

The Struggle for Emancipation and Citizenship, 1783-1827

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During the American Revolution, New Yorkers fervently debated the implications of enslavement in a society founded on the propositions that "All men are created equal" and are endowed with "inalienable rights." In 1777, John Jay, who headed the New York City delegation to the state Provincial Congress, unsuccessfully lobbied for an emancipation act. At the state's first Constitutional Convention, a majority of the delegates voted for a clause guaranteeing gradual emancipation. Gouverneur Morris wrote a statement supported by thirty-one of the thirty-five delegates that declared "Every human being who breathes the air of the state shall enjoy the privileges of a freeman." Despite these lofty pronouncements, the legislature refused to act during the war and ultimately decided only to support manumission for enslaved Africans who had fought for independence against the British. However, in 1785, it did vote to outlaw the slave trade in the state and in 1788, to declare free any enslaved African sold in New York.

After the American Revolution, the abolitionist movement in New York City and State included many prominent leaders of the new nation. The Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves was headed by John Jay and Alexander Hamilton. It purchased the freedom of persons held in bondage and founded the African Free School. Jay, Hamilton and Aaron Burr, helped win nearly three dozen legal cases in defense of the freedom of Black New Yorkers threatened with kidnapping and being sent to the south as slaves. Among the members of the society were former local slave owners and slave traders, including representatives of the Livingston family.

According to the 1790 federal census, about one third of New York County's Black population was free, but only twenty percent in Westchester and less than five percent in Kings County. In 1799, under the leadership of Governor John Jay and Aaron Burr, the state legislature approved a plan for the "gradual emancipation" of the remaining enslaved African population of the state. Black female children born in 1799 or after would automatically become free at the age of 25. Black male children would become free at the age of 28.

With the passage of a gradual emancipation act, the slave system in the state slowly moved towards dissolution. The Albany town council banned the beating of enslaved Africans for violating the night time curfew. New York City officials denied use of city jails to hold slaves. According to the 1810 federal census, only 1,446 men, women, and children in New York County remained enslaved, about 16 percent of the county's African American population. In 1817, the state legislature voted that all enslaved Africans would be freed in 1827. By 1820, almost 85 percent of African Americans in New York City and Kings County were free. On July 4, 1827, New York's African American community and its supporters were finally able to celebrate the state's Emancipation Day. However, emancipation did not mean full citizenship. In 1821, a New York State Constitutional Convention voted to limit the right to vote to African American men who owned at least \$250 in property.

Blacks were also becoming a greater presence in upstate New York, especially along the canal routes. In his autobiography, Austin Steward described being brought as a slave from Virginia to New York. He finally secured his freedom and settled in the Rochester area. Solomon Northup wrote about growing up as a free Black youth in Essex and Washington Counties and working on the Champlain canal system.

This period also saw the emergence of important African American institutions in New York state. In 1796, Black congregants in New York City formed an independent Zion Church. The New York Manumission Society established African Free Schools and they were later supported by the municipal government and the state legislature. Graduates of African Free Schools, including Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummell, and James McCune Smith, became prominent community leaders, especially in the struggle for Black civil rights and for the abolition of slavery in the United States. Seneca Village, in an area that is now part of Central Park in New York City, emerged as a largely Black community. *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper published in the United States, started production in New York City in March 16, 1827.