MODULE II:

Slavery & Freedom in the Era of the American Revolution, 1775-1800

Introduction: During the American Revolution, African Americans in Connecticut seized upon the era's social disruption and democratic ideology to begin freeing themselves from slavery. A number of whites assisted African Americans in their bid for freedom. Voices in the local communities urged a reconsideration of the issue of slavery. From the pulpit and the podium, ideas were circulated. Some of those ideas led to conclusions that slavery was sinful and contrary to the ideals of the new Republic. Laws were passed by the state which greatly enhanced the movement of enslaved persons towards freedom. While in 1775, Connecticut had over 5000 slaves, by 1800 it would have only 1000. In 1800, it had over 5000 free black people.

1. Black New Englanders and the American Revolution

- Enslaved African Americans took advantage of the disruptions wrought by the Revolution to secure their freedom.
- During the American Revolution in Connecticut, African Americans sought freedom through military service, petitioning, formal manumission, running away, or boldly seizing liberty and living free.

The eruption of the American Revolution in 1775 was the culmination of many years of mounting tension between England and her American colonies. Since the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, the colonists were increasingly discontent with British efforts to supervise their internal affairs, to impose new taxes, and to regulate American trade. While the British army and navy had served to eliminate the threat of

the French presence in Canada by 1763, the Americans chafed as the British attempted to increase their control over the colonies after the war. In Connecticut, the colonists had long had their own assembly and passed most laws that regulated their domestic life in the colony. Trading was very important for New England. Over time, merchants and ship captains found ways to bypass British officials to avoid paying taxes and duties levied on goods carried along the coast and over the ocean. Colonists in Connecticut and beyond had grown accustomed to ruling themselves and were very proud of their local assemblies. New England was particularly vocal in opposing Britain's expanding authority in the 1760s and 1770s. By 1775 after England had closed the port of Boston, given greater power to the royal governors, and stationed troops in Boston, many believed that the British crown was planning to make slaves of the white colonists, depriving them of autonomy. Many concluded the British King was a tyrant and to take action against this threat to their liberty, the colonies joined together in July 1776 to proclaim their independence from Great Britain. They based their declaration on the democratic ideal that all men are created free and equal.

The American Revolution undermined slavery in Connecticut. While slavery was not abolished in the new state during the Revolution, Connecticut authorities began to pass laws which weakened the institution. In 1774, the General Assembly prohibited any further importation of slaves into Connecticut. In 1777, the Assembly made it easier for owners to free (that is: "manumit") their slaves. This law provided a formal process by which the local Board of Selectmen would interview both slave owner and slave to

determine the fitness of the slave to be self-supportive and the desire of the individual to be free. The process usually resulted in release from the bonds of slavery. The Assembly also passed a law acknowledging the slave owners' authority to grant their adult male slaves permission to join the militia or the Continental Army. Their military service could be rewarded with manumission. A number of whites in Connecticut were beginning to accept the possibility that their black countrymen might live in the state as other than an enslaved people.

These new laws and the Revolution's great social disruptions and democratic ideals created unprecedented opportunities for the people of color to gain personal autonomy. Several hundred slaves who enlisted in the militias and the Continental Army were rewarded with manumission. Many fought valiantly, as was the case with the celebrated black soldiers at the Battle of Fort Griswold in 1779 and Ned of Redding who was identified as "A very zealous friend to the American cause . . . and went to Danbury to oppose the British troops and then and there bravely fought . . . till he was killed by the sd. Enemies." In testimony preserved in the public record, some slaves seized the democratic rhetoric of the era to petition the General Assembly for their freedom. Pomp of Norwalk refused to flee with his owner to British lines and remained instead in Fairfield, hopeful that the General Assembly would grant his petition for freedom. Still hundreds of others took advantage of the Revolution's turmoil and simply ran away. Many headed to New York City where the occupying British allowed them to live as free people. The newspapers of the era were filled with advertisements for runaways, many

of whom were never re-captured. The enslaved of Connecticut made certain that the Revolution would be as much about their independence as it was about the independence of the colonies.

2. The Nagging Contradictions of Slavery

- While the democratic ideals of the Revolution influenced the new antislavery sentiments which arose at this time, New England people of color had been seeking freedom long before these ideals had popular support. Some of the most important antislavery writings from the Revolution were produced by enslaved black men who petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly for their freedom and for the abolition of the institution of slavery.

- A number of prominent white men in Connecticut began to oppose slavery during the era of the American Revolution. The most ardent among them were Congregational ministers like Levi Hart and Jonathan Edwards, Jr. and the editor, Theodore Dwight. All were important founders of the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom.

The Revolution espoused great democratic ideals—liberty, equality, freedom for self and national rule. These ideals helped inspire the antislavery movement which emerged during this era. Patriot Party members argued that the British intended to tyrannize the colonists, reducing them to slaves. Black slaves in their midst were a reference point, repeatedly singled out to illustrate vividly what the English monarchy might do to the struggling Americans. Other Patriots were concerned that their own denunciations of tyranny and of slavery rendered them gross hypocrites so long as the enslavement of thousands of Africans continued. As one anxious Connecticut author wrote before 1775: “How can we expect our endeavors at the court of Great-Britain

should be bless'd, when we are acting a more cruel part with our neighbours, the Blacks?" While slavery remained in place in Connecticut throughout the Revolution, more and more Patriot Party supporters were troubled by the contradiction between their professed ideals and the slavery that existed all around them.

The most notable critics of slavery to emerge in Connecticut during the era of the Revolution were the Congregational ministers, Levi Hart and Jonathan Edwards, Jr. Both of these men were very influenced by another Congregational minister, Samuel Hopkins, who lived in Newport, Rhode Island. Newport was commonly known as one of the major centers in North America for the Atlantic slave trade. Hopkins witnessed first hand the brutalities of this traffic while serving as a minister there. He was deeply disturbed by this commerce. In 1775, he exhorted Americans to abandon the sinful traffic or else, he prophesied, an angry God would frustrate their movement for independence. Hopkins' words helped move the colonies in New England and beyond to end the importation of Africans.

Hopkins argued as well that the institution of slavery was horribly sinful and should be abolished. Reverend Hopkins contended that the highest calling of a Christian was to love others without self-interest. This act was a grace from God he called "disinterested benevolence." Hopkins preached a doctrine claiming that all humans, regardless of how seemingly different or 'foreign', were actually "neighbors" who merited this love and fellowship. For Hopkins, nothing more grossly violated this central Christian doctrine than did slavery, which reduced one denied benevolence and

fellowship to a segment of mankind. People of African descent, he admonished, were the colonists' brothers and sisters whom God valued as much as any others. If those held in bondage seemed ignorant of customs or behaviors, it was only because their enslavement had made them so. Because of the slave owner's exploitation of these people, the colonists now had a Christian obligation to free, uplift and enlighten the slave population.

Hopkins, Edwards, and Hart all believed that the course of the Revolution would be deeply affected by the position the Patriot Party adopted on the issue of slavery. Patriot representatives argued that the new nation as a whole must strive to rid itself of the sin of slavery or God might condemn them all to defeat and enslavement by the British. The foundation of their repudiation of slavery was religious. They believed the Revolution was in accord with their faith and deeply valued its dedication to individual freedom and representative government. Levi Hart wrote one of America's first proposals for the emancipation of slaves with the hope that it would be adopted in Connecticut and launch the new nation on the path toward total abolition. While this plan was never adopted by the state, Hart, Edwards, and other ministers and influential supporters formed the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom in 1790. In 1794, the Society vigorously promoted a bill for the total abolition of slavery, statewide, which came very close to passage, but ultimately failed. Nevertheless, the Society devoted itself throughout the decade to assisting aggrieved people of color—free and enslaved—in the courts. The Society continued to fight the terrible problem black Americans faced from kidnapping. The Society signaled the demise of slavery in the

state of Connecticut.

It was impossible for Blacks to sit by idly as white Americans pursued liberty; rather, they used their own longstanding commitment to freedom to pursue an agenda of dignity and independence. Along with the various measures noted above which they took to secure their freedom, they also wrote petitions to the General Assembly which contained some of the most eloquent assaults on slavery and tributes to liberty written in revolutionary New England. In 1779, Prime and Prince, slaves in the town of Fairfield, petitioned the Assembly not only for their freedom but for that of "the Negroes in the Towns of Stratford and Fairfield." They reproached slavery wherever it existed. "We are all Creatures of that God who made of one Blood, and Kindred, all the Nations of the Earth . . . and can never be convinced , that we were made to be Slaves . . . We are impatient under the grievous yoke . . . and look up to your Honours, (who are the fathers of the People) for Relief." In 1780, blacks elsewhere in the state petitioned that "all the Negro Servants in this State Do in a most humble manner Cry unto you for Liberty." These articulate appeals startled many whites who had not appreciated how deeply dedicated to freedom were the enslaved among them. Their passionate words became some of the most powerful arguments against slavery during the Revolution.

3. Gradual Emancipation

- Connecticut passed a law which began the gradual emancipation in 1784 of all children born to slave mothers that year and after. The law, however, did not free any adult slaves.

- Yet the law made clear that the state of Connecticut had now set itself firmly on a course towards the eventual destruction of slavery.

As a result of the Revolution, northern states began to take steps to abolish slavery. Under both the Articles of Confederation, which had united the colonies during the Revolution, and the Constitution which joined the new states after 1787, the national government had no power to end slavery in any of the states. Each state alone could choose to do so. None of the states south of Maryland chose to end slavery. Moved by the Revolution's celebration of liberty and the emergence of thousands of newly free blacks who had fought and labored responsibly during the war, states in the North began to act against slavery within their borders. In 1780, Pennsylvania passed a gradual emancipation law. Connecticut and Rhode Island followed suit in 1784. In Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont, slavery was soon abolished by a combination of judicial decisions and constitutional provisions. New York and New Jersey, (each of which had a slave population well over 10,000 after the Revolution), resisted acting against slavery initially. But by 1799 in New York and 1804 in New Jersey, the states had enacted gradual emancipation laws. By the turn of the century, slavery was well on the road to extinction in the North.

Gradual emancipation laws struck a devastating blow against slavery in the North but DID NOT abolish slavery. By 1800, Connecticut still had over a thousand slaves. That number would diminish slowly but steadily over the coming years. Connecticut's gradual emancipation act freed children born to enslaved women after 1 March 1784. It

did not free the mother, the father, or any other adults. The children also did not gain their full freedom until they attained the age of twenty-five. Prior to that age, the children in bondage remained in the custody of the parents and slave holders and were required to labor as directed. Enslaved people could also be placed outside the household as apprentices to craftsmen or hired out as contractual laborers to others. All proceeds from this labor, however, were turned over to the slave holder. Thus, prior to attaining the age of majority, these children were legally held in a transitional state, a 'limbo' between slavery and freedom. Slaveholders were required, however, to register the dates of birth of children born after the 1 March date. Many complied. The children were no longer valued as slave property and were listed as free. Subsequent laws were also passed later in the 1780s and 1790s lowering the age at which children would be freed. These laws also forbade the sale of any underage children or others in the slave population to owners outside of the state.

Although some prominent individuals called for a rapid and total abolition of slavery, most white men who controlled the process of emancipation deemed a gradual end to bondage the most judicious and moral course. While they readily acknowledged the injustice and immorality of slavery, they also sought to respect the property rights owners legally held in their slaves and to preserve the stability of the state through a slow and orderly release of the slave population. Part of what made slavery a sin, they argued, was that the institution damaged the character and the will of those who were enslaved by subjecting every aspect of their lives to the total control of their owners. Thus they had

lost the capacity for responsible self-governance, becoming dependent and possibly depraved. A hasty liberation of these people might unbalance Connecticut's social fabric while doing nothing concrete to correct the moral, physical and psychological damage inflicted on these former captives. Conscientious human government was ordained by God as well and this mandate had always to be weighed against the imperative to end the sin of slavery. The Connecticut jurist, Zephaniah Swift, wrote in 1791 that "the extinction of slavery [will occur in the United States] . . . as soon as [it] will be compatible with the safety of the public and the welfare of the slaves themselves." Ideally, honorable slave holders and citizens fulfilled their duty to state and to God by preparing the enslaved for freedom through education and catechism, releasing them only in carefully graduated steps. This "gradualism" did anticipate an expanding freedom for people of color and their growing independence from slave owners. The process of that emancipation was to be initiated, structured, and monitored by conscientious citizens over the coming years.

Black Americans were in no mood to wait for their freedom. Even though no laws existed for the emancipation of adult slaves, Connecticut had 2500 free black people by 1790, the vast majority of whom were born before 1784. By 1800, there were over 5000 free black people in the state. Through negotiating with their owners for manumission, running away or otherwise seizing freedom, people held in slavery proved they had both the desire for independence and the intelligence to secure it.

4. Slave and Free

- Newly free black Americans now had to provide for their own employment, shelter, and care. Some chose to remain with their former owners, entering into contracts for work. Others left to find work on their own or to open small businesses. A number purchased property and established themselves as farmers.

- During the Revolution and after, many within the white population came to view people of African descent and their capacity for a useful freedom in a far more favorable light than they had prior to the Revolution.

- While black Americans enthusiastically embraced their freedom, their new status also posed great problems and even perils. Because of common slaveholding practices, the vast majority of slaves was uneducated and lacked any reserves of money. Borrowing money to buy land or for other uses was made very difficult for them. The kidnapping of black children and adults for sale back into slavery outside of the state was a serious problem.

The steady extinction of slavery and the rise of a growing body of free black people in the North in the decades following the Revolution constituted a radical social transformation for all Americans. In 1790, the free black population in the North numbered about 25,000 and comprised 40% of the region's total black population. By 1810, there were more than 75,000 free black Americans in the North representing 75% of the population of those of African ancestry. Over the long term, this change helped lay the foundation for the sectional tensions which would rise dramatically during the antebellum era and finally explode into the Civil War. More immediately on a local level, it forced a marked shift in behaviors for all involved. Black Americans, who in slavery had been forced to turn over personal control of their total well- being to slave holders, now had to sustain themselves in a world where they largely lacked education, capital, and political power while also bearing the stigma—and racial badge—of previous

enslavement. Whites had too long accepted without question the myth of the "fitness of people of African descent" for enslavement and the routine subjugation and societal control of black Americans. Now they had to reckon with the reality of black independence and self-determination. The decades following the end of the Revolution were ones of transition and experiment in which white Americans and the growing numbers of free blacks Americans sought new structures and values for living and working with each other in the new republic which they unexpectedly found themselves sharing.

In Connecticut, former enslaved people greeted freedom joyfully. However, this new found freedom held added responsibilities—securing work, providing for self and family, creating a meaningful community. Many newly freed African Americans, having few financial resources and bleak wage- earning prospects, chose to remain in the households of former owners. Bristo, once a slave in the household of Judge Simeon Baldwin in New Haven, chose to remain with the Baldwins in the 1790s as a free laborer. Others chose to live on their own, working as day laborers, renting a residence or living on the margins of towns or on unused land. An area called "Hangtown," on an edge of the town of Greenwich, was inhabited by black squatters.

Despite numerous obstacles, free black Americans established themselves as tradesmen, owning their homes as well as the land on which they sat. James Hubbard, a former slave, was a respected master hatter in the late eighteenth century town of Fairfield where he owned land and a home. Cato Freeman owned a house in Newtown as

did Homer Peters, a successful barber and grocer in Danbury.

Venture Smith of Stonington and Cesar and Lowis Peters of Hebron dramatically illustrate the rise of black New Englanders from enslavement to the status of established free persons. Smith secured his freedom in the mid-1760s and continued to labor to ransom his wife and sons from bondage. One of his sons, Cuff Smith, enlisted in the Continental Army in 1781. Venture would come to be a prosperous landowner and entrepreneur in Haddam's Neck near Stonington by the 1780s. Local prominent antislavery activists helped publish his autobiography. They celebrated and praised him as an example of what black Americans, living in freedom, could achieve.

Cesar, Lowis, and their young children were the slaves of the Anglican minister, Samuel Peters, in Hebron before the Revolution. Rev. Peters abandoned them in 1776 when he sought British Tory protection in New York City and eventual asylum in England. Although still legally enslaved, they continued, during the course of the Revolution, to work the farm that Rev. Peters had deserted, gaining the respect and admiration of neighbors for their diligence. Late in the summer of 1787, however, Rev. Peters' nephew arrived in Hebron with heavily armed men and a resolve to expunge the debts of his uncle's estate. Cesar, Lowis and their family were seized as "property" to be sold to Southern slave holders. At great peril to their personal safety, the citizens of Hebron recaptured the family as the agents were transporting them to a Dixie-bound vessel docked in Norwich harbor. Viewed as valued members of the community, Cesar,

his wife and children were held in safety until they were manumitted by the General Assembly.

Seeing black Americans actually live, work and even fight as free persons during after the Revolutionary War period overturned inaccurate assumptions of them as fit only for enslavement. By 1800, many citizens of Connecticut had come to view people of African descent and their capacity for a useful freedom far more favorably than ever they had prior to the Revolution.

Yet by no means were all Connecticut citizens in agreement with this new appreciation. In the years after Independence, little was done to help the formerly enslaved overcome their great educational and financial disadvantages. These huge discrepancies hindered an ability to compete effectively with the larger population. Whites in some parts of the state persisted in clinging to slavery. While the number of slaves by 1790 declined precipitously in such larger slaveholding counties as New London (51%), New Haven (49%), and Hartford (75%), the slave population in Fairfield had only declined by 31%. In 1790, Fairfield held far and away the largest number of slaves of any county in the state with 800 people. As late as 1798, the county still had 350 enslaved persons, 40% of the total number of captive individuals in the state. In 1774, they had had only 23% of the total. Agricultural commerce remained central to Fairfield's economy after the Revolution yet the area continued to lack an adequate number of laborers. Slave labor was very important to meeting this need.

In Fairfield County, there was a resistance to perceiving African Americans in

new, more positive ways. Kidnapping was a serious problem confronting people of color and the most dangerous county for them, by far, was Fairfield. Farmers and merchants in Fairfield County were very closely connected with businessmen in nearby New York City. In late eighteenth century New York, slavery remained a vigorous institution. Indeed, in the 1790s, the number of slaves in New York City and elsewhere in the state actually increased to their highest levels just before the Revolution. In nearby New York City, an extremely profitable, lively market existed for slaves and those unfortunates who were kidnapped. Fairfield slave-owners, largely deprived of large slave holding fortunes, were now profiting from the sale of slaves within Connecticut. Although by the early 1790s strict laws existed in Connecticut against the sale or removal outside of the state of enslaved adults or children born in and after 1784, a surprising number of people were still being transported across state lines. Many of these individuals were kidnapped from Fairfield County. In the early 1790s, Isaac Hillard, a white citizen of Redding, fought in the courts and the General Assembly for the safe return of several local African American children illegally sold into slavery in New York and Virginia. Despite the venom heaped upon him by the local townsfolk who resented any interference with their so-called "property," Hillard persevered and secured the return of kidnapped children and adults to their families and the punishment by fine of the malefactors. Ebenezer Mallery of Newtown similarly struggled against other slaveholders and kidnappers in Fairfield County. Several members of the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom also helped secure the return of kidnapped black Americans in the 1790s from North Carolina

and elsewhere. Hillard seemed to recognize the persistent strength of support for slavery in Fairfield County when he exclaimed in 1797 to the residents: "Why do you not come out fair, and show your cloven feet, and say you wish to see your fellow creatures stolen and sold?" Up to 1800 and beyond, slavery continued in Connecticut. Although the majority was free, black Americans in the state could still find it a dangerous and insecure place.

The trend in Connecticut still veered clearly towards freedom for people of African descent. Even in Fairfield County, the number of the enslaved had dropped to 300 persons by 1800 and continued steadily downward. Connecticut was on its way to becoming a "free state."