"Negro Colony" or Integrated Neighborhood:

Building Equality in New Haven's Spireworth Square

Prepared For

Trowbridge Renaissance

by

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In 1995, after several years of lobbying by the Amistad Committee, Inc., the Connecticut Legislature mandated the State of Connecticut Freedom Trail with September designated as Freedom Trail Month. The Freedom Trail commemorates the historic contributions made by African Americans and their White allies to the continuing struggle for freedom and justice.

TROWBRIDGE SQUARE was immediately placed on the Freedom Trail. It was planned by the outstanding abolitionist and later Secretary of the Amistad Committee, Simeon Jocelyn, in the 1830's. It was established for African American and White working class families as a model egalitarian community.

Trowbridge Square, originally Spireworth Square, began as a shanty settlement on the outskirts of the city of New Haven at the turn of the nineteenth century. These shanty settlements were predominantly African-American. Despite the presence of free blacks and the emancipation of Connecticut's slaves in 1818, black residents of New Haven, though free, were not equal to white residents of the community, nor had they become full members of the community by the founding of Spireworth Square in 1830.

This issue of freedom without equality produced Spireworth Square and dominated the minds of prominent individuals in the white and black communities of New Haven. With this issue in mind, the Rev. Simeon Smith Jocelyn conceived of an integrated working class neighborhood, and his ideas of social and moral improvement were shared by others including Rev. Amos Beman, William Lanson and Thomas R. Trowbridge. They were not only ideas of one man and one community, but were the defining ideas of the time. I will explore how the ideas of freedom and equality upon which Spireworth Square was built were realized or not realized in a real community and real peoples' lives.

Socially and geographically isolated, black residents at the turn of the nineteenth century lived on the outskirts of the city. They held their own elections as they were unable to vote in governmental elections since New Haven maintained a policy to "let them be free but keep them separate." Black elections had their roots in pre-Revolutionary "Election Day" slave festivals which were recognized by slave owners as approved social gatherings for slaves who would assemble their own market on the outskirts of the city to socialize, eat and drink, and to elect the new governor or king of the black community. Though slave owners mocked the event as mimicry, the slaves took

the event seriously and such festivals were of great importance as days of free cultural expression. Performances included satirical dramatization of the acts of slave owners and the plight of slaves. After the abolition of slavery in New England, blacks moved to urban centers such as New Haven and these specific festivals lost importance. The tradition of electing Governors and Kings continued in New Haven however, and in 1825 William Lanson was elected King of the black community, showing the continuing sense of autonomy in the black community after emancipation. iii

Around 1812, James Hillhouse tried to develop the shanty village that would become Spireworth Square. He planned Howard, Columbus, Putnam and Water streets to ensure a gridded arrangement of this new city growth, then known as Oyster Point Quarter. This development was not successful however as the depression of 1807-1825 hindered new growth of the city. Significant development of the Trowbridge Square district did not really begin until the work of Rev. Simeon Smith Jocelyn in 1830.

Simeon Jocelyn was a congregational minister strongly influenced by the "liberal gospel of responsibility," which called upon the fortunate to aid and maintain the disadvantaged. He put his ideals into practice in the cause of advancing the interests of African Americans, spearheading many projects to include blacks as full members of the community. In 1820 Jocelyn helped found a black church containing a school for black adults and children. In 1829 this United African Society was formally recognized as a congregational church by the other churches of New Haven with four men and seventeen women taking communion at Center Church look up in Mcqueeney. Jocelyn also promoted a manual training school for African Americans in 1831. New Haven residents were strongly opposed to the idea and it was voted down at a town meeting 700 to 4. vi In

1839 Jocelyn, along with other abolitionists, came to the aid of slaves who claimed their freedom in a revolt on the schooner Amistad, issuing a public appeal for funds and seeking the help of former president John Quincy Adams. vii In all his varied projects, Jocelyn tried to integrate African Americans into the social fabric of the city. He opposed slavery as an abolitionist, as a pioneer of the Underground Railroad, and as a founder of the American Anti-Slavery society in 1833; and he spread his gospel for the spiritual betterment of the African Americans. The development of Spireworth Square seems to be a culmination of all his work.

Simeon and his brother Nathaniel Jocelyn were best known for their engraving enterprises; Nathaniel became famous for many works including the portrait of Cinque, the leader of the Amistad revolt, and the two made a fortune from the production of many bank notes. Simeon and Nathaniel Jocelyn were also known as "the largest and boldest adventurers at first in the purchase of the unimproved land lying around and nearest the occupied parts of the city." They were most noted for their development of the Franklin Square, renamed Jocelyn Square, in 1835. They bought and planned the land between Grand Street and Neck Lane, and between Franklin Street and Mill River, drawing up roads and dividing it up into 400 lots. "They chartered a steamboat in New York, and gave free passage to all who would come up and view the Jocelyn Square landscape and mark on their maps the favorite points on which to make their bids at the auction sale." Though the sale and the development of the area were successful, the speculation was a financial failure.

Then in 1830 Jocelyn along with his brother, Isaac Thompson and Sidney Hull embarked on developing what would become Spireworth Square. "These men," Col.

Gardner Morse recalled, "the Jocelyns, Sidney Hull and Isaac Thompson, true hearted, public spirited philanthropists, every one, united in the endeavor to remove a plague spot from Mount Pleasant by the purchase of the land and the layout of the Spireworth Park, between Portsea and Carlisle streets." Jocelyn, inspired by his liberal gospel of responsibility, seems to have developed this land not for profit but rather for the social and moral improvement of the people in the community. This spirit is embodied even in the choice of name, which, "... alluded to 'a slender spindling sort of grass' that grows only in poor soil." In addition to social improvement and the development of working class homes, Jocelyn used his ideals of moral reform, specifically of temperance and abolitionism, to shape the neighborhood. Deeds for lots in the Village of Spireworth laid strict restraints: no "ardent spirits" could be sold on the property; the lots could not go to people of disreputable character; and sale or rental could not be denied to individuals on grounds of race. All Jocelyn also had a school for blacks built on Carlisle Street and set aside land for a church to ensure moral and social growth in his Spireworth Square.

That the area included blacks did not go unnoticed. Charles Hallock, son of Gerard Hallock who had a mansion in the vicinity, stated, "some distance out on the avenue and beyond all other settlements, the Rev. Smith Jocelyn, an advanced abolitionist of his time, built himself an elegant and costly residence about the year 1830, and, nearby on a side street called Portsea Street planted a negro colony remnants of which continue to this day." It seems that Jocelyn's activity in the community was conspicuous and that his plans for integration of blacks into the neighborhood were unusual for the time. "Smith Jocelyn...," Hallock continues, "with his brother Nathaniel Jocelyn, was perhaps the pioneer in the movement of runaway slaves from the south by

the Underground Railroad, of whom there was a considerable settlement in Putnam Street... the most notable promoter of the colony was one Coe who had a white wife."xiv Jocelyn it seems was not just promoting equality for blacks and creating a neighborhood that could include them. The neighborhood was also a product of Jocelyn's role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Jocelyn integrated his work improving the situation of freed blacks with his work actively freeing enslaved blacks, populating his integrated neighborhood with the slaves he had freed.

Simeon Jocelyn and his business associates began development of the neighborhood in 1830. They bought about 15 acres of land in the Mount Pleasant district and plotted Portsea, Carlisle, Putnam, Salem, and Liberty Streets and subdivided the land into building lots. The roads divided the "Village of Spireworth" into nine squares, modeling the community after the original nine squares development of New Haven. As with the original nine squares, the central square was reserved as a public space. The Spireworth green was even bordered by fencing of the same period and style as the New Haven Green.*

The arrangement of Spireworth Square, modeled on the original nine squares, shows a desire to integrate the formerly isolated shanty town into the city structure just as the ideals of Jocelyn show a desire to bring the formerly isolated blacks into white society. Thus, the neighborhood at once brings a geographically isolated population of blacks into the city by physically shaping the neighborhood into the structure of the city, while simultaneously bringing the socially isolated population of blacks into the social structure by integrating black and white in one community.

Integration itself was a reform toward equality between blacks and whites. Simeon Jocelyn's effort toward integration was an integral part of his work to improve the status of blacks along with his moral and political reforms. In opposition to the doctrine of "let them be free but keep them separate," Jocelyn's efforts were directed toward demonstrating the ability of blacks to live alongside whites and up to the same moral standards thus proving their equality. When the United African Society was formally recognized as a congregational church by the other churches of New Haven its members were recognized as equals in the church community.

However, it was not only the white Rev. Jocelyn who was working for equality between whites and blacks; there were leaders from within the black community working to improve the situation of blacks, including William Lanson and Amos Beman, both of whom were involved in the founding of the first black church in New Haven. William Lanson was a very successful entrepreneur. He was elected "king" of the black community, owned large amounts of land, and as a contractor, he built many bridges, piers and other projects including the extension of Long Wharf by 1,500 feet, a job at which many before him had failed, and which succeeded in making Long Wharf profitable once again. On his land known as New Liberia, he owned a hotel, The Liberian, which he used for housing, and with his wealth he invested in the improvement of the black community. **vi* Lanson seems comparable to prominent wealthy members of the white New Haven community, a successful businessman and a speculator owning real estate, using his resources to develop the community, similar in many ways to Jocelyn.

William Lanson was very unpopular in the white community, and was endlessly persecuted with wrongful arrests and harassment. His hotel was known in the white

community for carousing, drinking and a rowdy clientele though he stated, "But as there were 15 shops near me. I do not think I sold one drink where the rest sold ten."xvii When his hotel burned down in 1825, the fire fighters would not put it out with the attitude that it would be better if it burned to the ground. "The firemen thinking the work of purification might be much more safely if not more effectually carried on by the water than by fire, substituted the latter element for the former, and gave the concern a good washing."xviii Despite his success as a contractor, his generosity providing housing for the black community, and even becoming a registered voter in 1807, Lanson was infamous and persecuted for being "pre-eminent in depravity." What was it that William Lanson was seen to lack? "Lanson...," one historian claimed, "with a good education and good moral training, would have made a valuable member of society and probably have become as distinguished for talents and virtues as he was for the absence of the latter, for he was endowed with more than a common mind." Though William Lanson was clearly the equal of many great leaders black and white in talent and ingenuity, he still was not awarded a social equality with whites. William "King" Lanson died penniless and alone at an Alms House in 1851.

Amos Beman was the first settled black minister of the United African Society church and was very popular with his congregation. He led the church through many times of financial hardship often working not for a paycheck, only for groceries and supplies for his family. **xii* He was heavily involved in the anti-slavery movement, and was associated with some of the most influential anti-slavery leaders of the time including William Lloyd Garrison. He was also an ardent prohibitionist and a leader of the temperance movement. **xiii* His desire for moral reform in the African American

community was intertwined with his work in social reform between blacks and whites. Whites attacked African Americans for having a supposed "depraved nature" and as long as they were excluded from the white community this façade could remain. In 1796, for example, the Convention of Deputies from the Abolition Societies, implored free African Americans, "to be religious, to refrain from spirituous liquors, to marry legally, and to behave in a civil and respectful manner," to promote the cause of abolitionism. "With his work Rev. Beman tried to show that blacks were equal if not ahead of whites in moral reforms such as temperance and tried to use these arguments in his anti-slavery work.

African American "Election Days," for example, became very unpopular among New England ministers for being a time, "to meet, to smoke, carouse, and swagger and dishonor God with greater brevity." Election Day festivals disappeared in part by the pressures of nineteenth century moral reform. Especially unpopular in the white community was the involvement of whites in the festivals. This kind of integration was the fear of the white community with one observer stating, "here lies a beastly black and here lies a beastly white." This fear that the black would corrupt the white was fought by Rev. Beman who saw moral reform as the key to the equal status of blacks. The paths of William Lanson and Rev. Beman crossed in a leadership struggle in the 1820s and 30s embodying the struggle within the black community between a history of cultural expression and new currents of moral reform. **xxvi**

It is difficult to measure the successes of these two men but both seem to have been seeking black equality. Both men worked within the community yet Lanson focused on social and economic improvement, whereas Beman attempted to institute moral reform. Lanson seemed very successful in business and raised a large monetary sum for

his enterprises, perhaps making efforts like a black church feasible, whereas Beman with perhaps less tangible success, tried to prove that blacks were on the same if not higher level morally as whites and therefore their equals.

It seems very probable that Rev. Simeon Jocelyn, with similar moral views to Beman, and with similar enterprising views to Lanson, wanted, with Spireworth Square, to integrate the blacks into the structure of white society to prove their compatibility morally and socially and to avoid exile and persecution. Jocelyn, in his physical modeling of the neighborhood after the original nine squares, wanted to fit the socially marginalized blacks into New Haven society.

The development of the neighborhood was not limited to Jocelyn's work however. Other notable developers including Elijah Prindle and Henry Hotchkiss had begun to subdivide their land, immediately east of the nine squares, into small building plots by the mid 1830s, and by 1850 much of the development was in this extended neighborhood. Though most deeds for these building lots specified their locations as Mount Pleasant rather than Spireworth, this new development was new growth of the Spireworth neighborhood rather than a new neighborhood. **xxvii**

Despite this growth of the neighborhood, the development of Spireworth was noticeably stunted. By 1851, only 50 houses had been constructed in the nine squares and the extended neighborhood. The reasons for this slow development are unclear but one theory cites the financial panics in the country's real estate market in 1837 and 1839. XXVIII It is likely that the slow development and the Jocelyns' declining influence in the neighborhood by the mid 1840s was due to their becoming financially overextended in this period.

When the Jocelyns' plans failed, Thomas R. Trowbridge continued the development of the neighborhood which was later to hold his name. The Trowbridge family was an influential merchant family involved in much development of the city, and they had owned land in the neighborhood, including the Columbus Avenue house of the first Trowbridges in New Haven. When T. R. Trowbridge bought a house on the Green, he had it sawed in two and moved to Columbus Avenue opening the lot for the construction of a very elaborate house on the green by the well known master builder Sidney Mason Stone. **xix**

Though from a mercantile background, Trowbridge did not develop the square solely for monetary interest. Rather than ignore the plan Jocelyn had set, he continued it and had modest workers' houses built on small lots. Along with Gerard Hallock he contracted Sidney Mason Stone once again to build the South Congregational Church in 1851 (also known at that time as the Gerard Hallock Church) following Jocelyn's ideals and belief in the importance of moral development in the community. This church was remodeled as a Roman Catholic Church and now stands as the Church of the Sacred Heart.*

A link between Spireworth and the Underground Railroad also remained in the development of the district as Trowbridge's years working to develop the neighborhood correspond to his years as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. From 1858 to 1860, his home was "one of the stations for the so-called Underground Railroad, a system for assisting the escape of slaves." Trowbridge was a strong supporter of the Civil War, raised money for volunteers, and entertained Abraham Lincoln in his house. It seems that

Trowbridge not only took a similar interest to Jocelyn in the development of the district, but continued, to some extent, the work Jocelyn had begun.

Jocelyn's vision of an integrated working class neighborhood in which morally upstanding members of the community proved an equal relationship between whites and blacks by free members of both races was never competed due to Jocelyn's financial difficulties. To divine what became of Jocelyn's neighborhood, I will return to Charles Hallock's description of the neighborhood as a "negro colony," with a "considerable settlement in Putnam Street" of "runaway slaves." "The community was orderly enough," Hallock writes, "as such communities go, but it ran naturally to cur dogs and violins, and suffered somewhat from the infusion of the reckless white element so that in time it acquired the sobriquet of "Sodom Hill," or more briefly, "The Hill." I would like to explore what is meant by Hallock's phrase "a negro colony," and what happened to the settlement on Putnam Street by examining the spatial organization of the Spireworth Square neighborhood.

A city directory, much like a phonebook, lists the residents of a neighborhood by head of household, indicating the race, occupation, and address of that head of household. Though it does not list the population of the neighborhood, it does give insight into where people lived. In the 1840 city directory there were 44 entries with addresses within the Spireworth Square neighborhood. Of these 44, an overwhelming 30 entries had addresses on Putnam Street, eight entries were addressed for Columbus, two for Liberty, two for Portsea, one for Cedar and one for Salem. There were ten entries, about 23% of the neighborhood, indicated as African American. Though the district's population was obviously concentrated on Putnam Street, (68% of the households were on Putnam)

blacks were even more heavily concentrated there. Eight out of the ten black residences were located on Putnam Street and neither of the other two was more than a block away. Though the neighborhood as a whole was 23% African American, blacks were clearly not evenly integrated through out the neighborhood. If out of those original 44 entries, one excludes those living on the northern border (Columbus Avenue) and eastern border (houses near Water Street) both areas with no African Americans, the remaining nine squares area plus its immediate surroundings (the nine squares area of Putnam, Liberty, Portsea, Cedar and Salem) was 41% African American. The area along Putnam from Howard Ave to Liberty was almost 100% black. Therefore, while the neighborhood was a whole was 23% African American, this did not mean every fourth household in the neighborhood was a black family. These figures show that Jocelyn's "negro colony" was just that- a colony- and in the greater neighborhood, black settlement really was an exception. Moreover, blacks in the neighborhood had less-skilled jobs than whites who were employed mainly as skilled tradesmen. All but one of the blacks were listed as laborers. The one was John Williams, employed as a carman, who had owned land in the neighborhood in 1827 before the Jocelyns' arrival. In contrast, most whites were tradesmen: shoemakers, carpenters, joiners, a goldsmith, a blacksmith, an engineer, a shipmaster, sailors, and grocers. xxxiii

This first generation of black residents took hold and made way for a larger black community to form. In 1850 both the population of the neighborhood and the black population more than tripled, with 147 entries in the greater neighborhood and 34 entries indicating colored residents. The percentage of blacks in the greater neighborhood stayed at about 23% with the percentage of African Americans in the nine squares plus

immediate surroundings area remaining at about 41%. Out of the 83 entries in this area, 14 residences were located on Carlisle, 11 on Cedar, 6 on Liberty, 14 on Portsea, 35 on Putnam and 2 on Salem, showing large growth on Carlisle, Portsea and Cedar with much less population concentration on Putnam Street. Blacks were also much more integrated throughout the neighborhood. As for the distribution of the 34 black households, 9 of the 14 residences on Carlisle Street were black (64%), 7 of the 11 residences on Cedar Street were black (63-64% black), 1 of the 6 residences on Liberty was black (16%), 2 of the 14 residences on Portsea were black (14%), 13 out of 35 residences on Putnam were black (37%) and both of the two residences on Salem were black. The nine squares area at this time was much more integrated neighborhood. There were increased numbers of jobs in the coach industry, and while the jobs for whites seem to have stayed about the same, the jobs for blacks seemed to have improved to the same level as the whites. This appears to be the height of black settlement in the neighborhood, with residents including "King" William Lanson and his wife. This also seems the height of the integrated community. In the nine squares at that time, whites and blacks were very well mixed with similar employment.xxxiv

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It seems, however, that the trend toward an integrated neighborhood did not last. By 1860 the African American population had dropped drastically to only 5% of the neighborhood, a good portion of whom had been listed as having lived in the community since at least 1840, showing that those who were there from the beginning remained, but that new black residents did not stay. The new residents to the neighborhood were not black but Irish and with the arrival of the railroads, ten percent of the jobs were listed as railroad jobs, with many more in related fields.**

Spireworth Square is valuable as an icon of the dominating issues of the time. The creation of Spireworth Square seems to be a unique integration of Jocelyn's economic, political and social activities and his moral and ethical reforms. The wealth from his engraving enterprises, guided by his liberal gospel of responsibility, was invested in a real estate venture which, in the light of the failure of his previous venture at Franklin Square and that of Henry Hillhouse's Oyster Point Quarter, could not have been seen as potentially profitable and was, in the end, an economic failure. Despite the idealism of the project, Col. Gardener Morse defends, "There was no mere moonshine in the undertakings of these men however unfortunate was the result to them financially. Everything they did in opening and extending the lines of the streets and dividing of the land into parks and building lots was done on a liberal plan, and done well." Though uncontrollable factors prematurely ended Jocelyn's work, Spireworth Square was a success as a living representation of the reform ideals of the time.

That black Americans were free from enslavement but outside the recognition of society left them on the outskirts of town in their own autonomous community. For leaders like King William Lanson, equality would come only with housing, development and a black nation of New Liberia. It would come as respect when a black man could build a pier which made a city a shipping power where whites could not, or when a black man owned a fortune that whites would envy. For leaders like Amos Beman, threatened with violence for daring to get an education, xxxviii equality would come when blacks would be respected for their morality, intelligence, and faith, when blacks would be seen not as beastly, but as virtuous. It would come as respect that a black man could be a college educated minister recognized as an equal with the white ministers of the city.

Spireworth was the product of many ideals, but most importantly, it was a planned community that was "done on a liberal plan, and done well." The most significant aspect of the neighborhood were the people who lived in the working class community, the African Americans who had the option of affordable housing and better employment, the ability for workers to own a house in a nice neighborhood with a public green for their children to run and play in. The legacy of Spireworth Square was creating what all communities work for, a safe, pleasant neighborhood made of people with morals and good character. That the neighborhood was integrated formed equality by transforming the individuals from a member of a race to a member of a community. Many more people whose stories may never be known include the Putnam Street laborer Robert Jackson and his neighbors, the machinist Thomas McHattie, and the musician and barber George M. Coe. How much can be known of laborer John Williams, or the widow Mrs. Cobus, the story of people like Mrs. Elizabeth Cisco, her daughter and the rest of the family she cared for? These were the people that were the active participants of integration, working on the equality of white and black not through ideals, but as a community equality of neighbor to neighbor. Though the nine squares neighborhood was swallowed by a rapidly expanding industrial city, fueled by influx of immigration, rather than slowly grow into a utopian garden of integration from a small spire of spindling grass, what remained was a demonstration of the spirit of equality that must live within the soul of every community.

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End Notes

ii Ibid

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Mary Beth McQueeny, "Simeon Jocelyn, New Haven Reformer." Journal of the New Haven Colony Historical Society, Volume 19, Number 3, (New Haven: The New Haven Colony Historical Society), September 1970, p. 63

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vii Horatio T. Strother, The Underground Railroad in Connecticut, p. 69

Col. Gardner Morse, "Recollections on the Appearance of New Haven and of its Business Enterprises and Movements in Real Estate Between 1825 and 1837," Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society, Vol. 5 (1894), p.100-101

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xvi Gary Highsmith, "History Ignores Eminent City Black Man," New Haven Register Feb 20, 1992 Arnold Guyot Dana, "New Haven Old and New: Its Homes, Institution, Activities, etc."

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xxi Robert A. Warner, "Amos Gerry Beman- 1812-1874, a Memoir on a Forgotten Leader," Journal of Negro History, Vol. 22 No. 2 (Apr., 1937), 205-206

bid, Passim, For more on Amos Beman, much of Warner's work is based on scrapbooks Rev. Beman kept known as the Beman Collection. This collection is currently in the archives of Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

i Mary Beth McQueeny, "Simeon Jocelyn, New Haven Reformer." Journal of the New Haven Colony Historical Society, Volume 19, Number 3, (New Haven: The New Haven Colony Historical Society), September 1970, p.64

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xxv Ibid

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XXVII J. Paul Loether and Dorothea Penar, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, (New Haven: The New Haven Preservation Trust, 1985), Inventory Item Number 8, p. 3

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xxxiii Arnold Guyot Dana, "New Haven Old and New: Its Homes, Institution, Activities, etc." MSS. 145 Volumes. On file at the New Haven Colony Historical Society, New Haven, Connecticut, Vol. 12 p. A, C

xxxiii 1840 New Haven City Directory, For more information such as the number of individuals in each household see also the Census.

xxxiv 1850 New Haven City Directory

xxx 1860 New Haven City Directory

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xxiii Shane White, "It Was a Proud Day": African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834, Journal of American History, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jun., 1994), p. 43