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Black Citizenship and Military Self-Presentation in Antebellum

Massachusetts

By

Hal Goldman

Every July 14, beginning in 1808, Boston's blacks met on the Common to celebrate the anniversary of the ending of the Atlantic slave trade. A corresponding custom arose each year as white men and boys gathered to taunt the celebrants and mock their ceremonies. The hostility between the two groups grew, until one year the blacks, "greatly incensed by this mockery of their festival, and this infringement of their liberty" decided to arm themselves against the whites. The confrontation ended in a riot during which the whites drove the blacks from the Common and chased them down Belknap Street, "clubs and brickbats flying in all directions." On the hearing the ruckus, "Colonel" Middleton, the ancient member of a colored company in the Revolutionary War, came out of his house brandishing a musket and threatening to kill any white man who came within its range. Though greatly out-numbered by the white rioters, Middleton rallied the blacks in an effort to get them to stand and fight. Just then, his white neighbor, David Convers Francis, father of reformer Lydia Maria Child, came out of his house along with a friend, Captain Winslow Lewis. While Lewis tried to quell the commotion by talking with the white ringleaders, Francis approached the musket-wielding black man who had continued to repeat his death threats. Finally, the old man allowed his white neighbor to take the musket from his hands, explaining, "I will do it for you for you have always been kind to me." With comforting words,

Francis soothed the now weeping black man and the episode came to an end.¹

Massachusetts was perhaps the best place in the nation for a black man to live during the first half of the nineteenth century. The 1780 Massachusetts Constitution abolished slavery in the Commonwealth. Blacks could publicly assemble, they could celebrate their culture, keep arms, and some had served in the nation's wars. Nevertheless, the above episode points out the ambiguity of the black experience, for if black men could participate in these rituals of citizenship, whites could also denigrate and limit that participation. Whites could mock their celebrations, run them off the Common and limit their ability to protect themselves for mob violence. Even many sympathetic whites seemed more comfortable with blacks in positions of subordination rather than full social and political equality.

Lydia Maria Child's account of the Belknap Street riot thus serves as a parable for the ambiguity of black life in Massachusetts. Boston's blacks publicly gathered to celebrate the abolition of the slave trade, an occasion they treated as an expression of their "liberty." Yet, Child writes that their right to assemble was actually a privilege which "our negroes" were "allowed." The blacks were incensed enough at white disrespect for their celebration that they armed themselves for their protection. Outnumbered, they must retreat until "Colonel" Middleton, armed with a musket and clothed with military "authority," rallied them. At this moment, Captain Lewis and David Francis intervened. Lewis, a white man, tried to stop the whites, while David Francis, another white man, disarmed a weeping Middleton. These two men, in effect, took the blacks under their protection, rather than letting them defend themselves. Beyond this, Child's account is also filled with patronizing and condescending remarks. Middleton was not, in Child's words, "a very good specimen of the colored man," yet, her father "had a natural compassion for the ignorant and oppressed" and was kind to his "passionate, intemperate, and profane" neighbor. As a result, according

¹ Lydia Maria Child recounts this episode from her youth in William Cooper Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1855), 24-27. The author has been unable to verify the date of the story, but evidence discussed below indicates that such confrontations did upset Abolition Day ceremonies.

to Child, David Francis always showed the “Colonel” a tongue-in-cheek deference to his supposed military rank.²

Thus, for all the rights they enjoyed, even the bravest and most accomplished of Massachusetts’s blacks were often forced to confront the fact that they continued to be dependent on white patronage and protection.³ Though black men had technical rights to citizenship, they were constantly reminded in both formal and informal ways that they were not real citizens and would never be recognized as such.⁴ Under these circumstances, their putative rights were often a source of frustration rather than pride. Historian George Levesque writes that “this ‘two-ness -- an American, a Negro,’ had the oxymoronic effect of buoying, depressing, bewildering and angering Massachusetts blacks.⁵

As we have seen, when blacks sought to assert such rights as they did have, particularly those involving what historian Susan Davis calls “ritual self-presentation” – they drew an intensely hostile reaction from some whites. The reason for this hostility was that black men were gaining the trappings of citizenship at precisely the same time that older hierarchical notions of male social and political organization were breaking down. As David Roediger points out, in the earlier colonial

² Nell, 24-25. While there is no way to verify the details of Child’s account, it is valuable nonetheless for what it says about how even a sympathetic white viewed black military pretensions and black attempts at self-defense. Child’s three descriptive terms for Middleton were often applied to all blacks as immutable characteristics.

³ Dr. John Rock lamented that for all his freedoms, the black in Boston was never treated as a real citizen. George A. Levesque, *Black Boston: African American Life and Culture in Urban America, 1750-1860* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 112, 240. Rock, a lawyer, doctor, and dentist, could not obtain a passport from the federal government since it was “a certificate of citizenship” and thus denied to blacks. Rock needed it to travel to Paris for medical treatment. In the end, he had to obtain one from the state of Massachusetts. George A. Levesque, “Boston’s Black Brahmin: Dr. John S. Rock,” *Civil War History*, 26 (1980): 331.

⁴ Blacks were excluded from places of public amusement, hotels and orphan asylums, and segregated in schools, public transportation and housing. Foreigners often enjoyed rights denied to blacks. They were abused and assaulted by whites of all classes, including Irish immigrants who were themselves a despised class. Lois E. Horton, “Community Organization and Social Activism: Black Boston and the Antislavery Movement,” *Sociological Inquiry*, 55 (1985): 185, 189; Levesque, *Black Boston*, 130.

⁵ Levesque, *Black Boston*, 231-232.

system freedom was only “imperfectly linked to whiteness amidst patterns of deference varied forms of economic vassalage among whites, colonial status and limits on suffrage.” Jacksonian America traded the older complex system based on economic and social status for one in which all white men could vote. As a result, “the correspondence between who was white and who was a freeman ha[d] become a far closer one.”⁶ Under such circumstances, black pretensions to political equality were particularly threatening to the new order. The ambiguity of black status in Massachusetts; as opposed to other places where it was unquestionably degraded and inferior, made blacks more eager to win recognition as equals, and some whites determined to resist these attempts.⁷

Take for example the celebration marking the end of the Atlantic Slave trade that was the cause of the Belknap Street riot. Held annually on July 14, these events consisted of public speeches, parades, banquets, and church services. Such occasions were an opportunity for Boston’s blacks to assemble publicly, make their presence known, and celebrate their culture. In short, they came together as Lydia Maria Child wrote, to assert their “liberty.” As we will see, both blacks and whites understood the symbolic importance of these assertions of public right. As regularly as blacks came together, some whites regularly conspired to disrupt these celebrations. Beginning in 1815, some whites communicated their mockery to a much larger audience through anonymous broadside campaigns satirizing the Abolition Day celebrations and critiquing what the authors considered to be black pretensions.⁸

⁶ David R. Roediger, *Wages and Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 56.

⁷ For example, the greater freedom of blacks in Massachusetts appears inversely proportional to their ability to rise economically. As the century progressed the number of black artisans declined in Boston to levels far below those in other, less liberal regions, including the South. Peter P. Hinks, “Frequently Plunged into Slavery: Free Blacks in Antebellum Boston,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 20 (Winter, 1992): 23; see also George Levesque’s discussion of the paradox of simultaneous political progress and economic decline among Boston’s blacks. Levesque, *Black Boston*, 111-120.

⁸ Phillip Lapsanky, “Graphic Discord: Abolitionist and Antiabolitionist Images,” in Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 216.

A study of these broadsides indicates that the propagandists were quite consistent in their focus from year to year. According to them, black celebrations were characterized by drunkenness and a pathetic attempt to copy the white etiquette of military parades and banqueting. The broadsides caricatured black leaders as pretentious boobs, ill-educated, drunken, and obsessed with the opposite sex. They spoke the Pidgin English of the southern slave, not the polished oratory likely to be heard from black speakers of the real celebration.⁹

The rhetoric and organization of the broadsides shows a keen knowledge of the contents of the real Abolition Day celebrations, as well as an awareness of the issues and concerns of the participants. For example, the broadsides mock the meticulous organization of the events. An 1830 broadside begins with a “general order” addressed to the “shief Marshall ob dis bressed day” with instructions to “gubern youself cordingly.” It then outlines the strict requirements of the parade including the order of the procession beginning with “De sages an onerable member ob de Bobalition Societee.” Next come the invited guests “mung dem de onerable Smico Smashpipes from de lland ob Moonshine.” The list proceeds down the line to the last members, “de sweep wid dare usual bage ob oner.”

The broadside moves on to the toasts, which include a poem. One of its stanzas reads: “Cum pas round de bole, de ful floing bol/what is de coloured man so fraid ob?” The poem notes how “our brudders as de souf ... would stare (hic) to see (hic) us drink such whiskey.” It is clear that these celebrations were a time to talk about abolition as well as to note the distinctions between Massachusetts blacks and their fortunate brothers and sisters in the “souf.” The reference to Garrison is interesting for two reasons. First, it shows the author’s familiarity with the nascent abolitionist movement. Garrison was unknown to Boston’s white community (including its politicians) until as late as October 1831.

July 14 is also Bastille Day, though the author has found no reference to indicate whether this was intentional or not.

⁹ James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York; Holmes and Meier, 1979), 69. For example, at the 1821 celebration, the audience was addressed by Reverend Thomas Paul, the longtime religious leader of Boston’s black community. *Reply to Bobalition ... Dialogue Between Scipio Smilax and Mungo Meanwell* (Boston, 1921). Original at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

How did the broadside's author know who he was? Second, the reference to Garrison speaks in the language of a black/white dependency relationship rather than the independent spirit the real celebrants sought to convey by their gathering.¹⁰

An 1822 broadside is even more explicit in this regard. Its repeated references to the Fourth of July celebrations are a recognition of the substitute role the abolition ceremonies played for blacks. Independence Day celebrations, with their heavy emphasis on military displays, excluded blacks since they were not permitted in Massachusetts militia companies. In his "Order of de Day" the "Sheef Marshal" makes clear that the black celebration is intended to copy that of the whites. "You no doubt see de publicum and the feddlers and de middlum interst folks selleybrate de fourt of Uly – bury well – de committee of derangement hab determine to make sellybrashum more splendum as dat, just same as de Sun more bigger as two cent candle."¹¹ There follows a series of toasts to the "Fourt of Uly," "De Presidumpf ot de Nited Tate," "De City of Bosson," and "De Hartford Convention" among others.¹²

The broadsides saved some of their most biting prose and graphics for black attempts at military organization. An 1817 example ordered members to show up on the Common in their uniforms and set forth the order of the drill which included commands to "Shouler Arm!"

¹⁰ *Bobalition of Slavery* (Boston, 1830), original in the Library of Congress, reproduced in Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*. On Garrison's anonymity among white Bostonians at this time, see Leonard Richards, "*Gentlemen of Property and Standing*": *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 21.

¹¹ *Grand and Splendid Bobalition of Slavery* (Boston, 1882), original at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, reprinted in Yellin and Van Horne, 219, fig. 16. Commentators were well aware of rhetorical power of the July Fourth celebrations. The *Liberator*, in commenting on the official 1831 celebration, called it "the fifty-fifth farce of American Independence" and, in a case of turnabout is fair play, described the banquet at Quincy Hall, commented on the 'usual superfluity of toasts given' and made a veiled reference to drunkenness, noting that "at the close of [the banquet] the 'Young Men,' we learn, became very patriotic." *Liberator*, 9 July 1831.

¹² It is worth noting that the frequent references to white patronage, the Hartford Convention, the President, the Bank of the United States and other subjects seemingly unrelated to Boston's blacks which frequently recur in the broadsides. This may reflect the use of blacks as a foil for political conflict between white political parties.

“Handel Kacrige,” and “Fix your Baggnut,’ among others.¹³ In the 1822 broadside, the marshal is instructed to keep order by making sure that paraders “keep zact step wid de moosick both foot togedder, and dat de platoon keep in zact strate semicircular lin perpendicularly.” The deputy marshal is reminded to obey the marshal or risk getting his shin kicked since he knows nothing “bout milmtary disumpleen.” The 1830 broadside warns the chief Marshal to be careful in the marching as a

large number ob grate milumtary carakter is spected to witness our marchin, mung di mos extinguish, I would tickularle menshun de North-square Silver-heels, de Millpond Mud-larks, de Copps-Hill Grave-diggers and de Neger-Alley Cadetts. De hole under de escort ob de gallant Captin Snippo Smarlheads’s cumpane ob Independent Terribles.

Graphics as well ridiculed blacks and black military pretensions. The 1822 broadside is topped with a woodcut of a troop of black soldiers led by their commander atop a white horse. They are dressed in full military regalia and drawn with grotesquely exaggerated black facial features. The 1830 broadside is also topped with a woodcut of a strutting military figure with a sword in one hand and his “usual bage ob oner” (a broom) in the other – a symbol of menial labor.

The regularity of the issuance of anti-black broadsheets and the creative energy that went into their execution shows the extent in some quarters of white societal resistance to black ritual self-presentation, of which the military procession was the highest form. The satirists’ treatments of the July 14 celebrations show a strong resentment of black attempts to engage in activities that some whites saw as being solely within the purview of white men. In addition to relying on satire, the broadsides were often quite explicit in voicing this resentment and fear. An 1837 example, referencing the fact that many blacks lived on Beacon Hill, contained this doggerel: “Nigger reason hab for every ting dey

¹³ *Grand Celebration! Of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, (Boston, 1817) original at the American Antiquarian Society. The Society also has originals from 1821, 1822, 1823, and 1837.

do/Whedder it be to scare white folk or go woo/So let our voices go high up in sweet strain? Dat we may be bigger den folk on de plane.”¹⁴

Newspaper accounts and letters to the editor also expressed resentment towards black efforts to engage in proud public presentation. Commenting on the 1821 celebration, one letter writer protested Blacks “parading in the streets, with all the ‘pomp and circumstance’ of their betters.” He wrote that the “soot headed race” needed to understand their station in society, and “evinced a proper respect for those who furnish them the ‘means by which they live.’” The author went on to complain that his bootblack “had the hardihood to refuse to clean my boots last Monday morning [the day of the celebration]; and in the afternoon of the same day I saw him hearty drunk...” Other contributions ridiculed the quasi-military aspect of the parade as well as the toasts at the banquet.¹⁵ Because serious black public displays were so threatening to some whites, it was not enough to merely ridicule them. Instead, the broadsides and letter writers went one step farther, linking pretended military rank and organization with the actual degraded professions of Boston’s blacks; for example, street sweeper or grave digger. Commentators made sure to remind blacks of the true nature of their status in Boston society; degraded, dependent, and inferior.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! De Gran Ragged Hill ‘Xbishum, and ‘Stinguishin Bust*, (Boston: 1837) original at the American Antiquarian Society.

¹⁵ *New England Galaxy*, [Boston] 20 July 1821; *Daily Advertiser*, [Boston] 16 July 1821. The author wishes to thank John Lund for pointing out these sources.

¹⁶ In mocking the Abolition Day celebrations, white satirists drew on a tradition of burlesque that had come to characterize their own militia training days. What had once been an opportunity for serious military display had become a festive event characterized by drinking, mockery, and misbehavior. Susan Davis argues that these burlesques reflected working -class hostility toward the elites who controlled the state militias. The influence of militia burlesque is most apparent in the 1830 broadside in the form of the military figure. Not identifiably black, he is a “Colonel Puck” figure, a generic parody of Andrew Jackson used in white militia burlesque. The reference to the “Independent Terribles” is itself a send-up of Boston’s “Antiques and Horribles” themselves a white parody of the city’s Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company. Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 84-96, 103. The author does not believe that the broadsides were part of the white militia burlesque. Rather, they simply drew on a familiar comic tradition to mock blacks.

White reactions to Abolition Day ceremonies are even more telling when compared with that of another annual event, the so-called Black Election. The annual black “lections,” which coincided with election day, were enjoyed by whites and blacks alike and were not occasions for white hostility. Blacks would elect “kings” or “governors” and engage in buffoonery, drinking, dancing and music-making. Black Election was widespread in New England by 1770s. Superficially, Black Election and Abolition Day celebrations might seem similar and the failure of the elections to bring out animosity in whites puzzling. Both mimicked white celebrations and white institutions. But there were crucial differences which explain the varying white responses to these affairs. The election occurred on the same day as the “real” election, a symbolic recognition before Black Election ended in 1831 of limited black involvement in politics.¹⁷ The raucousness and buffoonery of the election contrasted with the sober speeches and military discipline of the abolition day celebrations. In elections celebrations, blacks acted in ways that many whites expected, reinforcing the white notion of them as inferior, simple, drunken and politically emasculated. The event was in the nature of a charivari and hence, safe.¹⁸ The abolition celebrations conveyed an entirely different message, one of freedom, ambition and military discipline. A message that many whites found disturbing and threatening.¹⁹

¹⁷ Organized black political activity appears to have begun in the mid-1830s. Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 86.

¹⁸ As such, in Boston, they were probably the only public gatherings of blacks that did not elicit hostile responses from white ruffians. Sources from 1814 indicate that Black Election was the one exception. Roediger, 100-102. For a nuanced and thorough interpretation of the nature of Black Election in Boston and elsewhere, see William D. Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 117-140. Pierson states that Black Election declined in New England after the abolition of slavery and the festivals ended after lower-class whites screaming racial epithets began disrupting them. “Apparently, colonial slaves who ‘pretended’ to be kings and mocked local authority were funny to the white New Englanders in a way that black freedmen demonstrating ethnic pride and social criticism were not.” In addition, the Africans who had been so important to these festivals were dying out and being replaced by a more politically active and assimilationist group of blacks. Pierson, 159.

¹⁹ Susan Davis, writing on parades in Philadelphia notes that “when the image of a unified black community with moral and political claims on the rest of society were projected into the streets, whites felt their prerogatives threatened.” Some whites found

The Abolition Day ceremonies drew the ire of white commentators because nineteenth-century public processions were understood as political acts. As Susan Davis has shown in her study of parades in Philadelphia, public presentations were used “as tools for building, maintaining, and confronting power relations.” As political acts, the Abolition Day ceremonies, like Philadelphia’s parades, took place “in a context of contest and confrontation.”²⁰ Both blacks and whites focused on the quasi-military aspects of these public events because military service had such great symbolic power.²¹ Since all white men were automatically enrolled in the state militia, military duty corresponded directly with citizenship.

For many blacks, the tie between liberty and military service was even more direct. At the beginning of the American Revolution, Massachusetts blacks were prohibited from serving in the armed forces. Nevertheless, as the need for men increased, blacks were finally allowed to fight. By an act of Congress, slaves who served in the army or navy gained their freedom.²² Several hundred Massachusetts blacks served in the army and navy, and so, many blacks owed their very freedom directly to their fathers’ and grandfathers’ military service.

Thus, military service was a potent political symbol for both whites and blacks. This explains why black militaristic display during

blacks’ “fondness for imitating whites in processions and banners” extremely irritating (quoting contemporary John Watson). The unity these parades displayed was also threatening to whites. Susan Davis, 46-47, 156.

²⁰ Susan Davis, 5-6.

²¹ Allen Kulikoff in his work on status and deference in Revolutionary Boston notes the order of a parade held in honor of George Washington in 1789. The military comes first, followed by town and state officers, professional men, merchants, traders and sea captains, and forty-six different kinds of artisans; sailors brought up the rear. Laborers were not included. Allen Kulikoff, “The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 28 (1971): 385. It should be noted that blacks were overwhelmingly employed in the sea trade and as laborers in Boston at this time. Levesque, *Black Boston*, 116.

²² Thomas J. Davis, “Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773-1777,” *New England Quarterly*, 62 (1989): 249; Sidney Kaplan, “Blacks in Massachusetts and the Shays’ Rebellion,” *Contributions in Black Studies*, 8 (1986-1987): 8; Nell, 24.

Abolition Day ceremonies was a provocation for some whites. But by the 1850s these symbolic displays were no longer enough for black men. Events at the national level motivated them to focus more explicitly on citizenship rights rather than the assertions of liberty which characterized Abolition Day processions. As a result, blacks sought the right to engage in the public display that represented the most emblematic privilege of citizenship – service in the Massachusetts state militia.

Though the Revolutionary experience had shown blacks the link between military service and freedom, the theoretical understanding of its ties to their sense of citizenship took much longer to develop. For example, in response to Shays' Rebellion in 1786, Governor James Bowdoin demanded that all classes in Massachusetts confirm their loyalty to the Commonwealth. As Boston prepared for a rumored attack on the city, Prince Hall, an early black leader of the Boston community, offered the Governor the service of 700 blacks to help defend Boston. But Hall's offer was couched not in the language of free citizenship, of duty and privilege, but in the language of deference and dependency. Blacks, according to Hall were "peaceable subjects" incapable of participating in plots or conspiracies "against the state where we dwell." As the "meanest ... members" of the state, the continuance of lawful government was particularly important for their protection. Hall therefore stated his willingness "to help and support, so far as our weak and feeble abilities may become necessary in this time of trouble and confusion, as you in your wisdom shall direct us."²³ Hall's choice of rhetoric is not surprising. The explicit abolition of slavery in Massachusetts was only three years behind him 1786 and struggles to gain even a modicum of social equality were still years off. Thus, the petitioners did not assert the right and obligation to protect their city, but instead reemphasized their free, but dependent status in society.²⁴ They were not citizens, but subjects.²⁵ Sidney Kaplan argues that Bowdoin's

²³ Kaplan, 7.

²⁴ Indeed, several months later, Prince Hall's African Lodge submitted a petition to the General Court setting forth their desire to be allowed to return to Africa. Kaplan, 9. This episode strengthens the argument that the idea of black citizenship was barely conceived at this time.

²⁵ Petitions, whether submitted by citizens or not, were often couched in deferential language since the petitioners usually sought discretionary action on the part of the legislature or governor. Nevertheless, Hall's language reflects something more than

fiery rhetoric placed blacks in a difficult position since silence would be seen as sympathy for the rebels. By offering to help, they avoided a potential erosion of their “shaky pseudo-free status in the society.” But the offer was one made by a servant grateful for the protection of a kind master, not an assertion of a citizen’s right and duty to protect his home.²⁶

Not surprisingly, the experiences of blacks in the military during the revolutionary period indicate a much deeper concern with *freedom* rather than *citizenship*. Service in the Revolution led to freedom and offers to serve in 1786 were aimed at preserving that status, rather than asserting citizenship rights. Benjamin Quarles pointed out the pragmatism of black priorities in this period.

The negro’s role in the Revolution can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor a people, but to a *principle*. Insofar as he had freedom of choice, he was likely to join the side that made him the quickest and best offer in terms of those “unalienable rights” of which Mr. Jefferson had spoken. Whoever invoked the image of liberty, be he American

formal deference. Black petitioners could be quite forceful when seeking rights to which they felt they were entitled (such as freedom). Thomas Davis, 261-263. In 1784, Hall himself wrote a letter to accompany his petition for a charter from English Masonic authorities. Hall is deferential but not servile. “We must make you our advocate at the Grand Lodge, hoping you will be so good (in our name and Stead) to Lay this Before the Royal Grand Master and the Grand Wardens and the rest of the Grand Ledge [sic]; who we hope will not deny us nor treat us Beneath the rest of our fellowmen, although Poor yet sincere Brethren of the Craft. After wishing you all happiness here and hereafter, I beg leave to subscribe myself your Loving Friend and Brother.” William H. Upton, *Negro Masonry* (Boston: 1902), 208-209. Hall was seeking favor as a poor man, but also as a brother Mason. Contrast this with the language of his petition to Governor Hutchinson two years later. William A. Muraskin, *Middle-class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 31-34.

²⁶ Kaplan, 5, 12. In any case, the governor refused their offer and the rebels never made it to Boston.

or British, could count on a ready response from Blacks.²⁷

That liberty left them “nominally free, yet less than citizens” at the close of the Revolution.²⁸

But increasingly, as the nineteenth century progressed, it was citizenship, not mere freedom, that came to motivate black feelings about military service. All adult white male citizens were automatically members of the state militia. Thus, citizenship and military service were concomitant. Black, however, were specifically excluded from service in the militia under both Massachusetts and federal law.²⁹ Though they gradually gained greater social and political rights after the 1830s, the state remained steadfast in resistance to black militia service.³⁰

After 1850 blacks in Massachusetts and elsewhere began to campaign aggressively for the right to serve in state militias or at least, to form their own militia units. Late in 1852, Charles Lenox Remond and

²⁷ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), vii.

²⁸ Kaplan, 5.

²⁹ Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom; Blacks and John Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 68-69. The Massachusetts Militia Act of March 3, 1781 included “negroes” and “mulattoes” among a long list of persons who were “exempted from service, but it is not clear whether this language was intended to serve as a prohibition. The federal militia statute of 1792 limited service to “Each and every free, able-bodied, white male citizen.” Act of May 8, 1792, c. 33, 1 Stat. 271. One year later, Massachusetts repealed its militia laws and adopted a new law which copied the language of the federal law in restricting service to “each and every free, able bodied white male citizen.” Act of June 22, 1793. This essential language remained on the books until an act of May 14, 1864 removed the color bar.

³⁰ During this period, blacks gained the widespread right to vote, to attend white schools, and intermarry with whites. But, as stated earlier, social inequality and physical separation seemed to increase at the same time. On the miscegenation issue see Sara Dubow, “‘Not a Virtuous Woman Among Them’: Political Culture, Antislavery Politics, and the Repeal of the Marriage Ban in Ante-bellum Massachusetts” (ms., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts, 1995); on school desegregation see Mark Santow, “These Little Republican Temples: Race, Ethnicity and Public Schooling in Antebellum Massachusetts” (ms., University of Massachusetts, Amherst Massachusetts, 1992).

Robert Morris presented a petition signed by sixty-five blacks to the state Committee on the Militia seeking a charter for black military company. William Cooper Nell wrote in the *Liberator* that the need to seek their own company would be obviated “by erasing from the General Militia Law of the State the word white.” Nell further complained that companies made up of white citizens “whether of native or foreign birth” obtained such charters as a matter of course, but when blacks sought the same right, “then the granting of a charter became a question for sage and protracted legislation.”³¹ In even this, however, he was too optimistic.

At the hearing before the Committee on the Militia, on February 24, 1853, William J. Watkins delivered an address entitled “Our Rights as Men.”³² Watkins, a Garrisonian and former agent for the *Liberator*, was a staunch integrationist who believed that separate institutions consigned blacks to second-class status.³³ He made a point of explaining that blacks had every right to be admitted to the General Militia, and made it clear that the decision to ask only for the right to form a volunteer company did not signal acquiescence to the color bar in the statute. Instead, Watkins continually reminded the Committee that black men had equal rights to full citizenship. Nevertheless, by requesting formation of a black company, the petitioners hoped to make the Committee’s job easier by avoiding a clash with federal militia law which allowed only whites to serve.³⁴ After briefly describing the petition and the nature of the men who brought it, Watkins launched into the heart of the matter; why it should be granted. Watkins did not come before the Committee as a supplicant, the way Prince Hall did before Governor Bowdoin. Instead, he spoke unapologetically of manhood and rights.

³¹ *Liberator*, 11 March 1853.

³² Watkins’s oration is reproduced in Dorothy Porter, comp., *Negro Protest Pamphlets* (New York: Arno Press, 1969). Pagination refers to the original pamphlet reproduced in that work.

³³ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 87; Levesque, *Black Boston*, 181.

³⁴ Watkins, 5.

We proceed, then, upon the assertion that we have an unrestricted right to the enjoyment of full civil privileges; a right to demand and receive every thing which Massachusetts by her Bill Rights, grants to her citizens, irrespective of any accidental or fortuitous circumstances, the contingency of birth, education, fortune, or complexion. We are men, and we wish to be treated, as men in the land of the Pilgrims should be treated.³⁵

Watkins went on to detail at length the service of blacks in the Revolution and War of 1812. His rhetoric then changed from language of request, to language of demand.

We are an integral part of this Republic. We claim the absolute right, the inalienable God given right of Freemen. You gentlemen, have no more right to say we shall not obtain a charter, than you have to monopolize the winds of heaven, or the rain which falls alike upon the just and the unjust.³⁶

Watkins noted that the Militia Law included all white men over eighteen and excluded only those enrolled in volunteer companies or Quakers, Shakers and “idiots, lunatics, common drunkards, vagabonds, paupers and persons convicted of infamous crimes.”³⁷ Unless the Committee could show that the petitioners were not capable of performing their duty “there is no alternative but to treat us a citizens of the Commonwealth should be treated; as able-bodied, honorable men.”³⁸ Finally, Watkins explained the benefits of such service. It would show the world that Massachusetts “knows no man by the color of his skin, but all, irrespective of accidental circumstances, stand upon our broad,

³⁵ Watkins, 7.

³⁶ Watkins, 17.

³⁷ Watkins, 17-18.

³⁸ Watkins, 18.

common, and ever enduring platform....” It would also help elevate blacks and inspire them to rise “higher and higher, and HIGHER, until we scale the Mount of heaven, and look down from our lofty and commanding position upon our revilers persecutors.”³⁹

Watkins’ mountain metaphor was an unfortunate one. For like the anonymous broadside writers who warned against blacks looking down at the “folk on de plane,” members of the Committee did not want blacks climbing higher and they certainly did not want them looking down on anyone. According to the *Liberator*, the Committee treated the petitioners disrespectfully, refused to issue a report on the petition, and sought to withdraw from consideration of the issue.⁴⁰ Even the Free Soiler on the Committee went along with its decision. Watkins, a member of the Colored Citizens of the Free Soil Party, had urged every black voter to support the party in 1852.⁴¹ He was understandably furious at this betrayal, complaining that the Committee’s action left the colored citizens of the state “arrayed among the lunatics, paupers, and common drunkards of this time-honored Commonwealth.” Blacks were treated as men when they committed crimes he wrote:

but when we petition for protection in the exercise of any legal right, and asked to placed in a position in which we shall be able to show ourselves men, and honorable men, and thereby give the lie to the *American* doctrine of our innate inferiority; when we wish to demonstrate our capacity to cope successfully with any body else in the ‘wide, wide world,’ then our Committee on the Militia beg leave to ‘withdraw’ from the field.⁴²

³⁹ Watkins, 19-20.

⁴⁰ The Joint Standing Committee on the Militia consisted of Adams and Phillips of the Senate and Thompson (Boston), Bampus (Plympton), Darling (Leominster), Wilde (Harwich) and Shackford (Chicopee) in the House. *Rules and Orders to Be Observed in House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, for the year 1853* (Boston, 1853), 44.

⁴¹ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 87.

⁴² *Liberator*, 13 May 1853.

Rather than push for segregated companies, blacks focused on their main goal, removing the word “white” from the state statute prohibiting service. This paralleled a national movement to accomplish the same goal. In July 1853 the largest meeting of blacks in the antebellum period took place in Rochester, New York. This National Negro Convention sought to guarantee the citizenship rights of free blacks. In its address to the people of the United States, the Convention demanded equal treatment in all areas, including military service.

We especially urge that all laws and usages which preclude the enrollment of colored men in the militias, and prohibit their bearing arms in the navy, and disallow their rising, agreeable to their merits and attainments – are unconstitutional – the constitution knowing no color – are anti-Democratic, since democracy respects men as equals – are unmagnanimous, since such laws are made by the many, against the few, and by the strong against the weak.⁴³

The Massachusetts constitutional convention held that spring offered a good opportunity to accomplish this objective. At the convention, twenty-three “influential” blacks petitioned for the removal of the offending language.⁴⁴ The report of the convention’s Committee on the Militia noted that such action would conflict with federal law and that decisions regarding volunteer companies (such as the ones Watkins had advocated were within the purview of local officials and hence not an issue for state government to consider. It, therefore, recommended that no action be taken.⁴⁵ An attempt to strike most of the Committee’s

⁴³ *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention* (Rochester, 1853), 9.

⁴⁴ The petition was brought “that the laws may be so modified that no able-bodied male citizen may be forbidden or prevented from serving, or holding office or commission in the militia on account of his color.” *Liberator*, 1 July 1853.

⁴⁵ *Official Report of the Debates and Proceedings in the State Convention, Assembled May 4th, 1853, to Revise and Amend the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1853), 2: 71.

report and substitute language allowing black enrollment in the militia was defeated by a vote of 74 to 99 and the original report was accepted.⁴⁶

Later, in a session of the convention meeting as a whole, Henry Wilson of Natick, a Free Soiler and supporter of black militia participation, moved to amend the militia resolves by adding a resolution prohibiting discrimination based on race in the organization of volunteer militia companies. In his speech supporting the amendment, Wilson noted that the question of militia participation was “of little practical importance to black men or the public,” but that, “they feel the exclusion as an indignity to their race.” “When the country has required their blood in days of trial and conflict they have given it freely, and we have accepted it: but in times of peace, when their blood is not needed, we spurn and trample them under foot.”⁴⁷ He then spoke of the Constitution’s promise of equality.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, avoiding a conflict with federal law was an overriding concern for him. “We cannot act contrary to the laws of the United States, in this matter, nor do I wish to do so; but on the contrary, in everything, whether I approve or it or not, I shall ever bow in submission to the law of the Union.”⁴⁹

Rufus Choate, the Attorney General, then gave a lengthy speech on the question. If the goal was to create “a mere insulated local force – call it police or what you will – forming no part of the national militia ... a force not coming within that name; not entitled or liable to serve in their ranks ... a mere separate and local body of persons – then there is no conflict that I can see.” In other words, there was no problem so long as blacks were forced into a degraded state which advertised their second-class status. But if the state expected to “put them upon the parade on legal equality with the militia of the country, identified with them, taking their name, and sharing in their regulations and discipline and characters, then you do menace a conflict with the supreme law.” Choate doubted that anything could be gained by encouraging blacks “to strive and assume to be, what by law they cannot be.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *Official Report*, 2: 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2: 80.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2: 80-81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2: 75.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2: 88.

It is important to understand the true message being conveyed by the Attorney General of Massachusetts. Black men, ostensibly citizens of Massachusetts, could not march in a representative capacity as soldiers of the Commonwealth. They could procure an American flag, and they could march with arms in hand and a band at their head so long as they received no state recognition as a militia unit. Even in this reduced capacity, the legislature would still have to pass a law which would prevent paraders from being charged with criminal riot. Thus, the best blacks could hope for was pseudo-company whose marching would not subject them to arrest.

Charles Sumner was most concerned with the state's rights issues raised by the militia question. His lengthy comments made no reference to blacks.⁵¹ He accepted Choates's legal reasoning that federal prohibited black militia service and sought instead to get around the federal bar by substituting the words "military companies" for "militia" in the constitution. In this way, voluntary companies, composed either solely of blacks or of mixed membership, could be created without technically violating federal law. The voluntary companies "as a local system, disconnected from the national militia, and not in any way constrained by its organization, [are] within our jurisdiction." Opponents pointed out that this sophistry would still violate federal law. B.F. Hallett of Wilbraham argued:

unless the volunteer militia of Massachusetts are of 'the militia of the state,' they are outside the protection of the laws of the United States, when in actual service. It follows plainly, therefore, that you cannot embrace colored persons in the State militia, any more than you can include women. You may just as lawfully raise a battalion of 'Amazons,' as 'military companies' of colored persons; and the amendment ought to add, without distinction of sex, as well as color.⁵²

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2: 90-92.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2: 95-96. Hallett was a federal commissioner, charged with hearing fugitive slave cases under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. He was hostile to fugitives, and, as Bruce Laurie points out, would have been very resistant to arming blacks.

The convention rejected Sumner's proposed amendment, 78 to 112, and tabled the Committee's report without a vote.⁵³

On the last day of the convention blacks submitted another petition making reference to the arguments of Choate and other opponents of black militia service. The petitioners presented three arguments in support of their position. First, the state law violated the Massachusetts constitution which, they argued, was colorblind. Second, the United States Constitution's guarantee of equal privileges and immunities for the citizens of all states prohibited a federal law from denying black citizens of Massachusetts the right to serve in the state militia. Finally, they argued that the federal law itself was unconstitutional. The proponents were again unsuccessful and the convention, after agreeing to at least accept their petition into the record by a vote of 97 to 66 then reversed itself, refusing to allow even the arguments of the blacks for militia service to be entered into the record.⁵⁴

The *Liberator* was critical of the entire episode. In an unsigned editorial, the paper first reaffirmed its pacifism, noting that it opposed all war and war preparations. But rather than criticize those like Choate who had opposed removing discriminatory language from the state militia law, the *Liberator* reserved its ire for Sumner and Wilson, objecting to their easy acceptance of federally imposed inequality. "Neither of those gentlemen raised any objection whatever to [blacks] being ostracized by the laws of congress pertaining to the militia of the United States, but submissively acquiesced without a murmur!" Their actions were an admission, according to the *Liberator*, that Massachusetts citizens were not all equal under the United States

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2: 98.

⁵⁴ Nell, 107-111. After the first vote, B.F. Hallett returned to the convention and saw the petition language. He felt that it singled him out for condemnation and misquoted his comments that a black governor of Massachusetts could not lead the Massachusetts militia. This, he argue, was a statement of truth. "This Convention has no power to compose the militia of such persons and hence, a protest against the Convention for not doing what it has no power to do is simply an absurdity to enter upon the records." The convention then reconsidered its decision to enter the protest on the record. *Official Report*, 3: 647, 724-726.

Constitution. “And this is as far as the Free Soil champions dare to go!”⁵⁵

Following the defeats of 1853 in the legislature and at the convention, the petitioners formed an unofficial militia unit and equipped themselves for volunteer service anyway. The unit had initially chosen to name itself for Crispus Attucks, a mulatto seaman who had fallen in the Boston Massacre. But since his name had already been appropriated by the New York and Cincinnati militias, the group adopted the name of Massasoit, a seventeenth-century Indian chief.⁵⁶

What explains both the surge in activity on the militia question as well as Massachusetts’ refusal to allow blacks into its militia units? James and Lois Horton argue that the formation of black companies was a product of increasing black militancy and the response of an embattled community.⁵⁷ During the 1830s and 1840s blacks had become increasingly militant in their efforts to free brothers and sisters threatened by fugitive slave hunters. Some of these episodes involved spontaneous action by members of the community. But many other operations were the product of complex planning, relied on highly coordinated action, involved the use of arms and resulted in violence. These successful rescues were extraordinarily empowering for the black community. Its members formalized the black commitment to resist the fugitive slave laws by forming the Freedom Association in 1842.⁵⁸ By 1846 blacks and whites were working together to protect fugitive slaves and the interracial Boston Committee of Vigilance was formed. Five percent of its 168 members were black. The black membership came from the black elite several of whom were also active in the militia reform movement including John Rock, William Cooper Nell, and Robert Morris.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *Liberator*, 1 July 1853.

⁵⁶ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 121.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 88, 120-121.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 100-105; Levesque, ‘Boston’s Black Brahmin,’ 333 (Rock); Gary L. Collison, ‘The Boston Vigilance Committee: A Reconsideration,’ *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 12 (1984): 112 (Nell and Morris). Collison argues that the Committee was not very effective compared to other committees in other cities. He cites several reasons for this not the least of which is that the Committee was split between those

The Compromise of 1850 further electrified the black community. It is difficult to underestimate the extent to which this act stimulated black efforts to insist on the right to defend themselves and their community. Not only did it threaten to spread slavery to the new territories taken from Mexico, it also placed fugitive slaves (of whom many called Boston home) in great danger. Free blacks saw the compromise as a huge threat to their own freedom since it guaranteed not only the existence of slavery but its continued. In addition, the strengthened fugitive slave law made it much harder for free blacks and sympathetic Massachusetts officials to protect their friends, neighbors and loved ones from slavery.⁶⁰

This increased militancy may explain the desire to create black companies, but it does not explain the parallel efforts to have the word “white” removed from the states’ militia law. The Massasoit Guards showed that state sanction was not necessary to found a military unit. As the rescues of the 1840s showed, blacks did not need to be in a state militia to take armed action on behalf of fugitives. In fact, the initial black desire to be incorporated into the state militia was a far less radical course, since it would contain black militancy, subjecting it to military discipline and prohibiting vigilantism. Instead, the efforts by influential blacks like William Cooper Nell and John S. Rock came at a time when black citizenship had become increasingly threatened by national events. If the 1840s and the 1850s were a time of legal progress for blacks in Massachusetts, the Compromise of 1850 was a reminder of how fragile gains made at the local and state level were. Federal power could check such progress at the state level.⁶¹ Contemporary commentators were aware of the limits federalism imposed on local gains. Writing in 1857, English observer William Chambers noted that “In Massachusetts ... colored persons are legally recognized as American citizens; but this is only a local advantage. [T]he federal government does not allow that

willing to resort to extra-judicial actions and violence to protect fugitives, and those who were not.

⁶⁰ See, e.g. Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 116; Hinks, 18, 23-26.

⁶¹ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 103.

they belong to that category of citizens. They are tolerated and have a kind of protection; that is all.”⁶²

If the black desire to serve in the militia was tied to a strong desire for fuller citizenship, then white resistance can probably be explained as an equally strong desire to prevent this from happening. The argument of opponents that black militia companies would violate federal law is not convincing. Massachusetts, of all the states, had most often taken steps to vitiate federal action offensive to the interests of free blacks and fugitive slaves. Its Personal Liberty Law enacted in 1843 in response to the Latimer affair prohibited Massachusetts officials from cooperating with attempts to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act. After the Burns case in 1855, the legislature sought to extend the 1843 Act. As he had done on the militia issue, Attorney General Choate issued an opinion that the bill conflicted with federal law and was unconstitutional. The governor vetoed the bill, but sentiment was so strong in the legislature that the bill passed over veto.⁶³

But a parallel effort on the militia question had *not* resulted in a black victory. Choate sought to justify his opposition to black militia companies based on federalism, but his comments betrayed a different concern. For all his attentiveness to the supremacy of federal law, it was the symbolism of black military service that seemed to disturb him most. In this respect, Choate, felt that Sumner’s convoluted effort to create “military companies” was pointless.

As a matter of kindness to this portion of your fellow citizens, as matter of humanity, of philanthropy, I doubt greatly whether it is worth your while. Why call them to the parade, unfurl the national banner over their heads, bid them march to the music and mimic the pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war, when the discriminations and disabilities of color must, under the law, cleave to them even there – more conspicuous by

⁶² William Chambers, *American Slavery and Color* (London, 1857), 134-135, quoted in Levesque, *Black Boston*, 231-232. Recall Rock’s inability to obtain a federal passport and his traveling on one issued by Massachusetts in this respect.

⁶³ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 114. This took place even before the next elections brought a more radical anti-abolitionist membership into the legislature.

the contrasts of place and association – turning all to a sport of childhood, without its interest or gladness, of hope?⁶⁴

Unlike the extension of the Personal Liberty Law, neither the legislature nor the convention was willing to take steps to permit black participation in the militia. The votes were not even close on this issue. This dichotomy symbolized the black experience in Massachusetts in the antebellum period. White Massachusetts was willing to guarantee black freedom, but it reserved full citizenship for its own.

For their part, blacks understood that military service and militia membership were at the core of what it was to be a citizen. During a time of black turmoil, it was official recognition of them as men, soldiers and citizens that they desired, as a way to reassure themselves and whites that they were entitled to full citizenship.⁶⁵ This was also the point of William Cooper Nell's two recent works on black military service, *Services of Colored Americans in the Wars 1776 and 1812* (1852) and *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855). In his forward to the 1855 work Nell was explicit about his intentions. "We earnestly hope [the work] will revive the efforts for erasing the word *white* from the military clause in the statute-book." He then made clear the psychological import of this move, for so long as they prohibited from serving, blacks' "manhood and citizenship are under proscription."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Official Record*, 2: 89. Choate's reference to "your fellow citizens" is significant. Perhaps the implication is that they may be fellow citizens to Sumner, but not to Choate.

⁶⁵ Unlike later efforts to gain the right to serve in the Civil War, there is little evidence that proponents of black militia service saw it as part of a political *quid pro quo*. Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, vol. 3 (New York: International, 1952), 30-42 (on Douglass's arguments as to why blacks should serve in the war). Rather than serving as an obligatory commitment in exchange for the promise of better things to come, antebellum activism on the militia issue was *culmination* of efforts at legal citizenship rather than a means to an end.

⁶⁶ Nell, 11. The structure of Nell's 1855 work reflects the following. Of the 118 pages devoted to Massachusetts, only the first thirty-six pages detail black military service. The remaining eighty-two pages document black political and social achievements in Massachusetts unrelated to military affairs. The work shows how military service was, for blacks, only the most public manifestation of their competence, talent, ingenuity and success in a white world.

In their respective forwards to the work, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Wendell Phillips sounded similar themes. Stowe marveled that blacks had fought at all for a nation “which did not acknowledge them as citizens and equals.” She expressed her hope that Nell’s stories would give blacks new self-respect. “Let them emulate the noble deeds and sentiments of their ancestors, and feel that dark skin can never be a badge of disgrace, while it has been ennobled by such examples.” Phillips, for his part, noted that Nell’s stories of black patriots showed, “a wish ... to prove themselves men, in a land where laws refuse to recognize their manhood.”⁶⁷

The rhetoric surrounding the issue of military service routinely used the terms “citizen” and “man” interchangeably. The debate took place in a heavily gendered context. Recall “Colonel” Middleton’s symbolic emasculation by David Francis in Lydia Maria Child’s account of the Belknap Street riot. Recall how the “Colonel” wept as he handed over his musket. Recall also B.F. Hallett’s comments at the convention that the state could not allow blacks in the militia any more than it could women. Rufus Choate thought that Sumner’s “military companies” would turn military service “to a sport of childhood.” Proponents of black militia participation also resorted to gendered language. William Watkins’s address to the Committee on the Militia was entitled “Our Rights as Men.” Wendell Phillips noted that through their military service, all blacks wanted was an opportunity to “prove themselves men” in a land whose laws denied them their manhood. So long as they were unable to do so, according to William Cooper Nell, black “manhood and citizenship were under proscription.”

The relations between colonial men had been defined by a rigid hierarchy. The Jacksonian revolution had erased many of these distinctions and as the nineteenth century progressed, to be a white man increasingly became synonymous with being a citizen.⁶⁸ Blacks and women were excluded from this definition. Color and sex were now the basic determinants of citizenship status. Thus, to be a citizen was to be a

⁶⁷ Nell, 5-8. Phillips’s comments first appeared in Nell’s 1852 pamphlet *Services of Colored Americans in the Wars of 176 and 1812* (Boston, 1852).

⁶⁸ Roediger, 55-59; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, “Violence, Protest and Identity: Black Manhood in Antebellum America,” in James Oliver Horton, ed., *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community*, (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 92.

man. The rhetoric of black demands for citizenship rights reflected this relationship and military service was the epitome of manly action. What greater insult could a man face than to be told he was a second-class citizen? What greater attack than to be threatened with a return to slavery? Militia service was an assertion of the “right to ritual self-presentation,” a ritual which “roughly traced the definition of citizenship: white manhood.”⁶⁹ Black efforts to engage in ritual self-presentation, whether as paraders in Abolition Day celebrations, or as members of militia companies came too close to the heart of how white men defined themselves and thus invited reaction.

During the seventeenth-century, the conversion of black slaves to Christianity raised troubling legal and social questions for the white community. Would conversion require that slaves, now Christian, be given their freedom? Would Christian blacks be welcomed in white churches? White houses? White families? Different responses developed in different regions of the country. But in almost all cases, whites developed an ideology that allowed them to admit blacks into the Christian community, while severely limiting their full participation. They became second-class Christians.⁷⁰

David Roediger stresses that in the antebellum North, blacks were not only “noncitizens” but “anicitizens.” They were “enemies rather than members of the social compact,” they were “‘defilers’ of the body politic.”⁷¹ But in Massachusetts, the seventeenth-century religious experience may suggest a better model for the nineteenth-century political experience of the state’s blacks. Blacks were admitted to the social compact, but as junior partners – a status which made the daily slights and indignities that much harder to take.

Black men saw public ritual self-presentation as the epitome of what it was to be a fully enfranchised citizen – a full member of the community. Whites understood this dynamic too, and some were hostile to efforts by blacks to assert their right to the ritual self-presentation

⁶⁹ Susan Davis, 45.

⁷⁰ Marcus Wilson Jernegan, *Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America, 1607-1783* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1931, 1960), 24-44. On Christianizing slaves in New England see Pierson, 50-61.

⁷¹ Roediger, 57, quoting from the *Working Man’s Advocate* [New York], 17 April 1830; 29 January 1831; and 4 August 1832.

inherent in militia service. To these whites, it was pointless to call blacks to the parade ground so they could play at being soldiers, real citizens, real men. It was pointless, in Choate's words, to encourage black men "to strive and assume to be, what be law they cannot be."