

MORE THAN FREEDOM

*Fighting for Black Citizenship
in a White Republic,
1829—1889*

STEPHEN KANTROWITZ

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Introduction

As he prepared to watch the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment march through Boston in May 1863, the black activist and historian William Cooper Nell chose his place with care. The intersection of State Street and Devonshire, by the Old State House, was the perfect site from which to cheer the first Civil War regiment recruited from among the free blacks of the North. On that very ground, Nell reminded the readers of the New York *Weekly Anglo-African*, the former slave Crispus Attucks had become the first to fall in the cause of American independence, killed while confronting British soldiers in the Boston Massacre of 1770. But Nell also noted the less noble chapters of local history written on that same spot. In the 1850s, soldiers and policemen had marched fugitive slaves across the massacre site on their way from the Boston courthouse to the wharf, where ships waited to return them to slavery. The passage down State Street of the men of the 54th—many of them born enslaved, all of them until recently excluded not only from military service

but from American citizenship itself—symbolized a renewal of the American Revolution's promise of liberty, and of African Americans' forceful claim to that heritage.¹

The spectacle of black men as armed, disciplined citizens may have been something new under the sun to most of the day's white observers, but it represented the triumph of decades of political and ideological work by thousands of people. Since the 1820s, the nation's small and scattered free black communities had been mobilizing, developing institutions, debating issues, and searching out allies to help weave their yearnings into political victories and a place to belong.² Afro-America's revolutionary hopes for emancipation and citizenship, expressed in countless meetings, conventions, petitions, protests, and publications, revolts large and small, and innumerable small acts of courage and conscience had cast doubt on the common white perspective that free African Americans were a hindrance or a hazard to the nation's peace and prosperity. Moreover, that long campaign had helped bring the war in which these men's service was now required. The result was stirring: a crowd of black and white Bostonians together loudly cheering as black soldiers in U.S. uniforms marched off to win the nation's war and complete the work of emancipation. No wonder William Nell, his entire life devoted to this struggle, indulged in a moment of rapture, imagining "the free, the happy future, as within a seeming hailing distance."³

But the story of African Americans forging a new place for themselves in the nation cannot be compressed into this moment of triumph. Their road to that place of honor in the May sunshine had often seemed like little more than a succession of dead ends, washouts, and tollgates for which they had no coin. Most whites, North and South, regarded African Americans with scorn and suspicion, gleefully or sadly noting their failings and incapacities, and imagining a future for them as slaves, subordinates, or deportees. Fighting those ideas, and the laws and customs that perpetuated them, was an uphill battle for a small minority, along with organiza-

tions and debates came disagreements, some of them profound, that set black Americans against one another. Even in this moment of triumph, as the 54th paraded, Nell sadly noted that the unequal terms on which black soldiers fought—in separate units, under white officers—had sparked a campaign against enlistment.⁴ Nell did not quite admit it, but that campaign had been remarkably effective: most of the men of the 54th were not from Boston, and most eligible Boston men were not in it. Such debates and divides were as consistent a feature of free black life as the desire to forge unity and to heal the wounds left by old disputes.

Those hard histories of white hostility and black division might have been intolerable without a vision of how African Americans could transcend them and become fully vested American citizens, equal not only before the law but also in the hearts and minds of their neighbors. Over decades of struggle, black activists developed a vision of belonging—of their place in the nation—that allowed them to imagine Nell's "free, happy future" even when the status of free black Northerners as Americans was at its most precarious. In 1857, to choose the most bitter example, the Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that African Americans had not been and could not be citizens of the nation. Within a few years Northern states and territories voted to exclude black migrants, and Southern legislatures debated reenslaving their free black residents. A resurgent emigration movement among African Americans depicted African and Caribbean destinations as more promising than the American republic. But even in these dark days, Nell's friend George Downing told a convention of the "Colored Citizens of New England" that the future held something very different: God intended the United States to provide a model for "a great principle, *the fraternal unity of man*." In preparation for that coming age of "universal brotherhood," African Americans must prepare themselves for "confident manly contact" in the wider world, nurturing a "consciousness of equality" and insisting that their white neighbors do the same. In the face of exclusion, segregation, and derision, embattled

“colored citizens” like Nell and Downing envisioned a world in which white Americans not only recognized African Americans’ equal rights but also embraced them as brothers and equals in every arena of life.⁵

Because they hoped for so much, black activists did not consider their battle won with the end of slavery in 1865, nor even with the revolutions of Reconstruction. Instead, they worked to shape and extend these victories. They threw themselves into the remaking of the postemancipation South, pressed for broader and more capacious laws of equal citizenship, and insisted that whites who continued to exclude them by law or custom stood in opposition to the victorious Union and the egalitarian “spirit of the age.” The African American activists of the nineteenth-century North have long been dubbed “black abolitionists,” but that term both understates the dimensions of their efforts prior to the war and neglects their decades of work after emancipation. “Abolition,” essential but insufficient, was too small a box to contain their aspirations. Figures who spent the antebellum and war years building associations and demanding their rights hardly paused, even to celebrate, as they confronted the altered but still vexing challenges of the postwar world.⁶

In the postbellum decades Boston’s black citizens demanded and won both civil rights legislation and seats in the state legislature, even before Reconstruction enabled black Southerners to do so. From a narrow foothold on Beacon Hill, they used numbers and moral force to establish themselves as a group to be reckoned with. They also came to grips with the frailty and the limits of what they had achieved, and in the decades after William Nell’s reverie they constantly confronted the disappointments of citizenship. In Boston and throughout the United States, the people who called themselves “colored citizens” carried on with their fundamental project—the transformation of the American nation into a place where they finally, fully, belonged. That postwar part of the story—both its successes and its failures—is every bit as central to the meanings of emancipation, equality, and citizenship in American life as the struggles of the antebellum era and the victories of the 1860s. Black activists’ experi-

ences in the decades before the war explain a great deal about what they thought and did in the period that followed; the often grim realities of the postwar era help us understand both the dazzling scope of their hopes and triumphs, and the powerful constraints within which they were imagined and enacted. Neither the prewar nor the postwar story can be well understood without the other. This work explores both.⁷

This is the story of a vision of a republic in which African Americans could fully belong, a vision Northern free blacks developed and promoted during the six decades when the expansion, destruction, and aftermath of slavery preoccupied the nation. It begins in the era of David Walker, whose 1829 pamphlet *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* represented the anger, yearning, and solidarity of free black Northerners; it ends sixty years later, as the inheritors of Walker’s legacy passed from the scene. During this era, no group focused more sharply on shaping events than those blacks who were free before the war. Through persistent efforts, they sought to write themselves into the national narratives of democracy and fraternity. They wielded the weapons of petition, protest, and insurgency; forged associations to amplify their scattered voices; denounced white Americans for betraying their own stated principles; and banded together to take part in the rituals and celebrations of political and associational life. Throughout a critical phase of the nation’s history they waged an unceasing political campaign to establish African Americans as citizens, and to give that word a fullness of meaning. Their campaign began long before reliable white allies were anywhere in evidence, and it lasted long after the guns of the Civil War had fallen silent.

To call oneself a “colored citizen,” as David Walker’s admirers began to do during the 1830s, was to claim a role in at least two simultaneous efforts. On the one hand, African American activists created networks and institutions to bind their scattered communities together, investing themselves in projects as various as newspapers, Protestant denominations, and Masonic lodges.⁸ Excluded from public life in many of its forms, they created what some scholars have dubbed a “black counter-public,” in

which they looked to one another for support and affirmation.⁹ They practiced citizenship as a matter of survival. But although what they built was for many purposes a world apart, it did not represent a full-scale or principled withdrawal from the wider world. Even if they had wished to forge such an enclave, they could not create walls that slavery and prejudice were bound to respect.

Rather, most of the leading voices in that black world of speech and action sought a rapprochement of hearts and minds with white Americans. They understood that a future in the United States required them to establish their place among their white countrymen. "Citizenship" meant being legally and politically vested, but it also meant something more: bonds of trust and even love across the color line. It meant knowing and being known; it meant a warm welcome to the full duties, rights, privileges, and pleasures of American life, whether understood in George Downing's grand language of "universal brotherhood" or in William Nell's disarmingly candid vision of "the free, the happy future." It meant a citizenship of the heart.¹⁰

That they sought a sense of belonging in no way meant that they relied on moral and emotional appeals. Far from it. As inheritors of the ideological legacy of the American Revolution, they believed that freedom belonged only to those willing to seize it. Even as they described themselves as law abiding and "respectable," they issued strident and even violent challenges to proslavery and inegalitarian laws. They were a people militant, and often armed, long before the United States government authorized them to march in its ranks. Citizenship, they understood, was something one demonstrated to oneself and to others. It had to be asserted. It had to be won.¹¹

This book explores that expansive vision of citizenship through the struggles of Boston's black leadership to give that vision life. It focuses in particular on a group of men and women who came of age in the generation before the Civil War, and who, over careers lasting as much as fifty years, worked for inclusion, equality, recognition, and the end of the

MHS—Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston
 MSHU—Moorland-Spingarn Historical Collection, Howard University, Washington, DC
 NASS—*National Anti-Slavery Standard*
 NEAS—New England Anti-Slavery Society
 NEQ—*New England Quarterly*
 NGL—National Grand Lodge
 OHS—Ohio Historical Society
 PMHB—*Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*
 SHU—Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
 WAA—*Weekly Anglo-African* (New York, 1859-1865)
 WCN—Dorothy Porter Wesley and Constance Porter Uzelac, eds., *William Cooper Nell, Nineteenth-Century African American Abolitionist, Historian, Integrationist: Selected Writings, 1832-1874* (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 2002)
 WMQ—*The William and Mary Quarterly*

INTRODUCTION

1. This vision of Crispus Attucks figures in scholarly analyses including: Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *The Roots of African American Identity* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997); John Ernest, *Liberation Hystoriography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Stephen H. Browne, "Remembering Crispus Attucks: Race, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Commemoration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999), 169-87; Mitch Kachun, "From Foughten Founder to Indispensable Icon: Crispus Attucks, Black Citizenship, and Collective Memory, 1770-1865," *Journal of the Early Republic* 29:2 (Summer 2009), 249-86; Stephen Kanrowitz, "A Place for 'Colored Patriots': Crispus Attucks Among the Abolitionists, 1842-1863," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 11 (2009), 97-117; Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. Important points of entry to this literature include: Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and John Ernest, *A Nation Within a Nation: Organizing African-American Communities Before the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011).
3. "Departure of the Mass. 54th (Colored) Regiment," *WAA*, June 13, 1863, p. 2, c. 3-5.
4. Neither Nell nor the men of the 54th yet knew that black soldiers would be paid the inferior wages of military laborers, instead of the promised regular army wage; see ch. 7, below.
5. "New England Colored Citizens' Convention," *Liberator*, August 19, 1859, p. 132, c. 3.
6. "Black abolitionist," initially a nineteenth-century term of opprobrium (similar to "Black Republican"), emerged as a historian's description in the mid-twentieth century, notably in John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1947). It defined Benjamin Quarles's outstanding synthesis, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), which was followed by numerous works including Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks' Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974). Quarles noted many essential dimensions of antebellum black activism, including its universalist spirit, its critical brand of American nationalism, and the complicated dual role—as activists and as symbols—played by these men and women (*ibid.*, viii). In the half century since this landmark work, a team of scholars has produced an extraordinary compilation of primary documents, with extensive and deeply researched explanatory notes, on the abolitionist

Notes

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT AND NOTES

- AAS—American Anti-Slavery Society
 ACS—American Colonization Society
 AHR—*The American Historical Review*
 BAA—The Black Abolitionist Archive, University of Detroit Mercy (http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/baa/)
 BAP—C. Peter Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985-1992)
 BAPM—*Black Abolitionist Papers* Microfilm Series, 17 reels (Sanford, NC, 1981)
 BCA—City of Boston Archives, Boston
 BPL—Special Collections, Boston Public Library
 BVC—Boston Vigilance Committee
 CMA—Commonwealth of Massachusetts Archives, Boston
 CPAR—William Cooper Nell, *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855; reprint, Salem, NH: Ayer, 1986)
 CWSS—Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System (www.itd.nps.gov/cwss)
 FDP—*Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, NY, 1851-1860)
 HHU—Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
 JAH—*The Journal of American History*
 JNH—*The Journal of Negro History*
 JSH—*The Journal of Southern History*
 L&C—Vincent Yardley Bowditch, *Life and Correspondence of Henry Ingersoll Bowditch*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902)
 LC—Library of Congress
 LJ&NS—*Latimer Journal and North Star* (Boston, 1842-1843)

activities of African Americans: C. Peter Ripley, et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985–1992), and the larger associated microfilm set, *Black Abolitionist Papers* (17 reels; the printed guide is George E. Carter and C. Peter Ripley, eds., *Black Abolitionist Papers, 1830–1865: A Guide to the Microfilm Edition*, 1981), now also a full-text searchable electronic resource (<http://bap.chadwyck.com>). These editors, as well as many other scholars cited in this work, recognize the breadth and complexity of black Northern activists' work; for an overview, see Manisha Sinha, "Coming of Age: The Historiography of Black Abolitionism," in Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York: New Press, 2006). Despite the sophistication of these works, the chronological boundary set by the framework limits their analyses. While abolitionism (including agitation for the end of Southern slavery and the enactment of antislavery laws, actions in defense of fugitives, and a host of literary and partisan activities) preoccupied free black activists until the mid-1860s, it was never their only struggle, and few shared the view of many white antislavery activists that the end of slavery signaled their final victory. This study argues that a broader definition, including but not limited to antislavery, and a longer timescale, extending well into the late nineteenth century, together offer a more penetrating approach to the range of black Northern activists' aspirations, achievements, and challenges, both before and after Southern slave emancipation. For a legal-constitutional approach to the African American experience in this era that meets some of these criteria, see Donald Nicman, "From Slaves to Citizens: African Americans, Rights Consciousness, and Reconstruction," *Cardozo Law Review* 17 (1995–1996), 2115.

7. Most studies of nineteenth-century Northern black communities either begin or end around the Civil War. For a recent and welcome exception to the rule, see Catla L. Peterson, *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Important local studies for the early period include: Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, revised edition (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1999); and Nikki M. Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802–1868* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005). The literature on the postbellum era, some of which briefly considers prewar antecedents, includes: David A. Gerber, *Black Ohio and the Color Line, 1860–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Elizabeth Halkin Pleck, *Black Migration and Poverty: Boston, 1865–1900* (New York: Academic Press, 1979); David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); and Roger Lane, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). As these titles suggest, the postbellum literature is often as focused on explaining twentieth-century dynamics as the antebellum literature is on charting a path to the Civil War. For the postbellum careers of abolitionists, black and white, see James McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), and McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975). For a recent overview of black activism in the postbellum North, see Hugh Davis, *"We Will Be Satisfied with Nothing Less": The African American Struggle for Equal Rights in the North during Reconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).
8. See esp. Ernest, *Nation Within a Nation*.
9. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), 67–68. Works probing the meaning of "counterpublic" for African American history include: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," *WMQ* 62 (Janu-

ary 2005), 67–92; and Stephen Kantrowitz, "Intended for the Better Government of Man: The Political History of African American Freemasonry in the Era of Emancipation," *JAH* (March 2010), 1001–26. Richard Newman has offered a parallel formulation, describing various forms of voting within early-nineteenth-century black Northern congregations as "shadow politics," in Newman, "Faith in the Ballot: Black Shadow Politics in the Antebellum North," *Commonplace* 9:1 (October 2008), accessed at www.common-place.org/vol-09/no-01/newman/.

10. The language of "hearts" as an antidote to racial hostility, exclusion, and hierarchy is a theme of John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
 11. François Furstenberg, "Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse," *JAH* 89:4 (March 2003). This point is developed extensively in chs. 5–7, below.
 12. Boston is not the only city in Massachusetts whose "colored citizens" bear close investigation; see Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).
 13. Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 122–25. Thomas Morris, *Free Men All: The Personal Liberty Laws of the North* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 1–22.
- CHAPTER 1: A PLACE FOR "COLORED CITIZENS"
1. Scholars from Howard Bell in the 1950s to Peter Hinks in the 1990s have presented the 1820s and early 1830s as a turning point in black organizational life. Bell, "Free Negroes of the North, 1830–1835: A Study in National Cooperation," *JNH* 26:4 (Autumn 1957), 447–55; Peter P. Hinks, "To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren": David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance (University Park: Penn State Press, 1997), 92. See also Eddie Claude, *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
 2. For an overview of this history, see Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) and the same author's enduring classic on the Southern free black experience: Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (1974; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).
 3. See the provocative analogy of Northern free black communities to Southern maroon colonies in Steven Hahn, "Slaves at Large," in Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
 4. See Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: Norton, 1986).
 5. Dorothy Porter Wesley and Constance Porter Uzelac, eds., *William Cooper Nell: Nineteenth-Century African American Abolitionist, Historian, Integrationist: Selected Writings, 1832–1874* (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 2002), 6–7.
 6. Howell Meadoes Henry, *The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina* (Emory, VA, 1914), 186–87.
 7. Data from George E. Levesque, *Black Boston: African American Life and Culture in Urban America, 1750–1860* (New York: Garland, 1994), Table 1-14. The portrait of Boston here draws on: Donald M. Jacobs, "A History of the Boston Negro from the Revolution to the Civil War" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1968); Levesque, *Black Boston*; Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*; and Leonard Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800–1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
 8. James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1993), 26–28; Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 5–7.