involved in the New Haven controversy, Roberts was certainly familiar with its history when setting out to redeem his family's honor and egalitarian principles by crusading for school desegregation. Like Roberts, Nell was well into young adulthood in 1831, and the black Bostonians who had attempted to support the New Haven venture could be found among his colleagues. While still a young man, Nell had committed himself to the goal of documenting the history of people of "color" (his term) in the United States, and he ultimately gained well-deserved recognition as the nation's first pioneering scholar in that hitherto unexplored field. As Nell understood it, the Massachusetts school rights struggle extended the historic promise of equality for which patriots of color such as James Easton had fought. Indeed, Easton was an exemplary figure for Nell, and he set out to learn as much as he could


about him from grandson Benjamin Roberts, information Nell then recounted extensively in his published writings.

To say that William Nell and Benjamin Roberts had common interests risks understatement. Only a short walk separated their homes in Boston's West End, and during the 1830s and 1840s both men pursued the printer's trade, Roberts by maintaining an independent press and Nell by assisting Garrison in the publication of the *Liberator*. The Roberts and Nell families were also allies in the many uplift projects sponsored by African Americans in 1820s Boston. Nell's parents counted as a close associate the extraordinary black protest pamphleteer David Walker. Benjamin Roberts's mother, Sarah Easton, was James Easton's elder daughter and, like her husband, Robert Roberts, a notable Boston activist. During the 1820s, Sarah and Robert Roberts had, along with her brothers Hosea and Joshua Easton as well as William Nell's father, strenuously opposed the American Colonization Society. All became charter members of the Massachusetts General Colored Association, founded in 1826 to resist colonization and promote African-American advancement. The descendants of James Easton and the family of William Nell also fostered activism within their church, Boston's First Independent (African) Baptist Church, which welcomed white abolitionists like Garrison and donated funds to support his trip to England.28 In short, William Nell and Benjamin Roberts were being drawn together in the 1820s and 1830s by powerful relationships, associations, and traditions rooted in Boston's colored community that, in turn, cultivated in both men a hatred of racial discrimination, resentment for the personal wounds that prejudice had inflicted upon them, and a compelling interest to seize positions of leadership against white bigotry.

In 1838—the year following that in which his mother, Sarah, and his uncle Hosea suddenly died—Benjamin Roberts struck boldly to become the next "James Easton" by announcing that

he would be publishing a new abolitionist newspaper, the Anti-
Slavery Herald, the only U.S. newspaper at that time to be
edited by an African American. Drawing on his family's legacy
of activism, especially the example of his grandfather's manual
labor school, Roberts proposed to offer apprenticeships for
young African Americans in his print shop. Before he could
publish even one issue of the paper, however, the prominent
abolitionist Amos A. Phelps charged Roberts with deception
and self-promotion. Roberts exploded with anger and frustra-
tion in a letter to Phelps as he generalized the conflict beyond
the personal into more fundamental tensions circulating among
blacks and whites within the abolitionist movement.

I am aware that there has been and now is, a combined effort on the
part of certain professed abolitionists to muzzle, exterminate and put
down the efforts of certain colored individuals effecting the welfare of
the colored brethrn [sic]. The truth is respecting myself, my whole
soul is engaged in the cause of humanity, I am for the improvement
among this class of people, mental and physical. The arts and sciences
have never been introduced to any extent among us—therefore they
are of utmost importance. If our anti-slavery men will not subscribe to
the advancement of these principles, but rail out and protest against
them, why we will go heathen. The principle upon which the anti-slav-
ery cause is said to be founded (and boasting are not a few) are the el-
evation of the free colored people here. Now it is altogether useless to
pretend to affect the welfare of blacks in this country, unless the
chains of prejudice are broken. It is of no use [to] say with the mouth
that we are friends of the slave and not try to encourage and assist the
free colored people in raising themselves. Here, sir, is the first effort
of the colored men of this country of this kind, vis, the paper pub-
lished, printed and edited by colored persons in Massachusetts. Shall
this be defeated? But it is contended that the individual [Roberts]
who started the enterprise has not taken it up from principle—he
don't intend what he pretends. Base misrepresentations! False ac-
cusations!—I was not aware that so many hypocrites existed in the anti-
slavery society. According to what I have seen of the conduct of some,
a black man would be as unsafe in their hands as those of Southern
slave holders.29

29Benjamin Franklin Roberts to Amos A. Phelps, 19 June 1838, ms. #2.0499, Anti-
slavery Collection, Boston Public Library; reprinted in The Black Abolitionist Papers,
Roberts continued to pursue his printing business, occasionally publishing books and pamphlets by black activists, but after sending his bitter remonstrance to Phelps, Roberts retreated from visible leadership in the black community for a decade.

Like his friend Benjamin Franklin Roberts, William Nell also suffered bracing humiliations at the hands of white bigots. In 1823, when Nell was thirteen years of age, Boston mayor Harrison Gray Otis announced that the school committee had decided that Nell, two other young black students, and several whites would be receiving that year’s awards for outstanding scholarship. School officials presented the white students with the customary silver medals bearing the likeness of Benjamin Franklin, but they handed Nell and the other black students letters authorizing them to obtain free copies of a biography of Franklin from a local bookstore. The presumption, evidently, was that the young African Americans were ignorant of Franklin’s accomplishments and so would not have fully appreciated the medal. Compounding the affront, the school committee excluded the black scholars from that evening’s recognition dinner in Faneuil Hall. Furious, Nell gained access to the event by passing himself off as one of the black waiters serving the meal. Recognizing Nell, one of the white students proclaimed, “William! You ought to be up here with the other boys!” That evening, Nell recalled many years later, he vowed “that God help me I would do my best to hasten the day when the color of skin would be no barrier to equal school rights.” It was a pledge that placed him squarely in the traditions of the Easton family, as well as those of his own upbringing.30

William Nell took humiliation as a goad to lifelong activism. As he entered his twenties in the mid-1830s, Nell began organizing vigilance committees to aid fugitive slaves and promoting and participating in racially integrated associations designed to foster African-American self-improvement. Battling segregation in Massachusetts at the same time, he led a successful cru-

sade to force the Eastern Railroad to abandon whites-only train cars. Once, when denied access to the dress circle at a performance of *Don Giovanni*, Nell became so enraged that ushers called for police assistance and forcibly ejected him from the opera house. Nell’s rejection of segregation—indeed of the very concept that races were essentially distinct—was uncompromising. Churches serving exclusively black congregations drew his criticism no less than schools that discriminated on behalf of white students. When, in 1848, his friend Benjamin Roberts decided to reenter the fray and bring a desegregation suit against the Boston School Committee, Nell was eager to do all he could to advance the cause.31

Roberts acted on behalf of his five-year-old daughter, Sarah (named after her grandmother Sarah Easton Roberts), who was being forced to walk past five fine, whites-only elementary schools before arriving at the shabby facility reserved for blacks. The history of *Roberts v. Boston School Committee* has been ably recounted elsewhere, and so it suffices here to recall that Roberts’s team of attorneys, the white Charles Sumner and black Robert Morris, saw the case go against them. In finding for the defendants, Justice Lemuel Shaw elucidated justifications for segregation identical to those set out by the United States Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* nearly half a century later. Undeterred, Roberts, Nell, and a host of other leading black and white abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison prominent among them, mobilized a statewide petition campaign directed toward the Massachusetts General Court. In 1855, after five years of arduous canvassing and agitation led more publicly by Nell than by Roberts, the legislature handed the abolitionists a stunning victory by outlawing segregated public education throughout the Commonwealth.32


A traditional reading of Roberts and Nell's success considers them to be the fortunate beneficiaries of circumstances far beyond their control. By the later 1840s, of course, the political culture of Massachusetts had altered significantly in their favor. Prominent political figures like Charles Francis Adams, Charles Allen, John Gorham Palfrey, Henry Wilson, and Charles Sumner voiced, as did Leonard Bacon, increasingly emphatic opposition to slaveholders' demands for unlimited access to western territories and to their runaway slaves. Deeply earnest, such politicians were now insisting that Massachusetts' colored citizens must be protected from "slave-catchers" and from the malevolent influence of slavery and caste oppression. Not radical abolitionists to be sure, men like Charles Sumner were, however, now willing to join Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and other powerful white immediatists in the state in extending their opposition to the "slave power" to include supporting an antisegregation campaign led by Massachusetts' free people of color. In short, one could argue that the impact in Massachusetts of the national political crisis over slavery secured Roberts and Nell's victory.33

Certainly that was the view of those attending the celebratory gathering of black and white abolitionists at the Southac Street Church. More important, though, in everyone's mind was the leadership of William Nell. When master of ceremonies Wendell Phillips presented Nell with a gold watch and offered resolutions of thanks to him, the long, loud applause surely softened the resentments Nell had carried for better than twenty years. Phillips, who had himself written and spoken eloquently against school segregation, proceeded to credit Nell fully for creating

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the interracial coalition that had secured the victory: "We are greatly indebted to this young man we have met to honor; if Nell had not been the nucleus, there would have been no cause; if he had not gone up to the legislature, no one would have gone."34

While the importance of interracial coalition building cannot be denied, Roberts and Nell's campaign would have been doomed from the outset had it not been rooted in New England's rich tradition of colored activism. Imperatives first established in James Easton's time and nurtured over three generations of struggle came as close as they ever would to being realized in the antebellum era in Massachusetts' decision in favor of school desegregation. Building on the limited successes of their forebears, black activists had become quite sophisticated in their approaches. Employing the law and politics in ways not possible in James Easton's day, they had shifted away from earlier attempts to promote incremental uplift through schooling and apprenticeships and adopted methods—attorneys, sustained petition campaigns, and interracial coalition building—that have characterized modern civil rights movements.

Undergirding all their means to achieve justice, from the post-Revolutionary through the antebellum eras, was the colored community's same reflexive unwillingness to defer to white bigotry and to the supposed reality of race. The significance of the Negro College controversy, then, is not confined to the streets of New Haven in 1831, for over the years, it continued to affect the thoughts and actions of those who had been involved as well as those whose lives the participants had touched. The central meaning of the controversy resides in the narratives of racial struggle (some of which have been traced above; others, like Simeon Jocelyn's ongoing service to his New Haven black congregation, have not) that began with the American Revolution and extended, uninterrupted, across the antebellum decades.

34Phillips is quoted and the occasion is described by Wesley in "Integration versus Separation," p. 213.
William Nell understood the matter precisely thus. In addition to battling segregation, he sought to recover American history as a multiethnic striving for racial equality that had its origins in the American Revolution. In 1855, the year that marked his victory for Massachusetts school desegregation, Nell's extraordinary Colored Patriots of the American Revolution, a work surveying all thirteen colonies, also appeared. The intellect whites had once acknowledged only to demean now shone forth in a pathbreaking history, one that has been consulted by historians ever since. Nell's detailed account of the Eastons, the period's most informative source on the family, treats the indigenous peoples like those from whom the Eastons were in part descended and who, like James Easton, had rallied to the patriot cause. Not only did Nell's magisterial study honor Benjamin Roberts and the Easton family, in other words, but it bespoke as well the author's devotion to an antiracist vision of the nation's history.35

Benjamin Roberts also understood the victory against school segregation as an extension of activist traditions he could trace back through his family to the Revolution. In 1870 he wrote an essay on the history of people of color in Massachusetts entitled "Our Progress in the Old Bay State," which appeared in the nationally circulated New Era, a newspaper edited by lifelong abolitionists. Roberts began by celebrating the egalitarian achievements of illustrious "colored patriots"—men like his grandfather, whom he named—who had responded as one people to the cause of independence. Roberts then chronicled the decline into racial tyranny that had defined the commonwealth from the 1820s into the 1850s, which, of course, had touched him personally. "Colorphobia deprived us of our common schools and many other privileges: we were assailed in the streets . . . and it was a dark day for all of us." But finally, thanks to the unremitting efforts of abolitionists, racial tyranny had at last been put to rest. The legislative ban on segregation, he con-

cluded, “was the greatest boon ever bestowed upon our people”:

Our children do not feel as their predecessors felt a thousand times when passing the school house as inferiors and outcasts. To them, new ideas are opened . . . and it will not be many years ere the full results will find our successors in the full possession of positions of honor and emolument and amply competent to cope with the most distinguished citizens of our community. . . . Who among us can refrain from giving vent to highest exultation [sic] these remarkable events?36

Even lacking the benefit of hindsight, one might question Roberts’s optimism. As we know all too well, Boston betrayed its promise and became one of the North’s most segregated, most racially polarized cities. Still, Roberts’s victory was real, and it was a crowning achievement in a long record of activism by New England’s people of color. In this context, and as both Nell and Roberts would have maintained, the abortive 1831 New Haven Negro College project represented not failure but, instead, a moment of crisis and regeneration in an extended, unavoidable struggle to achieve a level of equality that recognized only one race, the human. Of all the conflicting narratives that emerged from the unfortunate collapse of the college proposal, those presented by Nell and Roberts recommend themselves as the most comprehensive, the most instructive, and ultimately the most uplifting as well.


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