



The Economics of Repression

insignificant and weak. . . . What are my prospects? To what shall I turn my hand? Shall I be a mechanic? No one will employ me; white boys won't work with me. Shall I be a merchant? No one will have me in his office; white clerks won't associate with me. Drudgery and servitude, then, are my prospective portion. Can you be surprised at my discouragement?"¹

Although they had been recently employed under slavery in a variety of skilled as well as unskilled occupations, emancipated Negroes found their economic opportunities limited largely to jobs as servants, seamen, or common laborers.² "Some of the men follow Mechanick trades," the Pennsylvania Abolition Society reported in 1795, "and a number of them are mariners, but the greatest part are employed as Day labourers. The Women generally, both married and single, wash clothes for a livelihood." Were such employments, the Society asked five years later, conducive to the Negro's "regularity and industry" or to his "natural propensity to thoughtlessness and amusements"?³ In 1788, a French traveler noted that most northern free Negroes worked as servants, kept small shops, cultivated land, or found jobs on the coasting vessels. This seemed to constitute the extent of their economic opportunity. "The reason is obvious," he concluded. "The Whites, though they treat them with humanity, like not to give them credit to enable them to undertake any extensive commerce, nor even to give them the means of a common education, by receiving them into their counting-houses. If, then, the Blacks are confined to the retails of trade, let us not accuse their

¹ Andrews, *History of the New-York African Free-Schools*, p. 132.

² Jacques P. Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America* (Dublin, 1792), pp. 282-83; Duke de la Rochefoucault Liancourt, *Travels through the United States of North America* (2 vols.; London, 1799), I, 531-32, II, 166-67; *Mass. Hist. Soc. Colls.*, Ser. 5, III, 400.

³ Minutes of the Committee for Improving the Condition of Free Blacks, Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 1790-1803, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, pp. 112, 220.

capacity, but the prejudices of the Whites, which lay obstacles in their way."⁴

The situation had not changed materially by 1860. Although some Negroes could be found in the skilled trades and professions, most of them continued to labor in the service and menial occupations. In New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, the men worked largely as laborers, mariners, servants, waiters, barbers, coachmen, bootblacks, porters, second-hand-clothing dealers, and hod carriers, while the women worked as washerwomen, dressmakers, seamstresses, and cooks. Only a few Negroes managed to obtain the financial and educational prerequisites for entrance into business or the professions. As late as 1855, some 87 per cent of the gainfully employed Negroes of New York City worked in menial or unskilled jobs, and this appears to represent their economic condition in other northern cities.⁵

The absence of Negroes from the skilled and professional occupations allegedly confirmed their inferiority. "We see them engaged in no business that requires even ordinary capacity," a Pennsylvanian observed, "in no enterprizes requiring talents to conduct them. The mass are improvident, and seek the lowest avocations, and most menial stations."⁶ Fortified with an elaborate set of racial beliefs, whites argued that this situation indicated racial adjustment rather than economic exploitation. The Negro was simply unfit—physically and mentally—to perform skilled labor or enter the professions;

⁴ Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States*, pp. 282-83.

⁵ Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850-1925* (New York, 1927), pp. 30-32, 37-39, 42-50; *Proceedings of the Colored National Convention . . . Philadelphia, October 16th, 17th and 18th, 1855* (Salem, N. J., 1856), pp. 19-24; *Stimpson's Boston Directory* (Boston, 1840), pp. 445-51; *Register of the Trades of the Colored People in the City of Philadelphia and Districts* (Philadelphia, 1838), pp. 3-8; *Statistics of the Colored People of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1856), pp. 13-15; *Douglass' Monthly*, March, 1859; Robert Ernst, "The Economic Status of New York City Negroes, 1850-1863," *Negro History Bulletin*, XII (March, 1949), 139-41, 142 n., 143 n.

⁶ *Pennsylvania Constitutional Debates of 1837-38*, IX, 364.

he was naturally shifty and lazy, childlike and immature, untrustworthy, irresponsible, unable to handle complicated machines or run business establishments, and seriously lacking in initiative and ingenuity. Recognizing these qualities, a New York merchant insisted that Negro laborers must be treated as children requiring adult white guardianship.⁷ Under these circumstances, how could Negroes qualify for anything but simple, unskilled labor? Such a lowly economic status, however, allegedly imposed no real hardships on the Negro, for he possessed little motivation for economic advancement and demanded only the satisfaction of immediate needs and desires. "He can supply all his physical wants without industry," the Connecticut Colonization Society contended, "and beyond the supply of his immediate physical wants, he has little inducement to look."⁸ Such racial stereotypes as these reinforced the determination to keep Negro labor in its proper place; they both explained and justified the economic plight of northern Negroes.

In filling the menial occupations, Negroes not only acted "naturally" but performed, at the same time, a valuable economic and psychological service for white society. "They submit themselves to do menial service, and we get the profit," a Pennsylvanian declared. "If they would not do this, we ourselves would be compelled to do it." For this very reason, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in 1828, objected to the colonization of the American Negro in Africa. Since the blacks performed "various necessary menial duties," the Committee concluded, colonization would create a vacuum in the seaboard cities, increase the price of labor, and attract rural Negroes and fugitive slaves to the urban centers.⁹ Just as

⁷ A New York Merchant, *The Negro Labor Question* (New York, 1858), pp. 5-6, 21-22.

⁸ *African Repository*, IV (1828), 118.

⁹ *Pennsylvania Constitutional Debates of 1837-38*, V, 457; Senate Document, 20 Cong., 1 sess., No. 178 (April 28, 1828), p. 14.

slavery allegedly freed southern whites for the leisurely pursuit of culture, so did the free Negro worker enable northern whites to engage in more vital activities. In the event Negroes were colonized, a New England journal warned, "white men must hew our wood, draw our water, and perform our menial offices. They supply the place of so many whites, who may be spared for higher purposes."¹⁰ Finally, Negroes performed a psychological service in that their work allowed the whites to assume aristocratic airs on occasion. In New York, for example, an English traveler observed that whites preferred Negro hackney coachmen "because they had no fear that they would assume any thing like equality, — because they could order them about in the tone of masters, — and still more, because it might be thought they were riding in their own carriages — like our cockneys, who put a livery-servant at the back of a glass-coach, and then pass it off as their own." In this way, the Englishman concluded, Negroes were able to improve their economic position "by the means employed to degrade it."¹¹

Prevailing racial stereotypes, white vanity, and the widely held conviction that God had made the black man to perform disagreeable tasks combined to fix the Negro's economic status and bar him from most "respectable" jobs. White workers refused to accept the Negro as an apprentice; businessmen rejected his application for credit; and educational restrictions severely hampered his training for the professions. When Frederick Douglass, a skilled caulker, escaped to the North and sought work in the New Bedford shipyards, he was told that his employment would drive every white man away. For the next three years, Douglass worked as a common laborer, a coachman, and a waiter, earning an average of a dollar a day. In 1853, he remarked that it would be easier to find em-

¹⁰ *New England Magazine*, II (1832), 17.

¹¹ *Abdy, Journal of a Residence and Tour*, III, 185.

ployment for his son in a lawyer's office than in a blacksmith's shop.¹² But even those few Negroes who managed to train themselves for professional careers found obstacles in their way. In Pennsylvania, for example, a committee of the bar refused to examine a qualified Negro applicant, and the district court upheld the decision on grounds that the state did not recognize Negro citizenship.¹³ Moreover, trained Negro teachers labored in inferior school buildings at substandard wages.

White labor feared not only the competition of Negroes in the skilled trades but also the loss of social status which resulted from associating with them. White mechanics thus refused to work with Negroes in the same shops, and white servants considered it degrading to eat with them. One English traveler concluded that most white men "would rather starve than accept a menial office under a black."¹⁴ Where the two races worked together, such as in the service occupations, whites insisted on different titles in order to preserve the sanctity of their color. Such distinctions confounded many a foreign observer. "As is well known," one Englishman commented, "a domestic servant of American birth, and without negro blood in his or her veins, who condescends to help the mistress or master of a household in making the beds, milking the cows, cooking the dinner, grooming the horse, or driving the carriage, is not a servant, but a 'help.' 'Help wanted,' is the common heading of advertisements in the North, where servants are required. . . . Let negroes be servants, and if

¹² Douglass, *Life and Times*, pp. 259-63; Foner (ed.), *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, I, 24, II, 234.

¹³ *North Star*, January 21, 28, 1848.

¹⁴ John Fowler, *Journal of a Tour in the State of New York* (London, 1831), p. 218; Kenneth and Anna M. Roberts (eds.), *Moreau de St. Mery's American Journey* (New York, 1947), pp. 302-3; James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), p. 55; *Minutes and Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour*, p. 27; *North Star*, April 10, 1851; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, May 18, 1855; Arfwedson, *United States and Canada*, I, 239.

not negroes, let Irishmen fill their place; but for an American, an Englishman, or a Scotsman to be a servant or a waiter is derogatory." This same traveler noted that even the recently arrived Irishman soon began to assert the supremacy of his white blood "and to come out of what he considers the degrading ranks of 'service.'" ¹⁵

Where Negroes competed with whites for the same jobs or threatened to do so, violence often resulted. Such clashes were bound to be more severe during times of economic depression. Unemployed white workers swelled the Philadelphia mobs of 1842 in protest against the hiring of Negroes. In nearby Columbia, "a town meeting of the working men" warned the populace that Negroes were taking jobs formerly reserved for whites and that this might soon lead them into every branch of skilled trade, where "their known disposition to work for almost any price may well excite our fears." ¹⁶ The prejudices of white labor and the fear of violence caused New York City authorities to refuse licenses to Negro carmen and porters. If such licenses were granted, authorities warned, "it would bring them [Negro carmen and porters] into collision with white men of the same calling, and they would get their horses and carts 'dumped' into the dock, and themselves abused and beaten." While New York maintained its restriction, Negroes in Philadelphia endured some initial hostility long enough to obtain positions as carmen. ¹⁷

Organized labor reinforced working-class antipathy toward Negro labor competition. Although trade-unions exerted a minor influence on ante bellum workers, they occasionally voiced labor's principal demands, aspirations, and prejudices. Such was the case when they rejected racial unity as a way

¹⁵ Mackay, *Life and Liberty in America*, II, 45-46.

¹⁶ Samuel D. Hastings to Lewis Tappan, August 19, 1842, Tappan Papers, Library of Congress; *The Liberator*, September 20, 1834.

¹⁷ *Colored American*, September 16, 1837; Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour*, III, 318 n.

of achieving higher economic standards, insisted on all-white unions, and vigorously opposed abolitionism. Indeed, anti-slavery advocates, who were themselves often oblivious to the plight of northern industrial labor, found few friends in trade-union ranks. After all, emancipation posed the serious threat of thousands of former slaves pouring into the North to undermine wages and worsen working conditions. Rather than prepare for such an eventuality by organizing Negro workers, trade-unions decided on exclusion. The Industrial Congress—a short-lived national organization of reformers and workingmen—admitted Negro delegates to an 1851 convention, but this had no apparent effect on other labor societies. ¹⁸ When New York Negro and white barbers agreed to organize to secure higher prices for their labor, the whites insisted on separate organizations. Carrying these sentiments to an extreme, a Cincinnati "mechanical association" publicly tried its president for teaching a trade to a Negro youth. ¹⁹

Against this background of exclusion and hostility, Negro workers could hardly be expected to rally to the side of organized labor when it sought to press its demands through strike action. Instead, in several cases the Negro laborer willingly acted as a strikebreaker. When New York longshoremen struck in 1855 against wage cuts and an employer attack on their union, Negroes took their jobs on the water front and precipitated some violent clashes. Commenting on the strike, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* expressed little sympathy with the demands of the white longshoremen and pointed out that thousands of idle whites and Negroes would gladly work at half the price. "Of course," the newspaper continued, "colored men can feel under no obligation to hold out in a 'strike' with the whites, as the latter have never recognized them." Despite

¹⁸ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 26, 1851; *The [12th] Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1852), p. 21; Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States*, pp. 57, 73-74.

¹⁹ Ernst, "The Economic Status of New York City Negroes," p. 132; Ohio Anti-Slavery Society, *Condition of the People of Color*, p. 8.

the violent opposition of the strikers, "the sympathies of the employers, the public, and the law, are on the side of the blacks; consequently, the white laborers have been restrained from any overt acts, though, at times, very threatening."²⁰ Such was the price paid by organized labor in both the ante bellum and post-Civil War years for the maintenance of white supremacy and exclusionism.

In addition to creating anxiety among white workers, the Negro labor force, increasingly augmented by emancipated and fugitive slaves, also aroused the concern of white citizens' groups and several northern legislatures and constitutional conventions. "The white man cannot labor upon equal terms with the negro," a group of Connecticut petitioners declared in 1834. "Those who have just emerged from a state of barbarism or slavery have few artificial wants. Regardless of the decencies of life, and improvident of the future, the black can afford his services at a lower price than the white man." Unless the legislature adopted appropriate entry restrictions, the petitioners warned, the sons of Connecticut would soon be driven from the state by the great influx of "black porters, black truckmen, black sawyers, black mechanics, and black laborers of every description." Agreeing that exclusion constituted the only remedy, delegates to California's constitutional convention warned that local capitalists planned to import Negroes to work in the mines and predicted the outbreak of "fearful collisions." In virtually every ante bellum northern legislature and constitutional convention, similar fears were expressed concerning the entrance of Negroes into occupations which had been dominated by native whites.²¹

²⁰ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, February 2, 16, 1855; Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States*, pp. 79-80; Albon P. Man, Jr., "Labor Competition and the New York Draft Riots of 1863," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXVI (1951), 393-94. See also Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour*, I, 116.

²¹ Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour*, III, 246-47; *The Liberator*, February 15, 1834; *California Constitutional Debates of 1849*, pp. 49, 138, 144, 148, 333.

By the 1830's, the rapid increase of the nation's population, urbanization, and competition among whites threatened the Negro's hold on even the lowly employments. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society protested that "prejudice and pride" excluded blacks from turnpikes, canals, coal mines, brick-making, street-paving, and street-cleaning, and a Philadelphia Negro complained of extensive discrimination among local common laborers. While thousands of persons worked to clean gutters and level drifts during a snowstorm, he found no Negroes so employed, but "hundreds of them . . . going about the streets with shovels in their hands, looking for work and finding none."²² Although Negroes continued to work in menial jobs, one observer concluded in 1837 that "the time may come when they will not be able to make a living by such means; and then they will be obliged to resort to something still more humble. In this manner the whites will chase and harass them from post to post, until misery will complete their destruction."²³ In addition to the impact of the Panic of 1837 and the ensuing depression, Negro workers faced a new and serious challenge to their already weakened economic position—the Irish immigrant.

Between 1830 and 1860, nearly five million immigrants entered the United States, the bulk of them Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians. While a large number of the Germans and Scandinavians settled on middle western farmlands, the penniless and poverty-stricken Irish usually remained in the cities, crowded into "shanty towns," and sought any kind of employment, regardless of wages or conditions. Such a cheap labor force posed serious dangers to the Negro's economic position.

²² *Minutes of the Eighteenth Session of the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and Improving the Condition of the African Race* (Philadelphia, 1824), p. 13; Woodson (ed), *Mind of the Negro*, p. 225.

²³ Francis J. Grund, *The Americans in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations* (2 vols.; London, 1837), II, 314, 321-22.

"These impoverished and destitute beings,—transported from the trans-atlantic shores," one Negro wrote, "are crowding themselves into every place of business and of labor, and driving the poor colored American citizen out. Along the wharves, where the colored man once done the whole business of shipping and unshipping—in stores where his services were once rendered, and in families where the chief places were filled by him, in all these situations there are substituted foreigners or white Americans."²⁴

The Irish immigrant did not immediately displace the Negro laborer. Apparently preferring Negro "humility" to Irish "turbulence," some employers specified in "want ads" that Irishmen need not apply but that Negroes would be acceptable. "WANTED," a New York *Herald* advertisement read, "A Cook, Washer, and Ironer; who perfectly understands her business; any color or country except Irish."²⁵ Actually, as one English traveler noted, Americans considered both the Irish and the Negroes as outcasts. "To be called an 'Irishman' is almost as great an insult as to be stigmatized as a 'nigger feller,' and in a street-row, both appellations are flung off among the combatants with great zest and vigour."²⁶ Confronted with these prejudices, the Irish soon channeled their frustrations and anger into hatred of the Negro and began to find what comfort they could in the doctrine of white supremacy. Observers remarked that the Irish detested the Negro more than they did the Englishmen or the native whites, that they considered them "a soulless race," and that they "would shoot a black man with as little regard to moral consequences as they would a wild hog." On election day in New York, the Irish flocked to the polls, shouting, "Down with the Nagurs! Let them go back to Africa, where they belong," and consistently voted against any

²⁴ *Colored American*, July 28, 1838.

²⁵ Ernst, "The Economic Status of New York City Negroes," p. 140.

²⁶ Matilda C. J. F. Houstoun, *Hesperos; or, Travels in the West* (2 vols.; London, 1850), I, 179.

proposal to extend them equal political rights. Fearing that emancipation in the South would send hordes of free Negroes into northern cities, the Irish also turned their invectives on the abolitionists, joined antislavery mobs, and warned that

. . . when the negroes shall be free
To cut the throats of all they see
Then this dear land will come to be
The den of foul rascality.²⁷

Was it not ironical, an English visitor asked, that a respectable Negro often found himself placed in an inferior position to "a raw Irishman" who might well be more deficient in the essentials of civilization?²⁸ Many Negroes agreed that it was both ironical and deplorable that they should be forced aside to make room for the Irish. Accordingly, they frequently challenged the superior airs of the new arrivals, referred to them contemptuously as "white niggers" or "white Buckra," and considered their presence in Negro neighborhoods undesirable.²⁹ Moreover, they compared the rebellious and lawless Irishman with the orderly and law-abiding Negro. "Who makes your mobs on your canal lines, and in the construction of your railroads?" a Negro leader asked. "Who swell your mobs in your beer gardens, and in your Sunday excursions? Who make your Native and Anti-Native American mobs? Your Forrest and Macready mobs, which the military have to

²⁷ David W. Mitchell, *Ten Years Residence in the United States* (London, 1862), p. 159; Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour*, I, 159; James D. Burn, *Three Years among the Working-Classes in the United States during the War* (London, 1865), p. xiv; Mackay, *Life and Liberty in America*, II, 46-47; Alexander Marjoribanks, *Travels in South and North America* (5th ed.; London and New York, 1854), p. 435; Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, I, 92; New York *Daily Tribune*, May 11, 1850; Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, 1941), p. 137; Godley, *Letters from America*, II, 70.

²⁸ Charles Daubeny, *Journal of a Tour through the United States and in Canada . . . 1837-38* (Oxford, 1843), p. 79.

²⁹ Mackay, *Life and Liberty in America*, II, 46-47; Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 213.

³⁰ *The Liberator*, May 18, 1860.

be called out to put down? I am sure, not the colored people.”³⁰ Frederick Douglass, however, expressed his willingness to excuse the “demoralization” and debasement of the “poor Irish,” for these were simply the inevitable products of intemperance, priestcraft, and oppression. But he could not extend this sympathy to the Irish Roman Catholics, for they represented “the enemies of Human Freedom, so far, at least, as our humanity is concerned.” Finally, Douglass appealed to the Irish to be more consistent in their professions of liberty. How could they condemn English tyranny overseas as long as they sanctioned racial oppression in their new homeland?³¹

Against a background of increasing antipathy and economic competition, violence often erupted between Negro and Irish workers. In 1842, Irish coal miners in Pennsylvania battled with Negro competitors; in 1853, armed Negroes replaced striking Irishmen on the Erie Railroad; and two years later, the Irish and the Negroes battled on New York’s docks.³² The Civil War intensified the conflict, which culminated in the New York Draft Riots of 1863. In at least one instance, however, Negro and Irish workers co-operated to advance their economic position. Underpaid Irish hotel waiters in New York City, advised by their Negro counterparts to demand higher wages, agreed to admit a colored delegate to their meeting. But this experiment in Irish-Negro unity failed miserably as the employers broke the strike, replaced some of the fired workers with Negroes, and finally agreed to retain the best white waiters at higher wages.³³

In the two decades preceding the Civil War, unskilled Irish labor continued to pour into the menial employments, depress wages, and drive out Negro competitors. Irish workers soon

³⁰ *Douglass’ Monthly*, August, 1859; *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, December 15, 1854.

³¹ Carl Wittke, *The Irish in America* (Baton Rouge, La., 1956), p. 126; Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States*, pp. 79–80; Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825–1863* (New York, 1949), p. 105.

³² Ernst, “The Economic Status of New York City Negroes,” p. 142.

dominated canal and railroad construction and broke the Negro’s monopoly on the service occupations. “Within a few years,” a Philadelphia newspaper remarked, “they [the Negroes] have ceased to be hackney coachmen and draymen, and they are now almost displaced as stevedores. They are rapidly losing their places as barbers and servants. Ten families employ white servants now, where one did twenty years ago.” In 1830, Negroes comprised the majority of New York City’s servants; twenty years later, Irish servants outnumbered the entire Negro population by ten to one.³⁴ The Negro’s economic position had been seriously undermined. “Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment,” Frederick Douglass complained in 1855, “to make room perhaps for some newly arrived immigrants, whose hunger and color are thought to give them a title to especial favor. White men are becoming house-servants, cooks and stewards, common laborers and flunkeys to our gentry, and . . . they adjust themselves to their stations with a becoming obsequiousness.” Although the Negro now suffered the consequences of economic displacement, Douglass warned, the Irishman would soon find “that in assuming our avocation he also has assumed our degradation.”³⁵

Economically more secure than the Irish, other immigrant groups had little fear of Negro competition and generally adopted a more tolerant racial outlook. Many German arrivals expressed their sympathy with the Negro’s plight and condemned slavery, thus encouraging Frederick Douglass to hail them as “our active allies in the struggle against oppression

³⁴ *Colored American*, July 28, 1838; Edward Needles, *Ten Years’ Progress; or, A Comparison of the State and Condition of the Colored People in the City and County of Philadelphia from 1837 to 1847* (Philadelphia, 1849), p. 5; American Union for the Relief and Improvement of the Colored Race, *Report of the Executive Committee* (Boston, 1836), p. 14; Warner, *New Haven Negroes*, pp. 21–22, 76; Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States*, pp. 32, 76; *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, March 4, 1853; John A. Finch, *Travels in the United States of America and Canada* (London, 1833), p. 35; Ernst, “The Economic Status of New York City Negroes,” p. 140.

³⁵ Foner (ed.), *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, II, 249–50.

and prejudice."³⁶ Although many of them remained strongly antislavery, public sentiment gradually permeated the ranks of the new immigrants and modified their racial tolerance. In 1851, a New York German-language newspaper called racial equality "unnatural" and charged that Negroes were the "apes of the white race" and belonged in Africa. German farmers and mechanics gathered in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1837 to condemn Negro suffrage, abolitionism, and English influences. Demanding more extreme action, German residents in Mercer County, Ohio, resolved to resist the further entrance of Negroes "to the full extent of our means, the bayonet not excepted," to remove Negro residents by a specified date, and until that time to refuse them employment, trade, and use of the grinding mills.³⁷ Although such incidents as these were sporadic and scattered, they nevertheless indicated that the Americanization of the immigrant was not always in the best interest of the Negro.

In California, Negro laborers competed with Chinese immigrants, and both groups faced powerful white prejudices and legislative and judicial discrimination. Although California Negroes expressed sympathy for the plight of the Chinese, they also appeared to share the white man's revulsion at the appearance of this alien population. "The poor Chinese are, indeed, a wretched looking set," the San Francisco correspondent of *Frederick Douglass' Paper* reported. "They are filthy, immoral and licentious—according to our notions of such things. . . . The Chinaman, under the most favorable aspects, is calculated to excite a smile. His vacant Know Nothing face is expressive of nothing but stupidity." Nevertheless, the correspondent added, such grotesqueness did not justify white oppression. When the state legislature threatened to prevent Chinese and others ineligible for citizenship from

³⁶ *Douglass' Monthly*, August, 1859.

³⁷ Ernst, "The Economic Status of New York City Negroes," p. 131; *The Liberator*, November 10, 1837; Woodson, *Century of Negro Migration*, p. 56.

holding mining claims, this same correspondent protested that the bill would greatly imperil the economic position of the Negro. How, he asked, could California's legislators justifiably place the Negro under the same restrictions as the Chinese? Unlike the Negroes, the Chinese could never really amalgamate with the Americans; since it cost them so little to live, they were content to work as "coolies" at a third of what would be necessary to support an average American. Despite such pleas, California whites applied legal disabilities against both groups as public opinion sanctioned and enforced social proscription.³⁸

Economic exploitation and segregation produced the Negro ghetto. In Boston, Negroes congregated on "Nigger Hill" and along the wharves in "New Guinea"; in Cincinnati, they crowded into wooden shacks and shanties in "Little Africa"; in New York, they concentrated in a few wards and mixed with poor whites in the notorious "Five Points," described by one visitor as "but a step into Hades" and "the worst hell of America"; and in Philadelphia, they settled in gloomy cellars and squalid houses located along narrow courts and alleys.³⁹ Although some observers also pointed to the remarkable number of fine houses owned by Negroes in attractive neighborhoods, few could turn their eyes from the squalor of the Negro slums or deny their existence. To southern visitors in the North, such conditions demonstrated the folly of emancipation. "Thar they was," one southerner wrote, "covered with rags and dirt, livin in houses and cellars, without hardly any

³⁸ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, September 22, 1854, April 6, 13, 1855.

³⁹ Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 100; Crawford, *Romantic Days in Old Boston*, pp. 93-94; John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston and New York, 1914), p. 17; Wade, "The Negro in Cincinnati," p. 44; Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City*, pp. 40-41; Robert H. Collyer, *Lights and Shadows of American Life* (Boston, 1836), pp. 6-7; *Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Colour, of the City and Districts of Philadelphia*, pp. 31-41.

furniture; and sum of 'em without dores or winders. . . . This, thinks I, is nigger freedom; this is the condition to which the philanthropists of the North wants to bring the happy black people of the South!"⁴⁰

Such surroundings obviously had their impact on the general health of the Negro residents. In New York City, tuberculosis proved fatal to twice as many blacks as whites, a reflection of adverse living conditions.⁴¹ Philadelphia's coroner attributed the high mortality rate in Negro districts to intemperance, exposure, and malnutrition. After conducting an inspection in 1848, he reported that many Negroes had been "found dead in cold and exposed rooms and garrets, board shanties five and six feet high, and as many feet square, erected and rented for lodging purposes, mostly without any comforts, save the bare floor, with the cold penetrating between the boards, and through the holes and crevices on all sides." Some bodies had been recovered "in cold, wet, and damp cellars," while still others had been found lying in back yards and alleys. Most of these Negroes had sold rags and bones for a living. Not too far away, however, middle- and upper-class Negroes maintained some respectable living quarters.⁴²

The vigorous exclusion of Negroes from white residential neighborhoods made escape from the ghetto virtually impossible. The fear of depreciated property values overrode virtually every other consideration. As early as 1793, the attempt to locate "a Negro hut" in Salem, Massachusetts, prompted a white minister to protest that such buildings depreciated property, drove out decent residents, and generally injured the welfare of the neighborhood. Some years later, New Haven petitioners complained that the movement of Negroes into

⁴⁰ Thompson, *Major Jones's Sketches of Travel*, pp. 103-4. See also Bobo, *Glimpses of New-York City*, pp. 94-97, 126-30.

⁴¹ Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City*, p. 238.

⁴² *Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Colour, of the City and Districts of Philadelphia*, pp. 34-36.

previously white neighborhoods deteriorated real estate values from 20 to 50 per cent; an Indianan asserted that the proposed establishment of a Negro tract would reduce the value of nearby white-owned lots by at least 50 per cent.⁴³ Obviously, then, the Negro had to be contained in his own area. Thus when a Boston Negro schoolmistress considered moving to a better neighborhood, the inhabitants of the block where she proposed to settle resolved either to eject her or to destroy the house. By 1847, the residents of South Boston could boast that "not a single colored family" lived among them—only immigrants "of the better class who will not live in cellars."⁴⁴

Although whites frequently deprecated the Negro slums, some profited from them. In Cincinnati's Little Africa, for example, whites owned most of the wooden shacks and shanties and protested the attempt of municipal authorities to bar further construction of wooden buildings in the center of town. "Heaven preserve the shanties," a Cincinnati editor sarcastically remarked, "and supply the proprietors with tenants from whom the rent can be screwed, without respect to color or character."⁴⁵ While white critics continued to deplore Negro housing conditions, white landlords made few, if any, improvements. Both conveniently concluded that Negroes naturally lived that way.

In view of the frequent charge that northern Negroes constituted "a standing monument to the folly of Abolitionism," antislavery societies could not ignore the economic plight of the Negro. In periodic appeals and editorials directed at the Negro community, abolitionists placed particular stress on the need for economic improvement. To destroy prejudice,

⁴³ Bentley, *Diary*, II, 34; *The Liberator*, February 15, 1834; *Indiana Constitutional Debates of 1850*, I, 446.

⁴⁴ Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour*, I, 169; Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 102.

⁴⁵ Wade, "Negro in Cincinnati," p. 45.

Negroes first had to secure the white man's respect, and this could be most effectively won through a rise in economic status. Accumulate money, William Lloyd Garrison told a Negro audience, for "money begets influence, and influence respectability." This was standard abolitionist advice: wealth alone could truly overwhelm and conquer racial proscription. "A colored man who makes a thousand dollars," a Unitarian clergyman and abolitionist asserted, "does more to put down prejudice, than if he made a thousand moderately good speeches against prejudice, or wrote a thousand pretty fair articles against it. No race in this country will be despised which makes money." Choosing a rather curious analogy, he concluded that if Boston or New York had "ten orang-outangs worth a million dollars each, they would visit in the best society, we should leave our cards at their doors, and give them snug little dinner-parties."⁴⁶

Antislavery organizations made sporadic attempts to implement their appeals to the Negro community. As early as 1796, the American Convention of Abolition Societies urged Negro parents to teach their children useful trades "favorable to health and virtue." Taking more concrete action, the Pennsylvania Society appointed committees to find employment for Negro adults and to place Negro children with persons willing to train them in some skill. "Could they be generally prevailed on to attend to agriculture," the Society hopefully remarked, "were those who remain in the city to become persons of property, and their children brought up to useful trades, we believe many of the evils complained of would gradually disappear." But by 1827, the American Convention could only deplore the Negro's continued exclusion from skilled employments and urge his instruction in handicraft trades.⁴⁷ The

⁴⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, *An Address Delivered before the Free People of Color, in Philadelphia, New York, and Other Cities* (Boston, 1831), p. 10; Clarke, "Condition of the Free Colored People of the United States," pp. 263-64.

⁴⁷ *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Third Convention of Delegates from the*

American Anti-Slavery Society, organized by Garrison and his followers in 1833, also encouraged a program of economic uplift; it cheered Negro efforts to shift from menial to agricultural and mechanical employments, called upon sympathetic merchants and master-mechanics to hire Negro apprentices, established a register of Negro mechanics available for work, and moved to found a manual-labor college to train Negro youths.⁴⁸

Abolitionist efforts, however, consisted largely of verbal advice and encouragement and failed to achieve any measurable success. The economic orthodoxy of most abolitionists seriously limited their understanding of the Negro's plight. These were, after all, middle-class reformers, not laboring men or economic radicals. They made no apparent effort to encourage Negro workers to combine among themselves or with white workers for economic gains. Inasmuch as Garrison and many of his followers had expressed no sympathy with the attempts of white workers to form trade unions and strike for better conditions, this attitude is not surprising.⁴⁹ The employer's sense of profit, not trade unionism, would override racial prejudice. "Place two mechanics by the side of each other," Garrison declared, "one colored, and the other white," and "he who works the cheapest and best, will get the most custom. In making a bargain, the color of a man will never

Abolition Societies, p. 13; Minutes of the Committee for Improving the Condition of Free Blacks, Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 1790-1803, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, pp. 1-2, 220; *Minutes of the Twentieth Session of the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and Improving the Condition of the African Race* (Baltimore, 1827), pp. 21-22.

⁴⁸ *Fifth Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1838), p. 127; American Anti-Slavery Society, *Address to the People of Color, in the City of New York* (New York, 1834), p. 5; Barnes and Dumond (eds.), *Weld-Grimke Correspondence*, I, 264-65; Minutes of the Committee for Improvement of the Colored People, Pennsylvania Abolition Society, 1837-1853, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, pp. 24-25; *The Liberator*, September 29, 1832.

⁴⁹ For Garrison's views on organized labor, see *The Liberator*, January 1, 29, 1831.

be consulted." Rather than combine with white workers, abolitionists advised Negroes, underbid them. "After all," the *New England Magazine* remarked, "the voice of interest is louder, and speaks more to the purpose, than reason or philanthropy. When a black merchant shall sell his goods cheaper than his white neighbor, he will have the most customers. . . . When a black mechanic shall work cheaper and better than a white one, he will be more frequently employed."⁵⁰

At the request of an Ohio Negro convention, three prominent antislavery sympathizers—Cassius M. Clay, Horace Mann, and Benjamin Wade—submitted their recommendations concerning the economic future of the Negro. Clay advised the delegates to forego social equality, which could never be attained in the free or slave states, and immediate political rights in order to concentrate on the accumulation of wealth. Form separate communities apart from the whites, Mann suggested, and thereby advance from menial employments to the professions and skilled trades. Separation would afford all Negroes an equal opportunity to compete for the highest political offices and the best jobs. Arriving at an almost identical conclusion, Wade advised Negroes to withdraw from menial occupations, form separate communities, cultivate the soil, become mechanics, and thus gradually attain economic independence. As long as Negroes remained in white communities, this goal could not be realized. Independence, however, would compel whites to grant them respect and recognition, thus forever destroying the doctrine of racial superiority. "The color of skin is nothing," Wade asserted. "When was it ever known that virtue, industry and intelligence were not respected?"⁵¹

⁵⁰ Garrison, *Address Delivered before the Free People of Color*, p. 10; *New England Magazine*, II (1832), 16-17.

⁵¹ *Proceedings of the Convention of the Colored Freemen of Ohio* (Cincinnati, 1852), pp. 15-25. For some Negro reactions to these suggestions, see *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, October 22, 1852, and *The Liberator*, November 26, 1852.

Such sentiments reflected the limitations of the abolitionist approach. Although these grandiose schemes held forth the promise of economic security at some future date, most Negroes were concerned with more immediate problems and more practical remedies. Not until the late 1850's, when political proscription and economic discrimination showed no sign of diminishing, did a growing number of them agree that separation from the whites might be the only solution. In the meantime, most Negroes would have preferred a job in an abolitionist's shop or office to eloquent messages on the virtues of economic independence.

"To be dependent, is to be degraded," a Negro convention declared in 1848. "Men may indeed pity us, but they cannot respect us" — at least, not until the Negro won economic independence for himself and ceased to rely on the white man for the necessities of life. "The houses we live in are built by white men — the clothes we wear are made by white tailors — the hats on our heads are made by white hatters, and the shoes are made by white shoe-makers, and the food that we eat, is raised and cultivated by white men." Moreover, a Negro leader added, "our fathers are their coachmen, our brothers their cookmen, and ourselves their waiting-men. Our mothers their nurse-women, and our wives their washer women." As long as economic necessity compelled Negro women to perform "the drudgery and menial offices of other men's wives and daughters," it was nonsensical for Negroes to prate about political and social equality.⁵²

Since at least 1828, Negro leaders, newspapers, and conventions had been voicing similar sentiments. David Walker, for example, had berated Negroes in his *Walker's Appeal* for relying solely on bootblackening, waiting, and barbering for a livelihood. Although he had no objections to such pursuits as

⁵² *North Star*, September 22, 1848; Delany, *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People*, pp. 41-45.

a necessary means of subsistence, he warned his people not to be satisfied with inferior employment. At the same time, the first Negro newspaper—*Freedom's Journal*—had recommended to its readers the virtues of economy and industry, as well as the proper training of Negro youths for useful and respectable trades. After 1831, Negro state and national conventions repeatedly called upon their people to shift from menial jobs to mechanical and agricultural pursuits, to form joint-stock companies, mutual-savings banks, and county associations in order to pool capital for the purchase of real estate, and to patronize Negro-owned businesses. The competition of immigrant labor added to the urgency of these appeals. "Learn trades or starve!" Frederick Douglass warned in 1853. Since Negroes could no longer monopolize the menial occupations, they had to find new opportunities; they had to master the mechanical arts, advance into the skilled trades, educate their children along these lines, "and learn not only to black boots but to make them as well." Otherwise, Douglass concluded, the Negro faced economic deterioration and disaster.⁵³

Excluded from the workshops, crowded into filthy slums, and confined to the lowest of employments, some Negroes became convinced that economic improvement could best be achieved by abandoning the cities for the simple and virtuous attractions of agrarian life. This was among "the most happy and honorable of pursuits," Negro leaders pointed out, for it elevated its workers through "wealth, virtue, and honor" and made them economically independent and respectable. The city, on the other hand, shortened lives, seduced its inhabitants through gambling and general licentiousness, and excluded blacks from remunerative employment and enterprise. More-

⁵³ Walker, *Walker's Appeal*, p. 34; *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 1827; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 4, 1853; Foner (ed.), *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, II, 234.

over, an "enormous combination of capital" was "slowly invading every calling in the city, from washing and ironing to palace steamers." In time, this process would make the urban poor nothing but the slaves of increasingly low wages and high rents. Through rigid economy and hard work, however, Negroes could move into the country and become successful farmers. Here was "a positive road to wealth, influence, and usefulness."⁵⁴ Virtually every ante bellum Negro convention—state and national—reiterated these sentiments.

In an effort to encourage such a move, Gerrit Smith, an antislavery leader and philanthropist, offered to distribute approximately 140,000 acres of his land in upstate New York to 3,000 Negroes. Such grants of 40 to 60 acres, Smith hoped, would establish a large population of independent Negro farmers and qualify them to vote under New York laws. Soon after the offer had been made, Negro leaders appealed to their people to take advantage of this "unexampled benevolence" and assert their economic independence. Once in possession of land, "we will be our own masters, free to think, free to act; and if we toil hard, that toil will be sweetened by the reflection, that it is all, by God's will and help, for ourselves, our wives and our children. Thus placed in an independent condition, we will not only be independent, in ourselves, but will overcome that prejudice against condition, which has so long been as a mill stone about our necks." Despite such enthusiasm, the project failed miserably. Much of the land was poor and unfit for cultivation, and the cost of moving, settling, seeding, and waiting for the first crops compelled many Negroes to abandon their grants. In 1848, two

⁵⁴ *Minutes of the National Convention of Colored Citizens: held at Buffalo . . . August, 1843, for the Purpose of Considering their Moral and Political Condition as American Citizens* (New York, 1843), pp. 31-36; *Proceedings of the Connecticut State Convention of Colored Men* (New Haven, 1849), pp. 16-17; *Proceedings of the First Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of Illinois* (Chicago, 1853), pp. 14, 30-31; *Ohio Colored Convention of 1852*, p. 10; *North Star*, April 10, 1851.

years after Smith's offer, less than 30 Negro families had settled on the new lands.⁵⁵

By the 1850's, it became clear that the virtues of agrarian life had made little impression on urban Negroes. "From some cause or other," Douglass lamented in 1853, "colored people will congregate in the large towns and cities; and they will endure any amount of hardship and privation, rather than separate, and go into the country." They are obviously "wanting in self-reliance—too fond of society—too eager for immediate results—and too little skilled in mechanics or husbandry to attempt to overcome the wilderness." As an alternative, Douglass proposed that an industrial college be established for the training of Negroes. Although heartily endorsed by the 1853 national Negro convention, plans for such a school met with as little success in the 1850's as they had in the 1830's. White abolitionist apathy and Negro factional disputes helped to doom them. Finally, in 1855, various Negro leaders publicly denounced the proposed industrial college as "a complexional institution" designed to separate Negro youth from the rest of the population, and they suggested instead the establishment of a central bureau to collect funds and encourage mechanics among Negroes. Delegates to the 1855 national convention agreed to form "Industrial Associations" to encourage Negro artisans, but the plan came to nothing.⁵⁶

White hostility prevented Negroes from playing any significant role in the ante bellum labor movement. In 1850, New York Negroes did form a short-lived organization—the American League of Colored Labourers—which sought to

⁵⁵ Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, pp. 244–52; *An Address to the Three Thousand Colored Citizens of New-York, who are the owners of one hundred and twenty thousand acres of land, in the State of New York, given to them by Gerrit Smith, Esq. of Peterboro* (New York, 1846); *North Star*, January 7, February 18, 1848, January 5, March 2, June 1, 1849.

⁵⁶ Foner (ed.), *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, II, 35–37, 231–35; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, January 20, 1854, May 18, 25, 1855; *National Colored Convention of . . . 1855*, p. 26.

promote a union of skilled workers, the commercial, mechanical, and agricultural education of Negro youths, an industrial fair, and a fund to assist Negro mechanics in establishing independent businesses. But the organization apparently expired before any of its plans could be executed. Meanwhile, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* reported "some talk . . . of organizing a society of the laboring classes" to secure more constant and profitable employment—"a thing that should have been done long since"—but again, talk failed to materialize into action. Convention recommendations that Negroes organize "Trade Unions on a small scale" or "Co-partnerships" of businessmen met a similar fate.⁵⁷

By 1860, a growing number of Negroes had obtained the necessary education and capital to enter the professions, small businesses, and the skilled trades, but the great mass of them still labored as unorganized and unskilled workers competing with newly arrived immigrants for the menial jobs. Both Negro and white labor failed to realize the consequences of this division, especially under the conditions imposed by postwar industrial capitalism, and firmly held to the vision of an eventual rise into the hierarchy of propertied entrepreneurs. White hostility, exclusion, and economic privation continued to confront Negro workers, and depressions fell upon them with particular force. "Whenever the interests of the white man and the black come into collision in the United States," an English visitor remarked in 1851, "the black man goes to the wall. . . . It is certain that, wherever labour is scarce, there he is readily employed; when it becomes plentiful, he is the first to be discharged."⁵⁸

In their efforts to maintain racial supremacy and purity,

⁵⁷ Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States*, pp. 55–56; Ernst, "The Economic Status of New York City Negroes," p. 141; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, February 23, 1855; *National Colored Convention of . . . 1855*, p. 19.

⁵⁸ James F. W. Johnston, *Notes on North America* (2 vols.; Edinburgh and London, 1851), II, 315.

the whites did not differentiate among the various classes of Negro society. By virtue of the color of his skin alone—and regardless of economic status—a Negro had to endure the disabilities imposed by white citizens and legislators. Whites might distinguish “good niggers” from “uppity niggers” or express a preference for hiring mulattoes over blacks, but that was all. Otherwise, Negroes were all alike—a homogeneous and degraded mass which had to be carefully regulated. Nevertheless, although it was seemingly irreconcilable with the Negro’s low economic status, social stratification did exist, especially in the larger cities of the North. Among Philadelphia Negroes, for example, one observer—Joseph W. Wilson—found broad social distinctions equaling those of any other community: an upper class, residing “in ease, comfort and the enjoyments of all the social blessings of this life”; a middle class, “sober, honest, industrious, and respectable”; and a lower class, “found in the lowest depths of human degradation, misery and want.”⁵⁹

Wealth, occupation, family, nativity, color, and education largely determined a Negro’s position in the social order. By 1860, inroads into business and the professions provided the basis for an increasing accumulation of property and liquid wealth.⁶⁰ Social segregation afforded a growing number of opportunities and insured an important position in the Negro class structure for doctors, lawyers, shopkeepers, ministers, and undertakers. Within the narrowly circumscribed economic world of the Negro, the upper and middle classes included professionals, successful businessmen, large-scale farmers, carpenters, skilled mechanics, barbers, and high-placed

⁵⁹ [Joseph W. Wilson], *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1841), p. 14.

⁶⁰ Delany, *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People*, pp. 92-137; Abram L. Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist* (Philadelphia, 1936), pp. 5-23; Nell, *Colored Patriots*, pp. 327-28; Ernst, “The Economic Status of New York City Negroes,” p. 142; *The Liberator*, January 27, 1854, July 2, 1858; Furness, “Walt Whitman Looks at Boston,” p. 356.

waiters, servants, and coachmen, while the lower class consisted of common laborers and comprised the bulk of the population. Rather than admit a permanent working-class status, however, many lower-class Negroes attempted to improve their position by obtaining regular employment and an education, virtual prerequisites for any successful escape from slum neighborhoods and for admission into the middle class. But the segregated Negro community provided a limited number of opportunities for a Negro bourgeoisie and sharply curtailed the amount of social mobility.

Successful Negro entrepreneurs often extended their services beyond their own communities. In several cities, for example, Negro restaurateurs, caterers, bootmakers, tailors, and barbers acquired a fashionable white clientele. Of course the maintenance of a good reputation among whites required Negro businessmen to show proper respect and not to tamper with deep rooted prejudices. In the restaurant and barbering businesses, for example, Negroes frequently, if not generally, had to bar members of their own race. A New York restaurateur called a friend from the dining-room and offered to serve him behind a screen or in the kitchen, explaining that “his customers *now* were not as those in William Street, where he formerly kept.”⁶¹ After witnessing the ouster of a prospective Negro customer from a New York barber-shop, an astonished English visitor requested an explanation from the Negro barber. “Ay, I guessed you were not raised here,” the barber replied. “Now I reckon you do not know that my boss [also a Negro] would not have a single . . . gentleman come to his store, if he cut coloured men; now my boss, I guess, ordered me to turn out every coloured man from the store right away, and if I did not, he would send me off slick.” That evening, the English visitor related the incident to three American “gentlemen . . . of education and of liberal

⁶¹ *Colored American*, June 5, 26, July 10, 1841.

opinions." "Ay right, perfectly right," one exclaimed, "I would never go to a barber's where a coloured man was cut!"⁶² Such practices finally prompted an Ohio Negro convention to condemn any "colored man who refuses to shave a colored man because he is colored" as "much worse than a white man who refuses to eat, drink, ride, walk, or be educated with a colored man . . . for the former is a party *de facto* to riveting chains around his own neck and the necks of his much injured race." Inasmuch as the same convention called upon Negroes to equal the "Saxon" in wealth and enterprise, this must have presented somewhat of a dilemma to many successful Negro entrepreneurs.⁶³

Nativity proved less important to status than occupation in the Negro class structure. A recently arrived southern-born immigrant who obtained a good economic position would find little to bar him from acceptance in the Negro upper or middle classes, but the fact that so many of the newcomers had neither education nor skill and comprised "the most numerous in those crowded streets and alleys where the destruction and wretchedness is most intense and infectious" resulted in some hostility between the northern-born free Negro and the escaped or emancipated southern slave.⁶⁴ Upper- and middle-class northern Negroes often held aloof from the new immigrants and complained that they threatened to besmirch the reputation of the community. In Philadelphia, for example, Joseph W. Wilson attributed much of the disaffection within the Negro upper class to "real or pretended sectional preferences," such as those between "the natives and the southern families." Although he concluded that the natives generally respected their southern brethren, he also found that some of them "can't bear

⁶² Fearon, *Sketches of America*, pp. 58-60. See also Candler, *Summary View of America*, p. 284.

⁶³ *Ohio Colored Convention of 1852*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Colour, of the City and Districts of Philadelphia*, p. 31.

the southerners!"⁶⁵ Among the lower classes, there existed more substantial grounds for antagonism because native Negro workers resented additional competition. When an English traveler arrived in Philadelphia in 1846, two Negro porters greeted him and offered to carry his baggage. While one claimed he was "in de cheap line," the other retorted: "Cheap! — neber mind him, Sa; he's only a nigger from Baltimore, just come to Philadelpy. I'se born her, Sa, and know de town like a book. Dat ere negga not seen good society yet — knows nuffin — habn't got de polish on."⁶⁶

Equally significant in determining a Negro's place in the social order was the relative darkness of his skin. By 1850, mulattoes comprised some 25 per cent of the northern Negroes.⁶⁷ Although a light color did not automatically secure a Negro's place in the hierarchy, it often afforded him greater economic opportunities, which, in turn, assured him of a high rank in Negro society. In many cases, whites simply preferred to hire mulattoes, feeling that their closer proximity to Caucasian features also made them more intelligent and physically attractive. Such preference invariably had its effect on some mulattoes and made them feel socially superior to the blacks. Nevertheless, a mulatto was still not welcome in white society and had to share the legal disabilities of the blacks. In most cases, then, he took his place in the Negro community and, in fact, produced much of its militant leadership, including such men as Frederick Douglass, James Forten, Robert Purvis, Charles L. Remond, James McCune Smith, William Still, John Mercer Langston, William Wells Brown, and David Walker.

Although whites understandably associated a lighter skin with a superior type of Negro, the surprising fact is that so

⁶⁵ Wilson, *Sketches of the Higher Classes*, pp. 47-48.

⁶⁶ Alexander Mackay, *The Western World; or, Travels in the United States in 1846-47* (3 vols.; London, 1850), I, 132-33.

⁶⁷ John Cummings, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington, D.C., 1918), p. 210.

many Negroes consciously or unconsciously accepted this color valuation. The mulatto's high social position thus resulted in large measure from the strong tendency among Negroes, particularly those in the upper and middle classes, to envy a light complexion, accept white standards of beauty, and do everything possible to alter their own appearances accordingly. In too many cases, one Negro protested, parents taught their children "that he or she is pretty, just in proportion as the features approximate to the Anglo-Saxon standard." To conform to these standards, "flat noses must be pinched up. Kinky hair must be subjected to a straightening process—oiled, and pulled, twisted up, tied down, sleeked over and pressed under, or cut off so short that it can't curl, sometimes the natural hair is shaved off, and its place supplied by a straight wig, thus presenting the ludicrous anomaly of Indian hair over negro features. Thick lips are puckered up. . . . Beautiful black and brown faces by the application of rouge and lily white are made to assume unnatural tints, like the livid hue of painted corpses." Such attempts to alter nature, he concluded, illustrated the power of public sentiment and required that parents cultivate in their children a respect for their race and color and refrain from characterizing straight hair as "good hair" or Anglo-Saxon features as "good features."⁶⁸ Ironically, the persistence of such practices, as well as the force of social segregation, formed the basis for some important Negro economic enterprises.

As more schools for Negro youths opened, education became increasingly important and necessary for social status, especially if it led to professional employment. It also tended to solidify class lines. Economic comfort and security enabled upper- and middle-class parents to insure the regular attendance of their children at public or private schools, while lower

⁶⁸ M. H. Freeman, "The Educational Wants of the Free Colored People," *Anglo-African Magazine*, I (April, 1859), 116-19.

class children frequently had to start work at an early age. Among the upper classes, education served important social and economic functions. In Philadelphia, for example, Joseph W. Wilson found that upper-class Negroes often pursued an education "more for its own sake—the adornment which it gives them—than from any relative or collateral advantages," and they did not necessarily utilize it to learn a specific trade. Actually, the relative merits of a classical or vocational education would long be a subject of dispute among Negroes. Moreover, Wilson found that the educated Negro was by no means "the happiest man." Qualified for a useful and honorable place in life, he still found it difficult to secure a good position and thus felt more acutely than others the effects of racial prejudice.⁶⁹ Partly for this reason, professional and educated men furnished the most numerous and aggressive portion of Negro leadership.

In social intercourse, upper- and middle-class Negroes sought to achieve much of the decorum and display of white society. Observing Philadelphia's Negro society, Wilson found social exchanges conducted on a very respectable and dignified level, a remarkable degree of refinement and cultivation, ease and grace of manner, and "a strict observance of all the nicer etiquettes, proprieties and observances that are characteristic of the well bred."⁷⁰ Although both races indulged in ostentatious displays of their real or pretended wealth, foreign travelers particularly noted such excesses among Negroes. "Many of the blacks carry walking-canes," an Englishman wrote, "and parade the streets arm in arm, bowing most affectedly to the negresses, who are often dressed in a style so costly, that it is difficult to conceive how they can procure such finery." In Philadelphia, another visitor noted that the "most extravagant funeral" he had seen "was that of a black; the coaches were

⁶⁹ Wilson, *Sketches of the Higher Classes*, pp. 95-97.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 56, 60.

very numerous, as well as the pedestrians, who were all well dressed, and behaving with the utmost decorum."⁷¹ Such ostentation, contrasting sharply with the general economic status of the Negro, disgusted many white and Negro abolitionists. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society, for example, accused Negroes of aping "those silly white people who pride themselves in their outward adorning to the neglect of their minds," and a Negro leader berated his brethren for spending thousands of dollars each year "for an hour's display of utter emptiness."⁷² But protests such as these largely ignored the fact that middle- and upper-class Negroes, having been segregated from white society and in most public places, had few other opportunities to demonstrate their social success and position.

Class distinctions sometimes manifested themselves in dissension and conflict. In the upper and middle classes, for example, one observer noted envy of advancement and success, antagonism toward newcomers, and constant competition for place and self-exaltation in political meetings. Travelers remarked that Negroes often reproached one another as "dirty black naysurs," an insult usually reserved for especially dark Negroes, lower-class blacks, or newly arrived southern immigrants. "So much does the oppressed or lower class always strive to imitate the superior," Francis Lieber observed, "that even the name which is bestowed by the latter upon the former,

⁷¹ John Howison, *Sketches of Upper Canada . . . and Some Recollections of the United States of America* (Edinburgh, 1821), pp. 312-13; Arfwedson, *United States and Canada*, I, 27; Francis Lieber, *Letters to a Gentleman in Germany* (Philadelphia, 1834), p. 68; Duncan, *Travels through Part of the United States and Canada*, I, 60; Edward D. Seeber (ed.), *Edouard de Montule Travels in America, 1816-1817* (Bloomington, Ind., 1951), p. 181; Marrayat, *Diary in America*, I, 294.

⁷² Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, *Address to the Coloured People of the State of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1837), p. 6; Henry Highland Garnet, *The Past and the Present Condition, and the Destiny, of the Colored Race* (Troy, N. Y. 1848), p. 19.

by way of contempt, is adopted and used by them."⁷³ Such language, carrying with it derogatory implications, not only set Negroes to fighting each other but, when used by whites, could precipitate a major riot.

By the 1830's, abolitionists — white and black — frequently expressed dismay and disappointment over the growing clannishness of Negro society. How could prejudice be conquered when mulattoes and Negroes found it difficult to live together, or when Negroes insulted each other as "niggers," or when they excluded members of their own race from their business establishments? "I mourn over the aristocracy that prevails among our colored brethren," Sarah Grimke wrote to Theodore Weld. "I cherished the hope that suffering had humbled them and prepared them to perform a glorious part in the reformation of our country, but the more I mingle with them the fainter are my hopes. They have as much caste among themselves as we have and despise the poor as much I fear as their pale brethren."⁷⁴ Nevertheless, class distinctions persisted. The Negro bourgeoisie, however, although often contemptuous of the less successful, could not dissociate itself from the lower classes. In the segregated community, it depended on Negro patronage. Moreover, racial pride and the fact that legislation applied to all colored classes insured the existence of a Negro community with common grievances, interests, and goals.

⁷³ Lieber, *Letters to a Gentleman*, p. 90. See also Isaac Holmes, *An Account of the United States of America, Derived from Actual Observation, during a Residence of Four Years in that Republic* (London, 1823), p. 331.

⁷⁴ Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, *Address to the Coloured People*, p. 6; Barnes and Dumond (eds.), *Weld-Grimke Correspondence*, I, 498.