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The Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation: Jamaica in the Atlantic World

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Redefining Freedom: The First of August in Jamaica and the United States

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On August 13, 1834, the Marquess of Sligo, then Governor of Jamaica, reported to foreign Secretary Thomas Spring Rice on the happenings of the First of August --- the day Parliament's Act of Abolition was enacted in the West Indies. There had been no large-scale rebellions, as many had predicted. In fact, the Governor wrote that in most parts of the island the day was devoted to worship in the sectarian chapels in special services arranged by the missionaries. In several towns there were "fancy balls" attended by the colonial authorities of the island. Many planters distributed the traditional holiday rations of extra rum and saltfish to celebrate the end of slavery; others slaughtered a cow and had a feast for their former slaves on the estate. All of these events were planned by whites and each ritual sought to define

emancipation as a gift to the slaves. For the missionaries it was a gift from God, for the colonial authorities it was a gift of the state, and for the planters it was a gift from them.¹

But there is evidence in the Governor's dispatch that black Jamaicans did not accept the definition of emancipation as gift, despite their attendance at the white-sponsored celebrations. In the evening, after the missionary services and the planters' dinners, Sligo noted that the streets became "crowded with parties of John Cause Men and their usual noisy accompaniments." The Governor was fairly new to island and I think he meant to say the John Canoe men, and the troupes of dancers and musicians were probably quite similar to what Isaac Mendes Belisario observed a few years later. The Governor also failed to observe that these John Canoe performances were completely out of season. Traditionally, John Canoe was performed during the Christmas holidays, not in August. But for some reason, black Jamaicans decided to perform John Canoe to mark emancipation. And I think they did this in order to establish their own explanation for the passage of slavery.²

White observers in Jamaica always associated the John Canoe performances with resistance and rebellion. The first reference we have to these performances appears in the early eighteenth century work of the traveling botanist Hans Sloane. Sloane did not use the term John Canoe and he is unclear about their timing, but the rituals he describes were likely a precursor. Sloane also noted that while the slaves had once been allowed to use trumpets and drums during their festivals, these musical instruments were banned at the time Sloane arrived on the island. The slaves had "made use of these [instruments] in their wars at home in Africa,"

¹ Marquess of Sligo to Thomas Spring Rice, August 13, 1834, in *Parliamentary Papers* 1835 (177) L, Papers in Explanation of Measures to give effect to Act for Abolition of Slavery. Part I. Jamaica, 1833-35, no. 17, 44.

² *Ibid.*

and the planters believed that the sounds “incited them to Rebellion.” When Edward Long wrote his *History of Jamaica* in 1774 he used the term “John Connu,” placed them during the Christmas holidays, and described them in almost ethnographic detail. The musical instruments were back, suggesting a process of contestation over the rights to music that Africans had won. In 1800, Lady Nugent described three days of “wild scenes” of John Canoe performances complete with singing and drums. She noted that her household could not employ the servants in any way, “for fear of interfering with their amusements.” The long-time Jamaica resident John Stewart wrote of the fear among whites “of the danger...of riots, disorder, and even insurrection” during the Christmas holidays. And in 1831 there was an enormous insurrection that began on December 27th, the third day of revelry, in the hills above Montego Bay. That insurrection spread through half of the island, it took a month to suppress, and the rebellion led inexorably to the abolition of slavery three years later. So in their creation of John Canoe and the revelry associated with it, African Jamaicans created a public ritual that symbolically communicated to whites their hatred of slavery and their inclination to rebel.³

Historian Barry Higman tells us that some in Parliament had recommended January 1, 1835 to be the day abolition was enacted. But Jamaican slaveholders had protested, fearful that emancipation would be associated with the revelry of the Christmas season, making violence all the more likely. The planters’ wishes were granted and Emancipation Day was set for the First of August. But the day chosen did not end the contest over the terms of labor that emancipation created. In St. Ann’s parish, for example, when the festivities were over and it

³ Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica*, 2 vols. (London, 1707), I, lii; Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols. (London, 1774), II, 423-425; Philip Wright, ed., *Lady Nugent’s Journal of Her Residence in Jamaica from 1801-1805* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1966), 49; [John Stewart], *An Account of Jamaica and Its Inhabitants* (London, 1808), 262.

was time to go back to work, the laborers on many estates refused to work unless paid by the estate owners. Tensions between the laborers and the estate managers became so hostile that Sligo sent troops to quell the disturbances and “a vast number” of laborers were flogged or sent to the workhouse. Similar events took place in the parishes of St. James, Westmoreland, and St. Elizabeth. For those who had been enslaved, emancipation was incomplete, as they were now so-called apprentices who still had to work for their former owners for forty hours a week without pay. In resisting the injustices of apprenticeship, and by performing John Canoe to inaugurate this enormous transition in Jamaican society, these unknown laborers and performers sought to publicly define emancipation as the product of resistance. Emancipation was not a gift, it had taken centuries of hard work.⁴

First of August celebrations also became major events in abolitionist communities in the United States. The U.S. celebrations were the invention of the African American community in the North, and they involved a very similar process of redefinition to what we’ve seen in Jamaica in 1834. Just as black Jamaicans sought to shift the meaning of emancipation from benevolent gift to the product of resistance, African Americans sought to redefine the popular notion of “American freedom” to include anti-racism and the abolition of slavery. The public ritual most associated with “American freedom” was the Fourth of July, Independence Day, and when Great Britain abolished West Indian slavery on August 1, 1834, the fortuitous proximity of the Fourth of July and the First of August allowed black and white abolitionists, often together, to project their movement into the public square. In the antebellum decades, white Americans

⁴ B.W. Higman, “Slavery Remembered: The Celebration of Emancipation in Jamaica,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 12 (1979), 56; Sligo to Rice, Aug. 13, 1834.

celebrated the Fourth as the birthday of American freedom. Most whites did not see either racism or slavery as incompatible with “freedom,” and violence against African Americans on the Fourth of July was not uncommon at these raucous, alcohol-fueled celebrations. Coming less than a month later, abolitionist celebrations of the First of August were a courageous response. African Americans and white abolitionists appropriated the forms of the Fourth of July – the banners, parades, orations, toasts, and community gatherings – and infused them with the subversive content of radical abolitionism. Celebrations of the First of August made visible an interracial political collectivity of Americans who rejected the mainstream acceptance of slavery and racism publicly represented by celebrations of “American Freedom” on the Fourth of July.⁵

From the very beginning, abolitionist leaders drew explicit links between the celebrations. The New York celebration in 1834, for example, began with an opening address by the black abolitionist David Ruggles, and was followed by solemn readings of the “DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE,” the “Declaration of the National Anti-Slavery Convention,” and the British Parliament’s Act of Abolition. The ceremonial recitation of the Declaration of

⁵ Recent work on First of August celebrations includes: J.R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); W. Caleb McDaniel, “The Fourth and the First: Abolitionist Holidays, Respectability, and Radical Interracial Reform,” *American Quarterly* 57 (March 2005), 129-151; Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, “Rehearsal for War: Black Militias in the Atlantic World,” *Slavery and Abolition* 26 (April 2005), 1-34; Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 10, 16-96; Patrick Rael, *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 54-81; Genevieve Fabre, “African American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century” in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72-88; William B. Gravely, “The Dialectic of Double-Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808-1863,” *Journal of Negro History*, 67 (Winter 1982), 303-05; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 116-29. On Fourth of July celebrations, see: Simon Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Independence followed the model of the Fourth of July, but the readings of key abolitionist texts challenged the traditional ideology. Following the readings and several orations, the assembly passed resolutions that continued the subversive mirroring of the Fourth. The first resolution celebrated liberation, not of the United States from Britain's tyranny, but of West Indian slaves from the tyranny of slavery. Another resolution hoped that the first of August, 1834 foreshadowed the day when "boasted 'free America'" would follow the British example. The resolutions projected a bold counterpoint to the patriotism of the Fourth of July, and transposed the traditional opposition of a tyrannical Britain and the freedom-loving United States. Moreover, the celebrants' recitation of the Declaration of Independence signaled the embrace of the Revolutionary moment that characterized political abolitionism. Abolitionist commemorations of the First of August tapped into the reigning nationalism, but at the same time demanded a critical re-assessment of the rhetoric of liberty. The Declaration of Independence may have stated that "all men are created equal," but only British abolition had begun to make it so, and only the abolition of slavery would make the United States live up to its pretensions.⁶

A celebration in Philadelphia in 1836 made the link with the Fourth of July even more explicit. In his introduction to the account, William Lloyd Garrison commented that black Philadelphians had carried on a "model" celebration that "might be imitated with advantage by the white celebrators of the anniversary of independence." Here the tables were turned. While the First of August celebration clearly followed the pattern of the Fourth of July, the rowdiness that had come to signify the Fourth led Garrison to suggest that the tone of the First of August

⁶ Boston *Liberator*, Aug. 30, 1834. For more examples of African American commentary on the Fourth of July see, Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 52-53, 86.

should be embraced on the Fourth of July. The celebration began with an address by the black abolitionist James Cornish followed by “appropriate public exercises” that included a procession through the city led by a banner made by the “Ladies of Philadelphia.” Colorfully embroidered with gold-leaf lettering on a fine, white satin background framed with green tassels, the banner proclaimed “AUGUST FIRST, 1834. HAIL BIRTH DAY OF BRITISH EMANCIPATION.”⁷

A dinner followed these events, which ended with a long series of “sentiments” proposed by more than a dozen participants, and cheered by the audience with either “good, cool water” or “fine, pure lemonade.” The Philadelphia “sentiments” played the same ideological role as toasts of wine or hard cider on the Fourth, while simultaneously offering a not-too-subtle critique of the drunkenness that often accompanied such occasions. Samuel C. Hutchins likened emancipation in the West Indies to a tree planted, which would grow until its branches “overshadowed the whole earth, and the fetters that now bind the sons and daughters of Africa be shaken off.” Only then, Hutchins said, could “we universally celebrate the anniversary of Independence of these United States.” Another sentiment proposed by James M’Crummill, toasted the United States as “An unnatural mother to her natural children—still we love her.” As in 1834, these black abolitionists recognized their American identity, but in the same breath they denounced their country’s moral failures.⁸

The abolitionist redefinition of American freedom had its fullest elaboration in the work of Frederick Douglass. In 1848 Douglass was the principal orator at the First of August celebration in Rochester, New York, where he had recently begun publication of his first

⁷ Boston *Liberator*, Sept. 17, 1836.

⁸ Boston *Liberator*, Sept. 17, 1836. Similar examples include: New York *Colored American*, July 20 and Aug. 17, 1839.

newspaper, the *North Star*. The ceremony had been organized by leaders of the African American community and contemporary descriptions of the days' events convey an enthusiastic celebration with an interracial audience of between two and three thousand people. The day began with a meeting of the black community at noon at the Ford Street Baptist Church, where they formed a procession that marched through the streets of the city to Washington Square, which had been prepared with a speaker's platform and seats. "Adams' Brass Band" led the procession of carriages and marchers; the marshals wore "gay ribbons" and the women wore their finest clothes. Banners included: "Ethiopia stretches forth her hands to God," and "Knowledge is Power," carried by a group of African American schoolchildren. The proceedings began with a reading of the Acts of Emancipation of Britain, and of France, which had recently abolished slavery in its West Indian colonies. Reciting these liberating documents set the tone for Douglass to speak.⁹

Douglass's opening lines mocked the rhetoric of the Fourth of July. It was not the occasion for "partial patriotism," or a day for the "the blood stained warrior." It was "the Tenth Anniversary of West India Emancipation – a day, a deed, an event, all glorious in the annals of Philanthropy." It was also 1848 – "stirring times" – when recent events unveiled an America out of step with the progress of human liberty. Revolutions against monarchy had swept across Europe, and Douglass reminded his listeners that while they rejoiced "at the progress of freedom in France, Italy, [and] Germany...we are propagating slavery in...our blood-bought

⁹ Rochester *North Star*, August 4 and 11, 1848.

possessions” in Texas. “While our boast is loud and long of justice, freedom, and humanity,” he cried, “the slavewhip rings to the mockery.”¹⁰

But Douglass had an even more radical message. He spoke of Nathaniel Turner – “a man of noble courage” – who eighteen years before had invoked the name of “a God of justice” and led a rebellion against his oppressors. Douglass reminded his audience that Turner had been shot down “amid showers of American bullets” guided by a Constitution that guaranteed the slaveholder the powers of the Federal Government to suppress rebellion. Douglass charged his white listeners – “the voters of this city” – with the “awful responsibility of enslaving and imbruting my brothers and sisters in the Southern States.” The Constitution provided the “bloody links in the chain of slavery” and their loyalty to its authority made them partners to its crime. Douglass’s challenge to the white voters of his audience to recognize their culpability in American slavery revealed his political agenda. Slavery would not be abolished until a majority was willing to condemn it.¹¹

National developments pushed Douglass even further. In 1850 President Millard Fillmore signed into law the Fugitive Slave Act, which made the slave catcher’s jurisdiction national and threatened the freedom of every African American in the North. In the summer of 1852, the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society invited Douglass to deliver their annual Fourth of July oration. He politely declined to speak on the fourth, but agreed to speak on the fifth in accordance with African American tradition in New York. Douglass’s July Fourth oration bridged the divide between the First and the Fourth, as the radicalism that had begun to emerge on the

¹⁰ Rochester *North Star*, August 4, 1848, reprinted in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 103-104.

¹¹ *Douglass*, ed. Foner, 109-110. It is interesting to note Douglass’s portrayal of Turner’s death as on the battlefield, rather than as the hanging that it was. This is emblematic of his radicalization during this period.

First in 1848 now sharpened his words on that Fifth of July. Like countless orators before him, Douglass began in the noble cadences of commemoration. The founders were “wise men,” they were “brave men” who understood “the remedy for oppression.” The Revolution had been “simple, dignified, and sublime.” But it was “your National Independence,” Douglass told his white listeners. It was “your political freedom” celebrated on that day. Douglass’s brilliant use of the second person laid bare the “immeasurable distance” of race and slavery that barred Douglass from his white listeners. “Why,” he challenged them, “am I called upon to speak here today?” What had black Americans gained from national independence but “stripes and death?”¹²

The traditional opening was a classic rhetorical maneuver that set up the audience for Douglass’s central theme: the relation of American slavery to the Fourth of July. To America’s slaves the Fourth of July was a painful day. White Americans needed to listen, for above the “jubilee shouts” that sounded in every village droned the “mournful wail” of millions enslaved. Those discordant sounds were the paradox of the nation. “More than all the other days in the year,” Douglass cried, the Fourth of July reminded America’s slaves of “the gross injustice and cruelty” they suffered.¹³ He took his audience deep within the slave trade, orchestrated, as it was, by “well dressed” men of “captivating” manners. He forced his listeners to observe the auction, where the babe was sold from her young mother, where the men were “examined like horses,” and the women were “brutally exposed.” He reminded them of the Fugitive Slave Act,

¹² *Oration delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, by Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852* (Rochester, 1852) reprinted in *Douglass*, ed. Foner, 188-190.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

by which “New York has become as Virginia,” and the black person “a bird for the sportsmen’s gun.”¹⁴

Douglass’s rhetorical finale embedded the crimes of American slavery in an international frame. Britain’s churches, in contrast to America’s, had not defended the slaveholder as a Christian but had “bound up the wounds of the West Indian slave, and restored him his liberty.” White Americans, Douglass accused, condemned the “crowned headed tyrants of Russia and Austria,” and yet they defended the “tyrants of Virginia and Carolina” with all the power of federal law. This was dangerous hypocrisy, for the world had changed since the founding. Douglass reminded his audience that the “oceans no longer divide, but link nations together” and the United States could not “shut itself up” from humanity’s moral improvement. Douglass identified a transformation in world history whereby “long established customs of hurtful character” were increasingly subjected to the censure of the world. Only the founding principles of the Declaration, if embraced, could work along with the “obvious tendencies of the age” to erode the chains of America’s slaves. Douglass brought the message of the First of August to his treatment of the Fourth of July. He embraced the moment of national independence not to celebrate American “freedom,” but to redefine it.¹⁵

The meaning of Emancipation, and the meaning of Freedom were contested questions in the Atlantic World of the nineteenth century. Political actors in these societies used public holidays such as the First of August and the Fourth of July to declare their own answers to these

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 198-202.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 202-205.

questions. The commemorations became public rituals laden with importance to the entire society. Whites in Jamaica and the United States used these holidays to exclude peoples of African descent from any authorship of Emancipation or Freedom. But the peoples of African descent had lived a different history, and on the First of August they commemorated that history. Black Jamaicans performed John Canoe and attempted to set their own terms of labor on the estates. Both actions would be repeated countless times over the next several decades, as the descendants of former slaves and former masters struggled over the meaning of emancipation. African Americans appropriated the forms of the Fourth of July. But they took the concept of freedom and expanded it to include themselves. First of August celebrations grew in number and in size over the next several decades, as black and white Americans struggled over the future of slavery and the meaning of American freedom.