

Free People of Color and St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church,
Charleston, South Carolina: 1790-1822
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Revolution, by definition, means the complete turning around of what previously existed. Obviously, after the American Revolution ended, restructuring was necessary in many aspects of government, economics, and society. The American colonists had challenged the English concept of hierarchy and had overthrown much of what was familiar. In addition to the instability caused by the war, questions about the social relationships between people abounded, and this was no where more evident than in the race relations in Charleston in the early years of the Republic.¹ The demographic changes that ensued from the American and later the Haitian Revolutions created a population of free people of color in Charleston that was drastically different from that which existed prior to the American Revolution. This change caused a new stratification of the free black population and changed the way elite whites interacted with parts of this population.

Following the American Revolution the number of free people of color increased throughout the thirteen original states, but particularly in urban areas like Charleston. These changes resulted in a more diverse population of free people of color. The American Revolution itself enabled numbers of slaves to acquire freedom with some having served in the place of their masters in the Patriot army in exchange for freedom² while others simply ran away in the chaos of revolution and immediately thereafter.³ Another contributing factor to the demographic change was the slave insurrection in Saint Domingue which sent large numbers of free people of

¹ For a discussion of the American Revolution in this light, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

² Berlin, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 36.

color to sea ports along the Atlantic coast including Charleston in the 1790s. These people, often of mixed race, arrived with different ideas about race and class. As a result of these changes, South Carolina's population of free people of color rose from 1,801 in 1790 to 4,554 in 1820⁴ and Charleston's rose from 586 to 1475.⁵ Ira Berlin, in his study of free people of color in the antebellum South, claims that this large increase "may have intensified the free Negro's consciousness of color."⁶ Those who were free represented both very dark and very light-skinned people as well as a wide range of colors in between. The lightest skinned were often conscious of their blood ties to the elites and cultivated those connections for social and economic benefit. In order to further ameliorate their situation, they made religious choices based on these efforts.

St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church was the key to this identity. Prior to the Revolution, St. Philip's was a mixed race congregation composed primarily of white slave owners and their slaves, but the membership's dynamics changed with the end of the Revolution as a number of upwardly mobile free people of color began to join St. Philip's. This group sought membership status more equal to that of the white membership. The motivations behind their actions and the responses of St. Philip's demonstrate that both the church and elite free people of color were searching for a new social order in the wake of the Revolution. This paper will argue that the presence of these free people of color at St. Philip's indicates the precarious position in which they found themselves. While other scholars have recognized that elite free people of color were members of Episcopal churches, no one has examined the boundaries of their membership and how this reflected their position in the larger Charleston community.

⁴ Berlin, 46-47.

⁵ E. Horace Fitchett, "The Origin and Growth of the Free Negro Population of Charleston, South Carolina," in *The Journal of Negro History* 26, no. 4 (October, 1941), 431.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

St. Philip's, along with many churches of various denominations, sold pews in order to collect revenue to support their ministries. In addition to the initial sales, the church required pew owners to pay annual taxes on their pews. While most churches acknowledged that this was not the ideal way to meet their budgets, they recognized the necessity of this practice. For Episcopal churches following the Revolution, the disestablishment of the church accentuated the need for money. In 1779 the vestry voted to seek a loan of £29,000 from the South Carolina legislature to address the church's financial problems.⁷ By 1783 with the payment of this debt looming, the vestry moved toward a more aggressive approach to renting or selling vacant pews and to collecting from members who were negligent in paying their taxes. Initially, they decided to post on the church door a list of vacant pews and their prices.⁸ By 1785 the number of those owing their annual taxes had climbed significantly prompting the vestry to agree to publish the listing in three area newspapers and demand immediate payment or, they stated, "the Pews will be hired out to others."⁹

In the midst of all of this controversy, free people of color bought and maintained pews alongside white members, and the location of their pews provides insight into the relationship between free people of color and white members at St. Philip's. In spite of all of the debate over pew taxes and appeals for the church warden to generate lists of those in arrears, the minutes of the vestry from 1778 to 1831 only include one listing of who owned each pew at St. Philip's. In May of 1804 the Committee on Pews reported that they had adjusted the pew rates to appear in even dollars. The church contained one hundred forty-eight pews. Pews were numbered, and

⁷ Minutes of the Vestry, St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina (hereafter cited as Minutes, St. Philip's Vestry) 3 August 1779.

⁸ Ibid., 21 April 1783 and 18 August 1783.

⁹ Ibid., 24 March 1785.

the list included both owner names and the amount of their taxes.¹⁰ This list, along with the parish register, provides a valuable window into the roles people of different races played at St. Philip's.

Because Charleston was a cosmopolitan city and the most important city of the Lower South, records giving the identities of at least some of the members are fairly easy to secure making an analysis of the pew ownership list possible. The parish records for the years 1810-1822 indicate the status of all of the participants in baptisms, and further verification of color is accessible through the membership roles of the Brown Fellowship Society, a fraternal brotherhood established by an elite group of free people of color from St. Philip's in 1790. While no statements about color requirements are part of the rules of this organization, the membership certificate clearly states that members had to be free and "brown."¹¹ Their membership roster has been invaluable in the analysis of St. Philip's pew ownership records.

The chart of pew assignments divides the sanctuary into six sections: the North Aisle, the Middle Aisle, and the South Aisle, which were downstairs, and the South Gallery, the North Gallery, and the Organ Gallery, which were in the balcony. The most expensive seats were in the Middle Aisle followed by the North and South Aisles. Robert Olwell in his study *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country* states, "It was customary for the wealthiest and most prominent families in each parish to claim the largest and most central pews."¹² Prior to the Revolution, slaves who worshiped in Anglican churches "occupied the lowliest places: in the gallery at the rear, on benches in the aisles, or merely

¹⁰ Minutes, St. Philip's Vestry, 15 May 1804.

¹¹ *Rules and Regulations of the Brown Fellowship Society Established at Charleston, 1 November 1790 (Charleston: 1844)*, Charleston County Library, Charleston, South Carolina.

¹² Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 110.

standing outside at the windows.”¹³ The prices for pews ranged from thirty-five dollars to five dollars with twenty-eight dollars being the most common price. Pews whose taxes were twenty-eight dollars were both upstairs and downstairs.¹⁴

By 1804 the vestry records indicate that all of St. Philip’s pews were owner-occupied. Free people of color clearly owned at least five pews in the gallery and possibly three others. Of these later three, Abigail Snelling owned pew 113, and only one person with the last name of Snelling appears in the parish register. She is Ann Snelling, and she is recorded as a free person of color; Abigail and Ann possibly represent the same family. In pew 116 Ruth Gardiner is likely a relative of George and Ruth Rapier Gardiner. George Gardiner was one of the few artisans of color in Charleston in the 1770s.¹⁵ Pew 129 is perhaps the most interesting of the group because it carried a tax of twenty-eight dollars like most downstairs pews. T. O. Elliot owned this pew. The parish records indicate that Thomas Odingsell Elliot received his baptism as an adult on November 29, 1811, alongside a “colored” child. While Elliot’s race is not listed in the parish records, other parts of the records demonstrate that baptisms of people of color, whether slave or free, always occurred on days separate from white baptisms.¹⁶ Therefore, it is likely that T. O. Elliot was a person of color who owned a prominent pew.

Other free people of color attended St. Philip’s at this time even though they do not appear to have owned pews. The parish baptismal records from 1810 through 1822 indicate a much larger number of free people of color associated with the church than reflected in the pew ownership list from 1804. Many of the members of the Brown Fellowship Society baptized all of their children at St. Philip’s, were married by the clergy, and had the clergy officiate at their

¹³ Olwell, 110.

¹⁴ Minutes, St. Philip’s Vestry, 15 May 1804.

¹⁵ Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 15.

¹⁶ Parish Register, 1810-1822, St. Philip’s Protestant Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina.

funerals indicating an ongoing relationship with the church. Between 1790 and 1816, the Brown Fellowship Society had sixty-one different members; and nearly half, twenty-four, appear in the parish registry. A larger number than this is likely since the parish registry only reflects those who were baptized, served as godparents, were married, were confirmed, or were buried by the clergy of the church between 1810 and 1822.

The presence of these elite free people of color at St. Philip's raises a number of questions. First, does the ability to own pews indicate a status equivalent to white pew owners? For this, the answer is clearly no. In spite of their possession of pews, when they participated in church rituals, they were grouped with slaves and other people of color. In addition the vestry minutes are clear that, while pew ownership allowed white members to vote on church business, the same was not true for people of color who owned pews.¹⁷ This leads to a second question concerning why elite people of color would choose to maintain a membership of lower status at the Episcopal Church when an African American church which allowed people of color to fill leadership roles had formed across town. The answer to this lies in the desire of elite free people of color to create an identity separate from the rest of the black population. The rejection they experienced at St. Philip's contributed to the formation of a class consciousness which allowed them to separate themselves from those of darker skin or lesser means.

While free people of color participated in a variety of ways at St. Philip's, they were not allowed the use of the church cemetery, and this became an issue. On August 1, 1788, the vestry of St. Philip's met and received a request from P. B. Mathews for permission to bury his child and future family members in the church's cemetery. Mathews obviously wanted to test the limits of membership for himself and his family, and the vestry denied the request without

¹⁷ Vestry Minutes, St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church, 12 August 1805.

further comment.¹⁸ While vestry minutes do not refer to him as a person of color, other evidence in the parish registry and in the South Carolina legislative papers indicates that Mathews was a free person of color not afraid to approach whites in an effort to extend his rights as a free man. Peter B. Mathews with other free black artisans argued for “full enjoyment of the Rights and Immunities of Citizens Inhabitants of a Free Independent State” because they had paid their taxes and supported South Carolina since the end of the Revolution.¹⁹ The Reverend Thomas Frost, who apparently felt empathy for Mathews and other members of his color and status, suggested that they form a burial society which could own a cemetery for the use of its members and their families. This resulted in the formation of the Brown Fellowship Society. The church placed no restrictions on Frost as he carried out his clerical duties, so he was able to officiate at funerals and even participated in the dedication of the land they bought for their cemetery in 1794.²⁰

The Brown Fellowship Society was more than just a burial society. The members worked to emulate other social organizations which flourished at this time, and they indicated this in the opening lines of their *Rules and Regulations*. The preamble asserted that they noticed “the unhappy situation of our fellow creatures, and the distress of our widows and orphans,” and they recognized the “essential duty of mankind” to provide mutual support for each other.²¹ Membership required that one demonstrate a level of success by paying an initiation fee of fifty dollars. With membership one not only attained the right to be buried or have family members buried in the Brown Fellowship cemetery, but one also gained the benefit of what we would call

¹⁸ Vestry Minutes, St. Philip’s Protestant Episcopal Church, 1 August 1788.

¹⁹ Petition from Thomas Cole, Mathew Webb, P. B. Mathews in South Carolina legislative papers, 13 January 1791, Series S165015, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina, text found at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h70t.html> <accessed 25 January 2010>.

²⁰ Brown Fellowship Society, letter requesting assistance with the financing of a Memorial Building , 1904, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

²¹ *Rules and Regulations*, Brown Fellowship Society.

insurance today.²² If a member became ill and was unable to work, the club's representatives would visit regularly and offer a stipend of one dollar and fifty cents each week of the illness. If a family was unable to afford a funeral for a member, the club would provide one. Indigent widows could also receive a sixty dollar yearly death benefit and surviving children received apprenticeships.

While the formation of the Brown Fellowship Society bestowed a level of social protection on elite free people of color, they also actively worked to appear respectable to elite whites. This occurred in two ways. First, they carefully policed their members to ensure that they did not present a threat to the social order of Charleston. This included expelling members who violated accepted standards. In one case a member was expelled from the club for attempting to sell a free person of color into slavery. Secondly, ownership of property was also essential to their identity and the retention of their freedom. In addition to their pews, they owned businesses patronized by whites, used slaves they purchase to work in their businesses, and occupied homes on streets next door to whites.

Avoiding association with the enslaved population was essential to the protection of a separate status for free people of color. Elite free people of color not only walked a careful line between holding slaves and preventing their own enslavement, they also defended the institution of slavery and participated in the reporting of actions that could lead to insurrection. The delicate position they held between the slave owning whites and the enslaved blacks made them eager to maintain the *status quo*. When rumors of insurrection reached the ears of elite free people of color, they aided in reporting these to the authorities and often received great reward for this. The Denmark Vesey conspiracy serves as a good example of this. Peter Desverneys

²² James B. Browning, "The Beginnings of Insurance Enterprise among Negroes," in *The Journal of Negro History* 22, no.4 (October 1937).

was a man enslaved by a white owner. The men planning the insurrection tried to recruit him to their efforts, but he was nervous about how to respond. He was apparently content with the treatment he received from his master and feared participation in an act that may not be successful and could reduce his quality of enslavement. He confided in William Penceel who was a member of both St. Philip's and the Brown Fellowship Society. Penceel advised him to reveal his knowledge to his master. Desverneys followed this advice which led to the exposure of the plan, won Desverneys his freedom and a pension from the state of South Carolina, and exempted Penceel from paying the Negro Capitation Tax for the remainder of his life. All of this, according to Larry Koger, probably brought praise to "the former slave because he protected their slave property and perhaps their lives...(as he) uplifted the position of the free mulattoes in the eyes of the white aristocrats."²³ Ira Berlin writes, "They could see how their status might degenerate, and they knew that whites only needed the flimsiest excuse to take their liberty."²⁴

In social settings they were careful to associate primarily with those who shared the same economic and racial status. Ira Berlin argues that they used their exclusive social ties to sooth "their bruised egos by flaunting their position on top of black society."²⁵ He continues to elaborate by writing, "They married among themselves and often it seemed their purpose was to breed themselves closer to the white ideal, perhaps with the hope of someday winning the full acceptance they craved."²⁶ Bernard Powers compares their customs to those of the white aristocracy, "Among the brown elite, the process by which marriage partners were selected was as elaborate and ritualistic as that of the most aristocratic whites and was designed to ensure that

²³ Koger, 176-177.

²⁴ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 270.

²⁵ Ira Berlin, "The Structure of the Free Negro Caste," in *The Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (Spring, 1976): 313.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

only families with similar socioeconomic backgrounds intermarried.”²⁷ In an effort to assert their connection with whites, elite free people of color avoided any setting which might associate them with the enslaved population or even the poor darker skinned free people of color. This forms the basis for their choice of membership at St. Philip’s.

Finally, it is necessary to establish how unique the status of free people of color in Charleston was. The presence of people of color among white worshipers was not unique to Charleston. In Philadelphia St. George Methodist Church not only had whites and blacks worshiping together, but Richard Allen, a free person of color, even preached from the pulpit. However, with the passage of the Gradual Abolition Act in Pennsylvania in 1780, free people of color were more eager to challenge their status in white churches. When they were unsuccessful at augmenting their status, they formed independent African churches such as Bethel African Methodist Church which Allen led following racial conflict at St. George. Elite free people of color in Charleston could have joined the African church in their city; however, they clearly realized from their experiences at St. Philip’s that they would sacrifice important social, economic, and political ties if they removed themselves from the white religious domain.

²⁷ Bernard E. Powers, Jr., *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 40.

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