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“A Convenient Seat in God’s Temple”:¹
The Massachusetts General Colored
Association and the Park Street Church
Pew Controversy of 1830

MARC M. ARKIN

ON a brisk Sunday morning in late February 1830, a middle-aged African American man left his home near the bottom of Boston’s Belknap Street and began the steep climb up the north slope of Beacon Hill, through the heart of Boston’s black community. On an ordinary day, Frederick Brinsley might have taken the short walk down the hill and turned east on Cambridge Street in order to reach his second-hand clothing store on Elm Street in the city’s Dock Square district. In that way, he could stay within Boston’s expanding African American neighborhood as long as possible, walking through the small commercial quarter that lay between Court and Hanover Streets in the city’s Fourth Ward, perhaps even

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¹William J. Snelling, in an 1833 speech before the New England Anti-Slavery Society, quoted in Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 121.

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passing his friend David Walker’s used clothing shop on Brattle Street along the way.

But this was no ordinary working day, and Brinsley was on no ordinary errand. As he climbed the hill, Brinsley could see the homes of his contemporaries within Boston’s precarious black middle class, among them John Telemachus Hilton at number 12, Reverend Stephen Dutton at number 20, and Baptist Deacon George Washington at 29. Midway up the hill, Brinsley would have passed the cul de sac of what is now Smith Court, where Baptist worshippers were likely gathering at the First African Meeting House for the morning service. Perhaps he even stole a glance at the church basement rooms that housed the recently named Abiel Smith School for black children. Still, he continued on his way up Beacon Hill until he reached its crest at Myrtle Street, the dividing line between black Boston and white Boston, between the cramped dwellings that housed multiple families with their various boarders and the spacious homes of Boston’s elite located on the south side of the hill as it descended to Beacon Street and the Common stretching beyond it.

Brinsley would have continued down Belknap until it intersected Beacon Street, turned left, and walked two short blocks to Park Street, at the eastern edge of the Common, passing the monumental Massachusetts State House on the way. Now he was in more hostile territory, an area frequented by idle white youths bristling with racial insults and spoiling for a fight, even with a respectable black tradesman. Perhaps he even quickened his pace to avoid trouble, particularly on that Sunday. Once he reached Park Street, Brinsley followed the now gentler slope of the hill down to the southeastern corner of the Common, his objective in plain sight the whole time.

Park Street Church—“the most interesting mass of bricks and mortar . . . in America” according to Henry James—dominated the Common in 1830 as now. Its spire loomed some 217 feet over the green, nearly ten feet taller than the State House dome, an ostentatious challenge to Unitarianism laid down by Boston’s most conservative—and by some accounts its wealthiest—congregation. Founded in 1808, Park Street was

the first Congregational Church in Massachusetts to be built entirely by private subscription and the first to be formed in the Commonwealth since before the ratification of the federal constitution.²

Two decades after its establishment, Park Street Church stood at the very heart not only of Boston, but of the Benevolent Empire of evangelical Protestant voluntary associations that dominated the cultural landscape of antebellum America. Presided over by the Reverend Edward Beecher—son of the eminent Congregational minister Lyman Beecher and older brother of the soon-to-be more famous Harriet Beecher Stowe—Park Street members were prominent for their good works ranging from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Society for the Moral and Religious Instruction of the Poor as well as popular causes such as the evangelically-inspired campaign against Free Masonry. In 1826, the American Temperance Society was founded in its lower vestry. A year earlier, in the same vestry, Park Street had organized an ecclesiastical council on behalf of the American Colonization Society (ACS) at which thirteen carefully selected black people about to depart for Liberia were officially gathered into a church, the better to support one another in their dual mission of expatriation and bringing Christianity to the indigenous peoples. The first such group to depart from a New England port, they represented the ACS's significant inroads in the region once it allied its cause with foreign missions. Park Street continued to enjoy close ties with the ACS when, in the summer of 1829, the Church invited a young Federalist newspaper editor named William Lloyd Garrison to deliver its prestigious Fourth of July Oration, a yearly event throughout New England, whose collection was dedicated to furthering the purposes of the Society.³

²Henry James, *The American Prospect*, quoted in H. Crosby Englizian, *Brimstone Corner: Park Street Church, Boston* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978); Abel Bowen, *Brown's Picture of Boston or the Citizen's and Stranger's Guide to the Metropolis of Massachusetts and Its Environs*, 2d ed. (Boston: Abel Bowen, 1833), pp. 159–60.

³P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement: 1816–1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 121–24; Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William*

None of this was lost on Frederick Brinsley on that late winter morning as he made his way up the church steps and into the main sanctuary. The hall itself was notoriously large, another gauntlet thrown before the theological liberals now in control of Harvard and all seacoast Massachusetts. It could not but have impressed Brinsley, as it does everyone who enters it. Ignoring the stairway to the upper gallery where black worshippers were ordinarily confined, Brinsley set his course down the center aisle, making his way past row upon row of pews until he was only a few lengths from the pulpit itself. There, among the most expensive pews in the church, among the deacons, the socially prominent, and the well-to-do, with all eyes upon him, the sole black worshipper in the main sanctuary, Frederick Brinsley took his seat in pew 82, the pew whose deed he now held and which he now legally owned.

Despite some inconsistency in the available sources, Brinsley seems to have appeared at Park Street on two other Sundays. On at least one occasion, his family may have accompanied him. This much, however, is quite certain: when Brinsley returned to the pew on that last Sunday, he found his way barred by a city constable, stationed at the door to pew 82 at the behest of the church’s governing Prudential Committee, a course of action taken after a series of heated meetings filled with much prayer and discussion.⁴ Soon afterward, the church forced Brinsley to surrender his title to the pew. Brinsley’s original deed still exists in the Park Street archives as does a newly issued deed reflecting the forced transfer, which bears his signature.⁵ Brinsley’s exclusion from Park Street immediately passed into legend among Boston’s black community and quickly became a cause

Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), pp. 61–68.

⁴Entry of 23 February 1830 supports the date of 21 February 1830 for Brinsley’s first visit to the church; Entry of 3 March 1830 authorized the Prudential Committee to bar Brinsley from his pew. Records of the Park Street Church, 1809–1834, pp. 447–48, Congregational Library, Boston. See below note 84.

⁵Henry Farnam originally purchased the pew in late October 1813, about three years after the meetinghouse was completed. Deed to Pew 82, Pew Deeds by Society, 1810–1820, pp. 93, 134. Records of the Park Street Church.

celebre in the wider world of abolitionism as a potent symbol of all that was wrong in America's treatment of its black citizens, at once transgressing upon the fundamental gospel message and the right of a free man to own property. It is the thesis of this article that Frederick Brinsley's appearance in Park Street Church was an act of protest coordinated by the Massachusetts General Colored Association (MGCA), the most forward-thinking black civil rights organization of its day, presumably with the co-operation of the previous pew owner, Henry Farnam, himself a member of Boston's white mercantile elite.

Although the evidence is primarily circumstantial, none of the existing abolitionist accounts portraying the event as the result of an arms-length business transaction survive scrutiny. On the other hand, Brinsley was a founding member of the MGCA and among its inner circle until his death. Contemporaneous writings of other MGCA members show that pew segregation in general and Park Street Church in particular were in the organization's sights as prime exemplars of the alliance between America's churches and the ACS and of the hypocrisy of America's white Christians in refusing to extend civic equality to blacks. Indeed, two of the MGCA's founders—Hosea and Joshua Easton—had personally engaged in earlier protests against segregated church seating and another—David Walker—had been touched by the Reverend Richard Allen whose well-known 1787 Philadelphia protest against segregated worship led to the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

What is more, years later, the letters from Park Street authorities to Brinsley remained in the hands of abolitionists—presumably through members of the MGCA which had been subsumed as an auxiliary to Garrison's New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1833—and are known to have been shown to at least one visiting foreigner as a demonstration of the supremacy of caste in ostensibly liberal Boston. All of this suggests that Brinsley's heroic act was part of a concerted MGCA strategy to publicize white racism in its least sympathetic

iteration—segregated worship—and to claim civic status on equal terms with whites, by confrontation if necessary.⁶

Even if direct evidence of the connection between the MGCA and Brinsley’s challenge to Park Street is lost to the historical record, close scrutiny of the event and its participants sheds substantial new light on this crucial organization, its membership, its part in the transition from uplift to radical abolition in the black community, and, ultimately, on its role in forging the alliance between black and white activists that was critical to the growth of northern abolitionism. Indeed, the Park Street protest provides significant insight into the dynamic that shifted the focal point of black abolitionism from Philadelphia and New York to New England.

Scholarly appreciation of the significance of the MGCA has only grown in light of the increased emphasis on the role played by black abolitionists and the black community generally in the development of the northern abolitionist movement. Recent scholars have called the MGCA “one of the most important” among the many contemporaneous black uplift societies, its “broad vision . . . unprecedented for a black political association of its time,” and have proclaimed it a key driver in the creation of the “urban networks that enabled a systematic correspondence among black leaders, and helped create a black abolitionist movement” which, based on “fervent opposition” to the American Colonization Society, “revolutionized white abolitionism by the early 1830s.”⁷

⁶Newman, *Transformation*, pp. 104–05, for the critical importance of narratives and testimony in a black abolitionist strategy of moral confrontation.

⁷John Ernest, *A Nation Within a Nation: Organizing African American Communities Before the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011), p. 45; Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997), p. 76; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), p. 211. Newman considers Walker and the MGCA to be the culmination of rather than a break with Boston’s prior black activist tradition and points out that although their organizations were largely segregated until the 1830s, opposition to colonization forced black strategists to co-ordinate tactics and seek new alliances with white abolitionists. He also states that “capping years of informal activity,” “dozens of activists” met to form the GCA, “an umbrella organization dedicated to securing black freedom and racial justice.” Without further elaboration, Newman asserts that

Yet, despite this scholarly consensus, surprisingly little is actually known about the MGCA.⁸ None of its records survive and only a few of its members left any writings behind them. Indeed, while emphasizing the group's importance, current scholarship is hard pressed to speak in more than generalities about its activities. Instead, most accounts treat the group as the lengthened shadow of its most famous member, the charismatic David Walker; its mission to forge bonds among free black communities swallowed up after his death by the Negro Convention Movement⁹ and its independent existence by the New England Anti-Slavery Society. Historians largely base their account of the group on a speech Walker delivered in December 1828 at the MGCA's first semi-annual meeting, a speech that was published in *Freedom's Journal*, the country's first black-run newspaper.¹⁰ In doing so, they have effectively failed to develop a broader picture of the organization and its goals. Drawing on a variety of contemporaneous newspaper

"The GCA earned a national reputation for its adamant protests against colonization" as well as its strategy of organization and confrontation. Newman, *Transformation*, pp. 96, 100.

⁸Sources reflect some uncertainty as to whether the MGCA was founded in 1826 or 1828. John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1914), p. 36, is apparently the original source for the 1826 date. Daniels's reading was picked up by James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, rev. ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1999), p. 57 and Newman, *Transformation*, p. 100. Hinks agrees with the 1828 date, stating that the earliest reference he can find for the MGCA is in *Freedom's Journal* in September 1828. *Afflicted Brethren*, p. 75n. Some of the difficulties in developing a full history of the MGCA are illustrated by Newman who credits James Barbadoes and other members of the MGCA with coauthoring an 1831 tract that persuaded Garrison to repudiate colonization. *Transformation*, p. 101. Yet, Newman's only citation to the tract is to Garrison's quotation of it in his *Thoughts on African Colonization*. None of the co-authors are ever identified. *Transformation*, p. 213ns. 52 and 53.

⁹The Negro Convention Movement first met in 1831 and held yearly meetings of northern black activists throughout the antebellum period. Its aim was to foster communication and solidarity as well as to support black causes, all issues central to the MGCA's mission. Hinks, *Afflicted Brethren*, pp. 103–105, 107–108.

¹⁰Hinks, *Afflicted Brethren*, p. 76. As Walker's biographer, Hinks understandably gave pride of place to his subject when discussing the MGCA. Other recent sources largely follow Hinks's account, e.g. Davis, *Age of Emancipation*, p. 211; Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), pp. 22, 25; Ernest, *Nation within a Nation*, pp. 45–46.

accounts, including those in *Freedom’s Journal* and *The Liberator*, as well as other print and archival sources, this article aims to tell a more nuanced and detailed story about the MGCA, its members, their aims and activities within the black community, and their complex relationship with white Boston in general and its churches in particular. As one nineteenth-century chronicler of the group lamented, “By the early post-Civil War period, the names of these men and others mentioned, with few exceptions, were known only to a few persons with long memories.”¹¹ It is the aim of this piece to restore them to their rightful place, insofar as the historical record will permit, while focusing on their part in the single most spectacular civil rights protest in Boston before the fugitive slave rescues half a decade later. Their protest provides a window in microcosm on the complex dynamic of black activism at a time in which the black community was poised between espousing separatism and forging alliances with white radicals as the best means to achieve its goals of civic equality and the abolition of slavery.

I.

One indication that the Park Street incident was intended to draw public attention to the racism endured by free blacks in everyday life is the wide publicity it enjoyed from the very first. Although the white Boston press bypassed the event, writing only days after Brinsley’s final exclusion, David Walker added a vivid, if cryptic, account of the incident to the third and final edition of his famous *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, identifying Park Street by name.¹² White antislavery activists soon took up the Park Street story as the perfect

¹¹George W. Williams, *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619 to 1880: Negroes as Slaves, as Soldiers, and as Citizens* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1883) 2: 44. As an illustration of the relative obscurity into which these pioneers have fallen when compared with the later generation of black activists, Kantrowitz mentions only Nell, Walker, and Hilton and suggests that the significance of black abolitionists was submerged by a self-congratulatory narrative fostered among white New Englanders. *More Than Freedom*, pp. 25, 419–24.

¹²*David Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, 3rd and last ed., Peter Hinks, ed. (1830 repr. University Park, Pa., Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), pp. 56–57. See Hinks, “Introduction,” p. xlvi.

example of the depth of both prejudice and hypocrisy in white America, trenching as it did on the twin cultural icons of property rights and religion. By the spring of 1831, the Park Street story had made its way into William Lloyd Garrison's newly founded anti-slavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, and pew segregation became a staple in its columns. For Garrison, the issue perfectly served his purposes, namely to convince black leaders of his genuine commitment to eradicating racial prejudice in American life while appealing directly to the consciences of white men and women everywhere. Garrison only needed to allude to the protest to evoke its full significance since virtually the entire early readership of *The Liberator*—then centered in Boston's black neighborhoods—already knew exactly what had happened at Park Street.¹³

A few years later, evidencing this campaign for white sentiment, a detailed account of the Park Street incident appeared in a book written by Edward Abdy, a Cambridge don with strong anti-slavery sympathies. Abdy had visited the northeastern United States in the summer of 1833 as part of a plan to tour the country and provide his English readers with a “full and faithful picture of the cruelties he had witnessed.” Although Abdy allowed that he was much taken with Boston for the safety of its streets, the cleanliness of its hackney coaches, and the civility of its inhabitants, he echoed David Walker in wondering at “how far the aristocracy of the skin is carried in this pious city.”¹⁴

As Abdy recounted, during his Boston visit an unnamed abolitionist placed “a curious document” into his hands—which turned out to be correspondence addressed to Brinsley by the Church—and then proceeded to spell out the full story that went with it. The scenario suggests that Brinsley's appearance

¹³*The Liberator*, 23 April 1831. See below notes 93-95.

¹⁴E.S. Abdy, *Journal of a Residence and Tour in the United States of North America from April 1833 to October 1834* (London: J. Murray, 1835 repr. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969) 1:v. See also, “Review, Abdy's Residence and Tour in America,” *The Spectator: A Weekly Journal of News, Politics, Literature, and Science* 8 (1837): 563-64 which discusses Abdy's treatment of the Park Street protest and provides a detailed description of an earlier protest by the Easton family.

was part of an organized effort to publicize the depth of the country’s racial divide with a high profile incident that would draw the sympathies of a wider audience. The informant’s step-by-step narrative was critical since Abdy—and his British audience—did not have the benefit of local knowledge and needed detail as well as documentation to establish what might otherwise have been an incredible tale. In fact, for those who did not understand the customs of the United States, Abdy felt compelled to add an explanatory aside, “It should be observed that the colored people are not admitted to places of worship, except to small pews or boxes set apart expressly for them, and so placed that they can hear without offending the fastidious delicacy of the congregation.”¹⁵

As the informant’s story went, a free black man had obtained ownership of a pew in a Boston church as the “only thing” he could secure from a white man who owed him money. After furnishing the pew, the black man put it up for sale. Not finding a purchaser at his asking price, presumably because no one would pay full price for something that the black owner could not use, “he determined to occupy it himself.” As to the black owner’s motives, Abdy offered only the implausible alternatives of black ignorance or hoped-for white restraint: “whether he was unconscious of the offence he was about to give, or thought he might as well speculate upon the white man’s pride, as, it would seem, the white man had speculated upon his submissiveness.” As Abdy put it, “[t]he sensation produced by his unexpected appearance among the favored children of Nature in the very sanctum sanctorum of their distinctions, can be described by those only who witnessed it.”¹⁶

The black man’s second appearance, this time with wife and children—what Abdy termed evidence of “this contumacious spirit”—proved too much for the as yet unnamed congregation. At this point, Abdy interrupted his third-person narrative to offer his readers the text of the documents the anonymous abolitionist had shown him. Only here, for the first time, did

¹⁵Abdy, *Journal*, 1:133–35.

¹⁶Abdy, *Journal*, 1:133–35.

Abdy identify the black pew owner as Frederick Brinsley, the church as Park Street, and the author of the documents as George Odiorne, writing on behalf of the Church's governing body, its Prudential Committee. The first note, dated 6 March 1830, advised Brinsley that if he had any pew furniture on the premises, he was to remove it "this afternoon." The second, addressed to Mr. Frederick Brinsley, "colored man," Elm Street—the correct location of Brinsley's shop at the time—warned him "not to occupy any pew on the lower floor of Park Street Meeting-House on any Sabbath, or on any other day, during the time of divine worship . . . and, if you go there, with such intent, you will hazard the consequences. The pews in the upper galleries are at your service." Brinsley did go again, and on that third Sunday, as Abdy succinctly put it, he "found a constable at the pew-door. No further attempt was made to assert the rights of property against such a formidable combination and we may seek in vain for the consequences, which Mr. Odiorne, with official brevity, says would have been hazarded by another visit to the house of God."¹⁷

The Park Street incident continued to figure in anti-slavery tracts and in each retelling different details emerged. In at least one, the focus was on the hypocrisy of Park Street Church, "then and since the headquarters of 'orthodoxy' in Boston." There the affront lay in the fact—amply corroborated by Church records—that the Church voted to deprive Brinsley of his pew and then met five or six times more—"each [meeting] opened and closed with prayer"—to develop a form of pew ownership that would exclude "the whole colored race from equal participation in their worship."¹⁸ A few offered telling embellishments, such as the writers who provided the fact that

¹⁷Abdy *Journal*, 1:134–35. The only inconsistency between Abdy and the church records appears to be the pew number, which Abdy records as 38. Cf., *The Liberator*, 23 April 1831 ("On the third or fourth Sabbath, however, (if we do not err,) a deacon, one or two Committeemen and a constable interfered, and would not permit him to take his seat!").

¹⁸Oliver Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and his Times; or, Sketches of the Anti-Slavery Movement in America and of the Man Who Was Its Founder and Moral Leader* (Boston: B.B. Russell & Co., c. 1880), p. 100.

the pew was on “the central aisle” of the Church.¹⁹ Each strove to characterize Park Street’s response to Brinsley’s presence, none better than abolitionist Oliver Johnson, an early associate of Garrison, who actually lived in Boston in 1830. Unfettered by British restraint, Johnson recalled that Brinsley’s “appearance and that of his family in that fashionable house of worship was accounted by all Boston as an outrage scarcely less flagrant than the use of a pew as a pigpen.”²⁰

Notably, each of these sources took great pains to paint Brinsley’s motives for acquiring and occupying the pew in the most neutral light possible. Abdy related that the pew was the “only thing” that Brinsley could obtain from a man who was “unable, or unwilling, to pay a legal claim he had upon him.”²¹ Abolitionist Charles Whipple stated flatly that Brinsley “bought and paid for” the pew while Johnson simply allowed that, having acquired the pew “in trading with a white man,” Brinsley hoped that “he might be profited by the ministrations of an intelligent white minister.”²² *The Liberator* reported that “a respectable black man,” “purchase[d] a pew in the broad aisle,” emphasizing for good measure that Brinsley “had the pew very handsomely furnished, and was the legitimate proprietor.”²³ Yet, none of these stories survive careful scrutiny of the finances of either the pew’s previous owner or Frederick Brinsley.

II.

Church records reflect that on December 23, 1829, Frederick Brinsley acquired title to Park Street pew number 82 from

¹⁹Johnson, *Garrison*, p. 100. *The Liberator*, 23 April 1831.

²⁰Johnson, *Garrison*, p. 100.

²¹Abdy, *Journal*, 1:133–35.

²²Charles K. Whipple, *Relations of Anti-Slavery to Religion, Anti-Slavery Tracts No. 19* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, n.d.), pp. 7–9; Johnson, *Garrison*, p. 100. Disagreeing with the church records and other sources, Whipple sets the incident in the course of a single day, with Brinsley appearing with his family in the morning and finding himself forcibly barred from the pew in the afternoon. His suggestion that Brinsley hoped to benefit from Edward Beecher’s ministry is particularly implausible since Beecher was shortly to be embroiled in a controversy within his church over his poor preaching and neglect of ministerial duties. Beecher resigned under pressure in October 1831.

²³*The Liberator*, 23 April 1831.

Henry Farnam, a prosperous businessman with a long history of civic involvement. What is abundantly clear is that without some form of assistance—either from Farnam himself or from others—Brinsley could not have afforded to purchase the Park Street pew. Equally clear, Brinsley was hardly in the position to throw away money on something that he would not be able to use or sell himself. The original 1813 deed shows Farnam paid \$550 for the pew, further obligating himself to pay quarterly dues of \$7.15 to the church.²⁴ This made number 82 one of the most expensive pews in the church; its stated value was more than Brinsley's entire taxable net worth in 1829. Even allowing for a decline in the real value of Park Street pews in the intervening decade and a half,²⁵ its yearly dues of \$28.60 were a substantial sum for a man who until then had never been taxed on a net worth of more than four hundred dollars²⁶—who at that moment was struggling to recover from a November fire that had destroyed his shop and its entire contents.²⁷

Thus, the spotlight turns to Henry Farnam. From at least 1807 to 1818, Farnam maintained a luxury goods shop at 15 Cornhill Street in Boston's Fourth Ward, around the corner from the Dock Square district where Brinsley and his cohort eventually located their stores.²⁸ Farnam kept his ties to the

²⁴Deed to Pew 82; *Pew Deeds by Society, 1810–1820*, p. 93.

²⁵Deed to Pew 82; Entry of 18 May 1829, *Park Street Records, 1809–1834*, p. 50, shows unsold pews remaining in the Church's inventory trading at a steep discount. Park Street resolved not to sell those pews for less than 25% of the appraised values, while facing the prospect of foreclosing on some of those already sold.

²⁶The 1829 Transfer Book for Wards 7 and 9 reflect that Brinsley paid his yearly taxes of \$3.08 on 5 June 1830. This included the standard poll tax of \$1.50 on each adult male in the household, leaving a tax bill of \$1.58 on Brinsley's personal estate of \$200. Until 5 June, Brinsley's net worth, exclusive of inventory and tools, had ranged between \$200 and \$300. *Boston City Valuation Books, 1823–1828*. Both the Transfer Books and City Valuation Books are located in City of Boston Archives and Records Management Division (hereafter referred to as Boston City Archives).

²⁷*Providence Patriot and Columbian Phenix*, 2 December 1829. The fire took place on 25 November.

²⁸*Columbian Centinel*, 18 February 1807 (notice dissolving the firm of Rufus Farnam and Henry Farnam at 15 Cornhill Street, with Henry continuing the firm's luxury goods business in his own name while Rufus set up a jewelry store on Marlboro Street), see also *Boston Directory* 1823, p. 28. In 1818, in his mid-forties, Farnam advertised

area even after he closed his store. In 1823, he served as one of the members for the Fourth Ward of the newly formed city government’s Common Council.²⁹ From 1824 through 1826, Farnam served as warden for the Fourth Ward, an office that involved overseeing elections when the polling moved from a single location at Faneuil Hall to the city’s wards under the new municipal government; his duty was to control the ward for the Federalists.³⁰ At a time when not all elections were by secret ballot, the warden wielded substantial political power—akin to the modern “ward heeler”—and likely knew all the people who either lived or worked in his ward. This would include black voters like Brinsley and the other poll tax paying members of the MGCA who had begun setting up shop in the district by this time and who, incidentally, had a long history of being reliable Federalists. At the same time, Farnam clearly did not know Brinsley very well since he first wrote out the deed to “Francis” Brinsley and then struck out the mistake, replacing it with “Frederick,” implying casual acquaintance rather than a significant business relationship.

Indeed, on this record, it is difficult to imagine the business transaction that might have thrown a retired luxury goods merchant in debt to an old clothes dealer of slender means. The story becomes even less plausible given the rest of Farnam’s background. It appears that Farnam had left trade in 1818 to live off his rents and other investments. Tax records for 1821 show that Farnam owned at least nine parcels of real estate whose total assessed value was more than seven thousand dollars (reflecting a market value of about fourteen thousand

that he was “for a short time” continuing his business at the “old stand No. 15 Cornhill for the purposes of settling all the concerns of the late firm.” *New England Palladium and Commercial Advertiser*, 27 January 1818.

²⁹Josiah Quincy, *A Municipal History of the Town and City of Boston During the Two Centuries from September 17, 1630 to September 17, 1830* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1852), p. 434; Quincy, soon-to-be president of Harvard and an anti-slavery activist, was mayor in 1823. Among the members of the Common Council that year was Robert Gould Shaw. The newly arrived Brinsley family apparently lived in the Brattle Street shop, making acquaintance with Farnam even likelier. *Boston City Directory 1823*, pp. 253, 264; 1823 Valuation Book for Ward 4.

³⁰Quincy, *Municipal History*, p. 434; Abel Bowen, *The Boston Newsletter and City Record* (Boston: Abel Bowen, 1826).

dollars) at a time when land prices were falling in the aftermath of the recession of 1819.³¹ In fact, despite that recession, abolitionist suggestions that Farnam was in financial distress when he gave up the pew are flatly contradicted by the record. In 1828 and 1829, Farnam was involved with the extremely lucrative business of marine insurance—long deemed by wealthy Bostonians to be a “safe and profitable haven for profits gained from trade”³² and was serving as the administrator of several estates tied up in a web of litigation that enmeshed the city’s most prominent and wealthy families. The most important dispute pitted the estate of marine underwriter Tuthill Hubbard, represented by Farnam, against Peter Chardon Brooks, one of Boston’s wealthiest men, in a lawsuit claiming more than seventy thousand dollars. In this high profile litigation, Farnam’s interest was represented by William Wirt, the former attorney general of the United States and future presidential candidate of the anti-Masonic party; Brooks tapped Daniel Webster to head up his defense. Given the stakes and the personalities, the trial was covered extensively in the Boston press, right up to Farnam’s resounding defeat.³³ Surely Farnam was not in dire financial straits at the time he transferred the pew, or at least he was not without better sources of financial wherewithal than a struggling black dealer in used clothing.

After a brief hiatus from 1827 to 1829—probably reflecting the collapse of Federalist fortunes after the 1824 presidential election³⁴ as much as his involvement in the Hubbard litigation

³¹Boston Taxpayers in 1821, pp. 42, 68, 77, 135, 184. Boston City Archives.

³²William W. Fowler, “Marine Insurance in Boston: The Early Years of the Boston Marine Insurance Company, 1799–1807,” in Conrad Edick Wright and Kathryn P. Vien, eds., *Entrepreneurs: The Boston Business Community, 1700–1850* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1997), pp. 151–79.

³³Henry Farnam, Administrator, etc. v. Peter C. Brooks, 26 Mass. 212, 9 Pickering 212 (1829); *Columbian Centinel*, 4 July 1829, 8 July 1829. After a heated exchange of editorials in the *Centinel*, Farnam decisively lost the case. Ironically, Chief Judge Isaac Parker’s decision came down in March 1830 at about the same time that Frederick Brinsley was fighting his own battle with the Park Street Church. See also the predecessor case, Elias Bean v. Henry Farnam et al., 23 Mass 269, 6 Pickering 269 (1828).

³⁴Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 120–27.

and other matters of estate administration³⁵—Farnam returned to politics in the spring of 1830 as a National Republican. He first served as an appointed assistant city assessor for Ward 8 under Mayor Harrison Gray Otis³⁶ and then was elected to the Massachusetts House as well as being voted one of the Boston’s nine aldermen, unpaid positions filled by the civic-spirited and prosperous.³⁷ As alderman, he served on a wide variety of municipal committees ranging from the Standing Committee for the Second District (which included Wards 4, 8, and 9) to the Committee for the Fire Department and Reservoirs and the Committee for Burial Grounds and Reservoirs.³⁸ Farnam continued to serve as an alderman for the next two years, contributing his services to a range of city committees.³⁹ In 1834, although out of elected office, he remained enough of a respected elder statesman to be nominated by Mayor Theodore Lyman, Jr., Otis’s successor, to the Committee of 28 to investigate the burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown by an anti-Catholic mob.⁴⁰ When Farnam died in 1852 at the age of seventy-eight the records listed his occupation as “gentleman,” and he left a substantial estate to be divided among his three surviving children. He lies buried in his family’s plot in Mount Auburn Cemetery.⁴¹

In the absence of financial need, what conceivable motive could Farnam have had for transferring his pew to a black

³⁵*Columbian Centinel*, 22 July 1829, 12 August 1829, both advertising “a rare chance to obtain an elegant Country Seat” through the sale at auction of Joshua Nash’s country home with Henry Farnam as executor of the estate.

³⁶*Columbian Centinel*, 14 April 1830.

³⁷*Boston Centinel*, 8 May 1830 (reporting Farnam’s nomination), 12 May 1830 (reporting Farnam’s election on 10 May with 1,107 votes). There were roughly 500 representatives in the Massachusetts House. Farnam was re-elected to the Massachusetts House in 1831. *Boston City Directory 1831*, p. 8.

³⁸*Boston City Directory 1831*, pp. 11, 12.

³⁹*Boston City Directory 1832*, pp. 10, 11; *Boston City Directory 1833*, pp. 10, 11.

⁴⁰*Baltimore Patriot*, 16 August 1834. Other members of the Committee included Harrison Gray Otis, Charles G. Loring, and Samuel Hubbard.

⁴¹*Massachusetts Vital Records: Boston Deaths 1849-1890, Death Index*, Boston Public Library, shows Farnam (or “Farnum”) died of old age on 25 May 1852, aged seventy-eight years, seven months, and seventeen days. Will 37838, Administration 92380, Probate Records for 1852, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, Boston Public Library (hereafter referred to as Suffolk County Probate Records).

man? It is very difficult to say at this remove although there are some clues to his sympathies. He came from Norwich, a Connecticut town with a large free black population dating from revolutionary days and his will included a substantial bequest to the town's poor.⁴² Neither New England Federalists nor their successors, the National Republicans, held any brief for slavery, as much from sectional distaste for the South as from concern for the plight of those in bondage. According to William Fowler, even before 1808 when slaving voyages were still legal on American vessels, New England's marine insurers refused to cover ships engaged in the trade out of moral conviction⁴³ although presumably financial motives figured in as well. All of this places Farnam in a social universe in which slavery was clearly disfavored. Nevertheless, it is a substantial leap from general distaste for the peculiar institution to activism on behalf of civic equality for free blacks.

A further suggestive link between Farnam and the black community may be found in his Federal Street neighbor, James Odiorne, the son and business partner of Park Street stalwart, George Odiorne. In 1832, the younger Odiorne became a founding vice-president of Garrison's New England Anti-Slavery Society and served as the group's treasurer for a number of years. While the younger Odiorne remained on good terms with his father who later joined the abolitionist ranks himself, it is conceivable that in 1829 James might have wanted to demonstrate his commitment to equality by bringing together Farnam and a highly respectable black man to expose the hypocrisy of Park Street's segregated seating. Certainly, the detailed abolitionist accounts of the Prudential Committee meetings that eventually stripped Brinsley of his pew suggest a source within the church.⁴⁴

⁴²Will 37838, Administration 92380, Suffolk County Probate Records. Farnam left a \$5,000 bequest to be invested until it reached the sum of \$10,000 as a fund for the poor of Norwich, which, given demographics, probably included many free black residents.

⁴³Fowler, "Marine Insurance," p. 179.

⁴⁴For the relationship between Odiorne father and son, see James Creighton Odiorne, *Genealogy of the Odiorne Family with Notices of Other Families Connected*

There is an additional indication that Farnam may not have minded embarrassing the Park Street Church, just as his attack on Brooks showed a willingness to take on Boston’s entrenched establishment. Sometime after 1826 when he moved his home from Milk Street to Federal Street, Farnam joined the nearby Purchase Street Church, a congregation light years away in theology from Park Street. In fact, Purchase Street was Unitarian; its minister at the time was George Ripley, later of Brook Farm. The congregation was supported by the theologically liberal Federalists of Harvard, a group unlike the hard-handed burghers of Park Street and one with a history of supporting black causes. Farnam was a key member of Purchase Street over the years. Having switched theological sides, by 1829 Farnam was in possession of a pew he neither needed nor wanted in a church whose tenets he no longer accepted.⁴⁵ The idea

Therewith (Boston: Rand, Avery & Company, 1875), pp. 74–79. Reverend Silas Aiken eulogized Odiome senior in not altogether flattering terms: “Having formed his own opinion of what was right and true, he was not the man to abandon his ground till convinced that he was wrong.” Quoted in Odiome, *Genealogy*, p. 79. By 1836, the elder Odiome seems to have modified his views and appears as the lead author of a petition to the Massachusetts legislature protesting southern laws passed in the wake of Nat Turner’s Rebellion that barred the entry of free blacks, especially sailors. The petition argued that the laws violated the citizenship rights of blacks. “Report on the Petition of George Odiome and Others,” *The Liberator*, 23 April 1836. *The Liberator*, 14 May 1836, lists George Odiome as a delegate to the New England Anti-Slavery Convention to be held on 24 May. Another potential inside source was Deacon Josiah Bumstead who abruptly resigned his position as Park Street treasurer when the church adopted a resolution to prevent “coloured persons” from procuring pews. Entry of 24 March 1830, Records of the Park Street Church, p. 451.

⁴⁵In early February 1829, Farnam transferred the pew to Hiram Harris. On 10 October of the same year, Harris transferred the pew back to Farnam, both times with the opaque statement that the seller had “rec’d a valuable consideration therefor.” Only ten weeks later, Farnam again transferred the pew, this time to Brinsley. Deed to Pew 82. By 1832, it appears that Farnam had severed all ties with Park Street, since his daughter was married by Purchase Street minister George Ripley. *Columbian Centinel* 14 July 1832. The surviving purchase street records date only from April 1836. For Farnam’s affiliation with Purchase Street, see, e.g., Entries of 9 April 1837 and 30 April 1837, Records of the Thirteenth Congregational Society (Purchase Street), pp. 10–12. Andover Newton Seminary Library, Harvard University. The April 1837 entries show that Farnam was nominated to serve as the Chairman of the Church’s Standing Committee and to serve as the sole member of its “Fuel Committee”; he declined both. See also J.I.T. Coolidge, *A Farewell Discourse, delivered to the Purchase Street Congregation, April 30, 1848, on Occasion of Leaving Their Old Church* (Boston: William Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1848), pp. 5–8, Andover Newton Seminary Library.

of ridding himself of it for a good cause may have appealed to him.

III.

What, then, points to the MGCA as the driving force behind Brinsley's protest? Although most accounts of the MGCA tend to focus on the organization's radical abolitionism, securing civic equality for free blacks—especially for middle-class people like the group's membership—was a significant part of its agenda. Without the potential for equal treatment, the MGCA's uplift message to the black community would have been largely pointless. And, without uplift, the racist stereotypes that were a central element of the ACS platform of involuntary expatriation would have remained largely unchallenged and unabated. As David Brion Davis has observed, groups like the MGCA displayed a "fusion of protest and self-help," perceptively noting that "[t]oday it is difficult to comprehend that courageous radicalism was once thoroughly compatible with calls for moral discipline as defined by a self-appointed elite."⁴⁶ It is the MGCA's militant demand for inclusion in the civic order on equal terms that provides an entry point for its hand in the Park Street protest.

The MGCA seemingly had its genesis in a community effort to support *Freedom's Journal* and the newspaper's pioneering effort to foster communication among northern black activists and to "arrest the progress of prejudice" among whites by presenting black people's stories in their own words. The newspaper's second issue in March 1827 carried the report of a "respectable meeting of the People of Color of the city of Boston, held at the house of David Walker." Among those described as present were the core of black Boston's activist community. James Gould served as chairman of the meeting; George B. Holmes was secretary. David Walker, William Brown, John Telemachus Hilton, and Reverend Thomas Paul of the African

⁴⁶Davis, *Age of Emancipation*, p. 130. For a treatment of the same dynamic in an earlier period, see Paul J. Polgar, "To Raise Them to an Equal Participation": Early National Abolitionism, Gradual Emancipation, and the Promise of African American Citizenship," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (Summer 2011): 229-58.

Baptist Church all addressed the meeting, which formally endorsed the newspaper as a project from which “great good will result to the People of Color” and resolved to “use our utmost exertions to increase its patronage.” Walker and Paul signed up as Boston agents for the venture, agreeing to handle its subscriptions and local business.⁴⁷

Editorial difficulties in the fledgling newspaper—including well-justified suspicions of colonizationist sympathies on the part of John Russwurm, one of its founding editors—brought the Boston group together again a little more than a year later, in April 1828. Convening at the Reverend Lee’s Methodist meetinghouse, the group considered whether the newspaper had been “conducted in a manner satisfactory to the subscribers and to the Coloured community at large.” Walker took the lead, praising *Freedom’s Journal* for its “defense and support of the African cause” and declaring that it remained “well worthy of our unremitting exertions.”⁴⁸

At the same time, a chill surely pervaded the group. Two months earlier, future MGCA founders Walker and John Scarlett, both used clothing dealers, had been arrested, tried, and eventually acquitted for dealing in stolen property. The incident shows that Walker and Scarlett maintained positive relations with the white community even as they were advocating black-led ventures. Covering the story sympathetically, Boston’s white press reported that evidence demonstrated that Walker and Scarlett conducted their businesses “in a fair and honorable manner” and that a “crowd of witnesses of the first standing in society”—presumably white—testified to the defendants’ “integrity and fairness in their dealings, and moral characters to be envied by some of a fairer complexion.”⁴⁹ Walker’s Brattle Street landlord, Mayor Harrison Gray Otis, may well have

⁴⁷*Freedom’s Journal*, 16 March 1827; 23 March 1827.

⁴⁸ *Freedom’s Journal*, 25 April 1828. For a more nuanced and sympathetic reading of Russwurm’s position, see Davis, *Age of Emancipation*, pp. 183–84.

⁴⁹*Boston Daily Courier*, 12 February 1828. A third defendant, John Eli, had charges against him dropped after the acquittal of Walker and Scarlett. At the time, Walker’s shop was located at 42 Brattle Street, John Scarlett’s at 24, John Eli, 38, and Frederick Brinsley, 34. Boston City Valuation Books for 1826, 1827, 1829 show Otis was Walker’s landlord.

had something to do with the availability of those character witnesses “of the first standing.” Otis’s presence in the background provides a striking illustration of the disparate social worlds that converged in the narrow streets of Boston’s Dock Square neighborhood.

As spring turned to summer, the seeds planted by *Freedom’s Journal* began to bear fruit. In late June 1828, future MGCA founder John Hilton sounded themes that shortly became signature elements of the MGCA’s platform in a speech delivered before the African Grand Lodge of Masons at its annual celebration of the Feast of St. John the Baptist, an occasion that coincided with the first anniversary of the African Lodge’s status as an autonomous branch of Free Masonry. Hilton was a key figure in reviving Boston’s black Masonic Lodge and leading it out of a long and fruitless controversy with white lodges over the authenticity of its charter. He did so by the simple expedient of declaring independence. Throughout his address, Hilton appropriated the language and heroes of the American Revolution, nowhere more vividly than in describing his solution to the authenticity controversy, “And here let us adopt the living and dying sentiment of the great American Patriot, ‘Independence now, and Independence forever.’”⁵⁰

Published at the request of David Walker and Thomas Dalton, both Masons and MGCA founders, Hilton’s speech is a bellwether for activist sentiment within this key cohort. He devoted much of the address to the legacy and values of Free Masonry and its associations with the American Revolution, reminding his audience that by right they shared equally and fully in the civic legacy of the Revolution and its heroes. And, as Hilton alluded, by declaring independence on their own initiative, he and the members of the African Lodge had followed Masonry’s true principles. Some of Hilton’s most expansive rhetoric, however, did not simply celebrate Masonic ideals of equality and fraternity for his audience; rather, it aimed

⁵⁰John T. Hilton, *An Address delivered before the African Grand Lodge of Boston No. 459, June 24th, 1828 on the Annual Festival of St. John the Baptist* (Boston: David Hooton, 1828), p. 5. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

at defending Free Masonry from the growing anti-Masonic movement among white evangelicals, including some from Park Street.

Even at the risk of casting a cloud on the festive occasion, Hilton tempered his assertion of civic equality with recognition of its realistic limits and of the “duty” of those in relative freedom to assert their solidarity with the enslaved. In language that prefigured David Walker’s *Appeal*, Hilton proclaimed, “it is a source of pain to me to state, that while we are here, partially enjoying the fruits of liberty, within these peaceful walls, there are in this boasted land of liberty, christianity, and civilization, over twenty hundred thousand of our race kept in perpetual slavery, without one ray of hope, of their ever being released from their state of bondage, but by death.” Drawing a contrast between Christian ideals and practice, Hilton demanded “Christians look at this! And tell us no more of thy exalted virtues and humane feelings! Nor of the charity of raising money for Missionary purposes, to enable you to convert the heathen at such distances from home, where there is over twenty hundred thousand of immortal beings, groping in mental darkness; born amongst you; on the same soil; and surrounding your very doors! claiming kindred with you, and with those blessings which your liberty so abundantly bestows.”⁵¹ Even in this early iteration, the disjunction between Christians’ stated ideals—typified by Park Street’s favored cause of foreign missions now inextricably linked to the ACS—and their acceptance of domestic slavery looms large.

Throughout the summer of 1828, even as racist violence reached their neighborhood during the community’s annual July 14 celebration, the same group pressed its agenda forward. David Walker’s December address to the first semi-annual meeting of the MGCA reported that the group had met, held a series of “conferences” in the black community during that summer, and tried to develop support for a formal organization. As Walker drily recalled, the plan faced “many impediments,” including community opposition so great that

⁵¹Hilton, *Address*, pp. 12–13.

“had our opponents their way, the very notion of such an institution would have been obliterated from our minds.” Resistance ran so high that opponents went “around from house to house, enquiring what good associations and societies are going to do for us.” Apparently, opponents worried that a black-led organization would alienate the white “brethren and friends [who] are making such mighty efforts for the amelioration of our condition.”

For his part, Walker claimed that by “uniting and cultivating a spirit of friendship and of love” among the black community, the endeavor would actually enhance the efforts of those “very good friends,” many of whom were presumably still flirting with colonization. In effect, Walker challenged black Americans to build organizations that would enable them to engage with white America from a position of solidarity and strength. As Walker famously proclaimed, the MGCA had the “primary object” of “unit[ing] the colored population, so far, through the United States of America, as may be practicable and expedient; forming societies, opening, extending, and keeping up correspondences, and not withholding any thing which may have the least tendency to ameliorate *our miserable* condition.” Although Walker’s speech focused on the ultimate goal of emancipation, he also spoke movingly about the “degradation” suffered by all blacks. In a significant passage, he turned his attention to the half-million blacks who were “about two thirds of the way free” and exhorted “if no more than these last were united . . . and resolved to aid and assist each other to the utmost of their power, what mighty deeds could be done by them for the good of our cause?”⁵²

By August 1828, the organization had taken formal shape.⁵³ A number of sources agree broadly on its founding membership and officers. According to community historian William C. Nell, the MGCA was formed by Hosea and Joshua Easton, John Scarlett, Thomas Cole, James G. Barbadoes, William G.

⁵²Walker, “Address,” *Freedom’s Journal*, 19 December 1828.

⁵³*Freedom’s Journal*, 5 September 1828 referred to Thomas Dalton as the president of the MGCA. Cf., Hinks, *Afflicted Brethren*, 75n.

Nell (Nell’s father), “together with Thomas Dalton, John T. Hilton, Frederick Brimley [sic], Coffin Pitts, Walker Lewis and others of the ‘Old Guard.’” George W. Williams, writing later in the century, described the founders of the MGCA as “the most spirited and intelligent colored citizens of Boston. Names and families already or soon to become familiar—Thomas Dalton, President, William G. Nell, Vice President, James Barbadoes, Secretary. Its charter members were Coffin Pitts, John E. Scarlett, the Easton Brothers, Hosea and Joshua, Thomas Cole, Frederick Brumley [sic], Walker Lewis, and John T. Hilton.” Ironically, both accounts omit mention of David Walker who is now seen as the driving force behind the MGCA.⁵⁴ Dalton seems to have remained president for the MGCA’s entire existence, with Nell serving as vice president. Sources from 1831 show a slight change in the roster of officers. James Gould, chairman of the initial meeting in support *Freedom’s Journal*, became the MGCA’s treasurer, and, with an eye to its core mission, the group formed a three-member Corresponding Committee consisting of Hosea Easton, Thomas Cole, and Frederick Brinsley.⁵⁵ Significantly, Brinsley’s status in the group seems to have risen in the wake of his Park Street protest.

Almost uniformly these men were members of black Boston’s slender entrepreneurial class, individuals who came into greater contact with whites than poorer blacks and, because of their status, were primed to feel the slings of racist treatment even more acutely.⁵⁶ Together, they may have had sufficient resources to purchase pew 82. Of the founders, Scarlett, Pitts, Lewis, Brinsley, and Walker were used clothing dealers. Barbadoes, Cole, and Hilton were hairdressers, with Hilton assuming deceased fellow activist George Holmes’s business as

⁵⁴Nell, *Colored Patriots*, p. 345; Williams, *History of the Negro Race*, 2:78. John Daniels, *In Freedom’s Birthplace*, p. 36, picks up the list of members from Nell, including a misspelling of Brinsley’s name. For Nell’s life and career, see Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom*, passim.

⁵⁵*The Liberator*, 28 May 1831, reporting the MGCA’s annual May elections.

⁵⁶As Philadelphian James Forten, one of the richest black men in America, remarked, “the more wealthy and the better informed that any of them [blacks] became, the more wretched they were made; for they felt their degradation more acutely,” as quoted in Davis, *Age of Emancipation*, p. 172.

a perfumer and decorator. Nell was a tailor and the Easton brothers were skilled ironworkers and the sons of a foundry owner; both were ministers as well. James Gould and Thomas Dalton were bootblacks, but Dalton moved up the economic ladder to become a prosperous used clothing dealer and property holder in later life. On his death, his estate was reportedly valued in excess of fifty thousand dollars.⁵⁷ Founding member Walker Lewis illustrates the generational connections between the MGCA and earlier mutual aid societies as well as the continuities in Boston's black elite. Lewis's father, Thomas Lewis, was an original officer of Boston's African Society, a founder of the African Baptist Society, active in the African Masonic Lodge and a force in the earliest campaigns to establish a black school in Boston.⁵⁸

From the first days of the organization, members of the MGCA brought their highly visible stamp of racial solidarity to community events. In August 1828, shortly after the MGCA was formed, its members played a prominent role in a grand civic celebration honoring both Haitian independence and Prince Abduhl Ibrahim Rahaman, a newly emancipated slave. Rahaman's life story reads like a novel: a member of a royal family captured as a youth in a local war, transported as a slave to the American South, recognized by a white man whose life he had helped save years earlier in Africa, and finally freed after long bondage. Lionized by southern journalists and the American Colonization Society, the prince toured the North to raise funds to free the rest of his family and return with them to Africa. Rahaman reached Boston during the first week of August armed with a letter of introduction from ACS leader Charles Gurley to Charles Tappan, a wealthy Boston merchant with colonizationist ties. Cutting an exotic figure in his strolls

⁵⁷For the importance of the used clothing trade among black entrepreneurs, see Hinks, *Afflicted Brethren*, pp. 67–68. Horton and Horton, *Black Entrepreneurs*, pp. 334–35. For Hilton's change of trade see *Columbian Centinel*, 11 November 1829.

⁵⁸Horton and Horton, *Black Entrepreneurs*, p. 77. Nonetheless, several of the MGCA's founders were relatively recent arrivals in Boston including Brinsley (1823), Walker (approximately 1824), and William G. Nell (approximately 1816).

about the city, Rahaman quickly attracted the attention of the white press and the black community, which seem to have been equally moved by the Prince’s plight and the desire to steal a march on the ACS which had used Rahaman’s desire to repatriate to Africa as a public relations gold mine.

Over a single weekend, a Committee of Arrangements provided for a dinner in the Prince’s honor in conjunction with Boston’s Haitian Day festivities. On Wednesday, August 29, at four in the afternoon, a procession formed at the African Meeting House and proceeded down Belknap Street to the African Masonic Lodge on Cambridge Street at the foot of the hill where the banquet was held. The formal array of the parade, like other celebratory processions in the black community, aimed at building group identity and asserting control of the public space against a hostile environment. Taking pride of place, David Walker led the parade as Second Marshal; he was followed by a group of young men, musicians, and then the leading dignitaries.⁵⁹

As was customary, after the “well-provided dinner,” the evening proceeded to a series of toasts, pithy remarks that offer insight into the community’s concerns. Almost all the reported remarks focused on the abolition of slavery; at least one wished long life and success to abolitionists William Wilberforce and Benjamin Lundy. During dessert, Thomas Dalton, identified in press accounts as president of the MGCA, symbolically led the “volunteers” asserting the MGCA’s dual agenda in the process. Dalton proclaimed “*Liberty and Equality*—The most inestimable gifts of God conferred on man. May the time not be distant when all the sons and daughters of Africa who are now in bondage shall be enabled to exclaim ‘We are *free*.’” According to newspaper reports, the toast was received with “distinguished applause.” Walker, for his part, followed with characteristic remarks about the disjunction between Christian ideals and practice when it came to slaveholding, “Our worthy guest . . . was by Africans’ natural enemies torn from country, religion, and friends, and in the very midst of Christians, doomed

⁵⁹*Freedom’s Journal*, 5 September 1828, citing *The Boston Centinel*.

to perpetual, though lawful, bondage. May God enable him to obtain so much of the reward of his labor, as may purchase the freedom of his offspring.”⁶⁰

In the year after its founding and leading up to Brinsley’s acquisition of pew 82, the available writings by MGCA members testify that pew segregation was high on their list of outrages perpetrated by white America. In November 1828, MGCA founder Reverend Hosea Easton was invited to deliver a Thanksgiving Day address to the “colored population” of Providence, Rhode Island, an example of the MGCA reaching out to urban black communities beyond Boston. Easton and his brother Joshua had long and bitter personal experience with protests against pew segregation, suggesting that they may have been a driving force behind the events at Park Street. The Eastons’ father James, a prosperous foundry owner, led the family in their first stand against segregated church seating as early as 1800, purchasing a pew in the Fourth Church of Christ in Bridgewater, Massachusetts from a sympathetic white congregant shortly after the church constructed a “Negro gallery.” The family occupied the pew until they were ejected for making “a disturbance in time of public worship.” Easton biographers have documented five more family protests against segregated seating between 1800 and 1827, each apparently involving the purchase of a pew from a favorably disposed white congregant.⁶¹

⁶⁰*Freedom’s Journal*, 5 September 1828. This account is largely drawn from Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves: The True Story of An African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 138–41. Rahaman returned to Africa only to die of yellow fever in Sierra Leone, *Columbian Centinel*, 11 November 1829.

⁶¹James Brewer Stewart and George R. Price, “The Roberts Case, the Easton Family, and the Dynamics of the Abolitionist Movement in Massachusetts, 1776–1870,” in *Abolitionist Politics and the Coming of the Civil War*, James Brewer Stewart ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), pp. 71–72. Patriarch James Easton famously established a manual labor academy for black youth in connection with the family’s North Bridgewater foundry, bankrupting himself in the process. He died around 1830 in disappointment over the failure of the venture, which his son Hosea ascribed to the “repeated surges of the tide of prejudice.” Quoted in George R. Price and James B. Stewart, eds., *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p. 42n.; Hosea Easton, “A Treatise on the Intellectual Character and Civil and Political

The most remarkable of these early protests involved the purchase of a pew in a Baptist church in Stoughton, Massachusetts. When church members failed to convince the Eastons that scripture required them to sit in the gallery, they turned to more extreme measures. Congregants tarred the pew; the family stood in the aisle. Church members booby-trapped the pew with a “jug of filthy water” to soak anyone who entered. The family discovered the ruse. Members then destroyed the pew and threw the seats in a pasture. The Eastons brought their own seats in their wagon. The congregation tore up the floor under the pew, leaving a hole that, as Joshua Easton later recalled “proved a serious inconvenience to the whole congregation” when the cold weather arrived, but which congregants bore “for some time with Christian fortitude.” Finally, the church unsuccessfully tried to cancel the deed for misrepresentation. In the end, the Baptists excommunicated James for contumaciousness and the Eastons withdrew from the church.⁶² The Easton brothers knew well what was entailed in a protest against segregated pew ownership.

In his Providence speech, Easton interwove a message of Christian hope and the values of racial uplift with vivid descriptions of the atrocities of slavery and the inequities visited upon free African Americans. Proud of his status as a “minister of the gospel,” Easton made clear how personally “demeaning”—a word that recurs throughout the address—he, and presumably other upwardly mobile blacks, found every humiliating encounter with white racism. Easton virtually vibrated with anger as he recounted the treatment respectable black

Condition of the Colored People of the U. States; and the Prejudice Exercised towards Them: With a Sermon on the Duty of the Church to Them,” in Stewart and Price, *To Heal the Scourge*, pp. 110–11. The timing of James Easton’s death lends further support to the suggestion that the Easton brothers played a primary role in planning the MGCA protest.

⁶²This account is substantially drawn from Lydia Maria Child, “Illustration of Prejudice” in *The Oasis*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: Benjamin C. Bacon, 1834), pp. 54–61, which appears to be based on a firsthand account by Joshua Easton, including the text of a letter from his mother Sarah withdrawing from the church. See also Nell, *Colored Patriots*, pp. 33–34; Brewer and Price, “The Roberts Case,” p. 72. “Review of ‘Abdy’s Residence,’” *The Spectator*, p. 564, shows an acquaintance with Child’s account, demonstrating the value of these stories in the battle for public opinion.

travellers received even in the North. In a telling insistence on class roles across the racial divide, Easton was infuriated that two “colored gentlemen”—one a minister of the gospel of “no mean standing”—were displaced from the back seat of a stage by two so-called “genteels”: a “white sailor of low grade, and a young girl that worked in the [Fall River] Factory.”⁶³

Among the most significant sources of humiliation, Easton singled out for his audience white churches, where blacks were “treated more like a beast than in any other course of life,” forced to occupy “the most remote part of the house of God that is too demeaning to have the beasts for its occupants.”⁶⁴ Drawing on his family’s experience, he continued,

The coloured “brother,” however able to provide for himself, must have a place provided for him. And where is it? In some remote part of the Meeting-House, or in a box built above the gallery. When the Church is called to partake of the sacred elements, the black communicants must come down, stand or sit in some remote part of the lower floor, until the white brethren have eat what they want of the Lord’s body, and drank what they want of his blood; then cries the minister, “Come coloured brethren, now come and partake of the broken body of Christ. It is free for all without any distinction.” And it is a chance if he does not, while thus officiating, offer an insult to their feelings, by saluting them as Africans or Ethiopians. While in fact they are Americans, and perhaps distantly related to some of the white members, by reason of the brutal conduct of their fathers.”⁶⁵

In no uncertain terms, Easton pronounced that racism—and colonizationist sentiment—pervaded America’s churches.⁶⁶ As

⁶³Hosea Easton, “An Address: Delivered Before the Coloured Population of Providence, Rhode Island, on Thanksgiving Day, 27 November 1828,” in *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice*, ed. Price and Stewart, p. 55.

⁶⁴Easton, “Address,” p. 57. See Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, pp. 10–12, for the significance of being reduced to the level of an animal in African American experience.

⁶⁵Easton, “Address,” pp. 57–58. The Eaton family itself was of mixed racial background.

⁶⁶In *The Rights of All*, successor to *Freedom’s Journal*, editor Samuel Cornish declared that “the political trends of the society were such that in three years we shall have a colonization ticket, with Reverend colonization candidates for the Senate and House of Representatives as there are Masonic and anti-Masonic members.” *Rights of All*, 14 August 1829, quoted in Bella Gross, “Freedom’s Journal and the Rights of All,”

he pointed out, “there is not a church in the circle of my knowledge but what, must bear the character here asserted.” Racism linked the “great part of the Christian community” with the “diabolical pursuit” of the “Colonizing Craft.” Then, Easton reminded his hearers of what they already knew:

Our ancestors were stolen property, and property which belonged to God. This is known by our religious community; and they find that the owner is about to detect them. Now if they can slip away these stolen goods by smuggling all those out of the country, which God would be likely to make an instrument of, in bringing them to justice, and keeping the rest in ignorance by such means, things would go well with them, and they would appease their consciences by telling what great things they are doing for the colored population and God’s cause.

Grimly, he concluded “The deception is not so well practised, but that we can discover the mark of the beast.”⁶⁷

Barely a month after Easton’s Thanksgiving address, David Walker published his speech to the semi-annual meeting of the MGCA in *Freedom’s Journal*. Apart from his account of the MGCA’s founding, Walker expressed his hope that a union of the free black population numbering some half a million souls, “resolved to aid and assist each other to the utmost of their power,” would result in “great and mighty deeds” for the “good of our cause.” In his address, Walker directed attention toward what modern readers might term the false consciousness of blacks who collaborated with slavery, such as black slave catchers and blacks who kidnapped free blacks—especially children—and sold them south into slavery, a special form of treachery that he later termed “servile deceit.”⁶⁸ Although his focus was on the need for black unity, Walker’s hope

Journal of Negro History 17 (1932): 241–86, 267. Nathaniel Paul, a prominent New York minister and brother of Boston’s Reverend Thomas Paul, added a further twist, claiming the church was linked to the ACS and that wealthy pew holders controlled them both. *Rights of All*, 18 September 1929, in Gross, *Freedom’s Journal*, p. 267.

⁶⁷Easton, “Address,” pp. 56–59.

⁶⁸Walker, “Appeal,” pp. 62, 71.

for “mighty deeds” challenging the racist status quo seemed an augury of things to come.

The summer of 1829 brought much the same round of events as the previous year. On the Fourth of July, Boston’s churches held their annual service dedicated to raising a collection for the American Colonization Society, exemplifying the artful alliance between foreign missions and colonization that had energized the ACS throughout New England. The theologically orthodox churches gathered at Park Street, presumably because its hall could seat fifteen hundred of the city’s wise, good, and well-to-do who might be urged to donate to the cause. The speaker was none other than William Lloyd Garrison, whose weakening support for colonization was augmented by his doubts about the practical efficacy of the ACS plan.⁶⁹ The speaking engagement placed Garrison in Boston for the black community’s annual July 14 celebration of the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As Garrison later recounted, “at about 12 o’clock, a procession was formed, consisting of members of the African Abolition Society, which marched very orderly to the Rev. Mr. Paul’s Church, where a discourse was delivered by a clergyman of the city. The exercises opened with the singing of an anthem and the reading of the Constitution of the Society.” No other mention of the “African Abolition Society” appears in contemporaneous sources, so it seems likely that the Constitution was either that of the long-established African Society, a mutual aid group, or that of the MGCA, both of which were closely associated with abolitionism.

Garrison’s attention was focused on the reception accorded an unnamed white speaker, who attempted to “impress upon his hearers the importance of a good moral and religious character.” His point, which moved the audience to anger, was that any effort of the enslaved to win their freedom by violence “would only make their chains more strong.” Instead, he argued, it was up to “the free colored people of Boston, and elsewhere, to show by their conduct, that they were capable

⁶⁹Davis, *Age of Emancipation*, pp. 186–87 describes the ambiguity in the timing of Garrison’s fusion of his commitment to immediatism with an attack on colonization.

of self government.” If the free blacks showed themselves to be “industrious, and peaceable, and moral, they may do more than all others to let oppressed go free.” At one point during the talk, the speaker, seconded by a colonizationist representative, argued that the liberation of two million slaves “in their present condition, would be neither a blessing to them nor safe for the country.” According to Garrison, the reaction of the black audience was telling: “a very audible murmur ran around the house, which spoke a language that could not be misunderstood. The argument did not obtain.”⁷⁰ While Boston’s black activists remained committed to uplift, they refused to have it become an excuse for putting off emancipation.

As the summer ended, David Walker gave his own personal meaning to the term “mighty deeds.” On 28 September 1829—three months before Frederick Brinsley acquired title to pew 82—Walker published his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, the *Appeal* was directed initially at the black leadership, reflecting in broad strokes the MGCA program of encouraging literacy and education, religious values, and political awareness to bring about the liberation of slaves and the inclusion of blacks in what was, to Walker, a fundamentally attractive social order. Walker took as his starting point the uniquely oppressive character of American slavery, based as it was on racial prejudice that treated blacks as outside the human family. To Walker, like Easton, the great danger of the colonization movement was that expatriation would drain free blacks from American society, leaving the enslaved without any means of raising themselves from brute status and acquiring the political consciousness necessary to secure freedom. Throughout the *Appeal*, Walker was unsparing in his critique of white America’s hypocrisy and warned of an imminent day of reckoning for what he ironically termed “this Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!!”⁷¹

⁷⁰*Genius of Universal Emancipation*, 2 September 1829. The unsigned account was clearly written by Garrison who had recently joined Benjamin Lundy as editor of the newspaper.

⁷¹Walker, *Appeal*, pp. 52–54, 71–73.

Sounding his recurring theme, Walker devoted an entire section of the *Appeal* to “OUR WRETCHEDNESS IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE PREACHERS OF THE RELIGION OF JESUS CHRIST.” In the September 1829 first edition, he included a complaint against the willful blindness of a ministry that ignored slavery in favor of foreign missions and a denunciation of parishioners who “form societies against Free Masonry and Intemperance, and write against Sabbath breaking, Sabbath mails, Infidelity, &c. &c.” while hardly noticing the “fountain head [namely slavery and oppression], compared with which, all those other evils are comparatively nothing.”⁷² These causes show that Walker clearly had Park Street Church in mind. Leading church members George Odiorne and George Denny were the public face of Boston’s anti-Masonic movement, a movement that was peaking just as Walker wrote the *Appeal*. In addition to its colonizationist activities, Park Street was also a center of foreign missions, with Reverend Jeremiah Evarts, executive secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and editor of its magazine, *The Panoplist*, among its deacons. The American Temperance Society was formed in Park Street’s lower vestry; both temperance and the Sabbath observance movement were known to be favored causes of the Beecher family.

The threat of exposure loomed large in Walker’s denunciation. Significantly, after warning that God “will . . . publish your secret crimes from the housetop,” Walker included the following passage in his attack, “Even here in Boston, pride and prejudice have got to such a pitch, that in the very houses erected to the Lord, they have built little places for the reception of colored people, where they must sit during meeting, or keep away from the house of God, and the preachers say nothing about it—much less go into the hedges and highways seeking the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”⁷³ This last was a thinly veiled slap at Park Street’s then-pastor Edward Beecher, who was prominently associated with all facets of the Benevolent

⁷²Walker, *Appeal*, pp. 42–43.

⁷³Walker, *Appeal*, p. 42.

Empire through his father, Reverend Lyman Beecher, but who remained silent throughout the Brinsley affair.

Insofar as Walker appears to have been *primus inter pares* in the development of the MGCA’s broad agenda, it is worth noting that the *Appeal* contains several laudatory passages about the labors of Bishop Richard Allen of Philadelphia’s African Methodist Episcopal Church. Indeed, the passages are so “glowing” that they led Walker’s biographer to infer that Walker had spent time in Philadelphia and had some personal exposure to Allen.⁷⁴ Famously, Allen and several other black men were involved in a 1787 protest in Philadelphia’s St. George Methodist Church. While services were underway, Allen and his associates took seats outside the part of the gallery set aside for blacks. When white trustees made an attempt to remove them physically, the group left the church in a body and subsequently withdrew from St. George’s, joined by some of the remaining black communicants. It was this move that eventually resulted in Allen’s 1816 formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and his selection as its first bishop. Thus, for anyone in Allen’s orbit, a public protest against church segregation would have held unusual resonance.⁷⁵

Between the fall of 1829 and the spring of 1830, Walker’s *Appeal* went through two more editions, its message intensifying with each iteration. Notably, in the second edition, he significantly refocused his attack from America’s political hypocrisy to its religious hypocrisy, repeatedly transforming such references as “enlightened Americans” into the far more acid “enlightened Christians of America.” By the third edition, he juxtaposed the religious claims of “white Christians of America . . . (or more

⁷⁴Hinks, *Afflicted Brethren*, p. 66. See Walker, *Appeal*, pp. 59–61, 66–67.

⁷⁵Carol George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 54–56; Charles H. Wesley, *Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1935); Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Reverend Richard Allen* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833, repr., New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 25. Allen (1760–1831) was active in organizing the 1831 Negro Convention in Philadelphia, the first of its kind, which brought together black leadership from throughout the North, suggesting that he had a strong influence on other elements of Walker’s agenda as well.

properly speaking, pretenders to Christianity)” with the fact that “they treat us more cruel and barbarous than any Heathen nation did any people whom it had subjected, or reduced to the same condition.”⁷⁶ Walker was clearly considering the events at Park Street, and his words echoed those of Hosea Easton months earlier.

In the third edition which came out sometime in the spring of 1830—shortly after Brinsley’s protest—Walker explicitly referred to that “atrocious” in a two-page insertion that vigorously assailed white America’s pretensions to both Christianity and republicanism. In that passage, he repeated his previous threat that God would expose the sins of Americans on “the house top” while declining to give details of the Park Street event: “was it not for the reputation of the house of my Lord and Master, I would mention here, an act of cruelty inflicted a few days since on a black man, by the white Christians in the PARK STREET CHURCH, in this (CITY) which is almost enough to make Demons themselves quake and tremble in their FIREY HABITATIONS.—Oh! My Lord how refined in iniquity the whites have got to be in consequence of our blood what kind!! Oh! What kind!!! of Christianity can be found this day in all the earth!!!!!!”⁷⁷ The theme of exposure that runs through the paragraph suggests Walker’s profound desire to confront both black and white Americans—and the world at large—with the corrosive depths of American racism, something the Park Street incident was supremely suited to do.

It is hardly surprising that Walker knew of Brinsley’s treatment by Park Street since both men moved in the same circle, followed the same trade in shops nearby one another, and were

⁷⁶See Hinks, “Introduction,” *Appeal*, pp. xlv–li, regarding the differences between the editions, stressing the amplification of Walker’s message with each succeeding edition and, in particular, Walker’s increasing focus on the hypocrisy of white America.

⁷⁷Walker, *Appeal*, pp. 56–57. Reflecting his rage, and perhaps a printer’s deadline, Walker curtailed his description of Park Street’s treatment of Brinsley, “I forbear to comment on the cruelties inflicted on this Black Man by the Whites in the Park Street MEETING HOUSE, I will leave it in the dark!!!! But I declare that the atrocity is really to Heaven daring and infernal, that I must say that God has commenced a course of exposition among the Americans, and the glorious and heavenly work will continue until they learn to do justice.”

founding members of the MGCA. What is more, the incident presumably was the talk of all Boston, both black and white. And, Brinsley’s eviction from worship at Park Street would naturally have hit a raw nerve with Walker given his personal connections to Brinsley and Richard Allen. Nevertheless, it is suggestive that Walker increased his focus on the hypocrisy of white Christians in the second edition and then engaged in such a significant revision of the *Appeal* in the aftermath of Brinsley’s entrance into Park Street. None of this conclusively proves planning and collaboration by the members of the MGCA, but it certainly suggests concerted action focused on Park Street as the epitome of all that was wrong with America’s churches.

IV.

Frederick Brinsley himself was an ideal candidate to serve as the face of a protest that would challenge and expose the hypocrisy of white Christians. Although community historian William Nell called him a member of the “Old Guard,” in fact, like many of his cohort, Brinsley was actually a relatively recent arrival to Boston, first appearing in the Boston City Directory and other local records in 1823. Rather, the 1820 federal census listed Brinsley as a “free person of color” aged somewhere between twenty-six and forty-four, residing in New Haven, Connecticut. Unusual among New Haven’s black community, Brinsley was the head of an independent household, apparently consisting of himself, his wife, a boy, and two young adults, one male and one female.⁷⁸ Sometime between the fall of 1820 and late 1822—probably responding to the worsening conditions for free blacks throughout the North much as David Walker had done—Brinsley emigrated with his family to the ostensibly more favorable economic and social climate of Boston. In a striking coincidence, Brinsley shared this Connecticut

⁷⁸The 1820 Census showed him the head of a household of five people, including a woman between twenty-six and forty-four, a boy under fourteen, a youth between fourteen and twenty-five, and a young woman between fourteen and twenty-six. Given the tradition that Brinsley entered Park Street with his family, it seems fair to describe the other persons in the household as his wife and children.

background with both Henry Farnam and Edward Beecher, whose years at Yale apparently overlapped with Brinsley's time in New Haven. Within a year of arriving in Boston, Brinsley had established himself as a dealer in used clothing with a shop on Brattle Street and had settled his family in rented quarters on Belknap Street a few doors up from Cambridge Street at the center of the city's largest black neighborhood.

By 1829, Brinsley was an established businessman of middle age—old actually for a resident of black Boston—still living with his wife and, apparently, the same three younger people as well as three more children.⁷⁹ Over the years, as noted earlier, city records show his taxable worth ranged between \$200 and \$300, with his poll tax paid on time, securing his right to vote. Unusual for someone in his social and economic cohort, he cannot be shown to have joined any organization other than the MGCA. Searches of existing records of organizations frequented by men like Walker, Dalton, and Hilton such as the African Free Masons, the African Baptist Church, and the May Street Methodist Church fail to show his name. This suggests that Brinsley kept a relatively low profile for a community activist, someone who would not excite suspicion of being anything other than what he seemed, the legal owner of a pew. And, if he were acting out of character, it supports the inference that he had the backing of others.

What is more, like Walker and Scarlett, Brinsley seems to have enjoyed a reputation for respectability and maintained careful relations with the white authorities and the local police. For example, in mid-February, only weeks before he entered Park Street, a "lad" by the name of Otis Braman was arrested by a constable in Brinsley's shop while in possession of several items of stolen clothing. At least one modern scholar has

⁷⁹The 1830 Census shows that the Brinsley household had grown to eight persons. It now consisted of three males between ten and twenty-four, one male between twenty-four and thirty-six, one female under ten, one female between ten and twenty-four, and an adult man and woman, each between the age of thirty-six and fifty-five. It seems fair to say that the New Haven household had stayed intact and was augmented by two boys and a girl, offspring or possibly adoptees, as was common in Boston's black community.

read the newspaper accounts of the incident to suggest that the constable was present at Brinsley’s instigation.⁸⁰ The following August, not long after the Park Street matter was closed and shortly after David Walker’s death, Brinsley led a group of second-hand clothing dealers to a meeting of Boston’s Board of Aldermen where, according to accounts in the Boston newspapers, “Brinsley and others” presented a petition that second-hand clothes dealers be licensed, presumably to protect honest dealers from periodic police harassment and to keep receivers of stolen property out of the trade.⁸¹ Clearly, Brinsley was not afraid to invoke—or confront—the civic powers on terms of equality.

Indeed, the Park Street records reflect just such a confrontation. On 6 May 1830, Brinsley seems to have met with Park Street’s treasurer, George Denny, whose mission was to secure the transfer of pew 82 back to the church. The stage had been set for this encounter in the month following Brinsley’s exclusion when the church met several times for what Park Street’s clerk tersely called “considerable discussion” of the issue of pew ownership. After rejecting a number of other suggestions to gain control of the burgeoning secondary market in Park Street pews in order to prevent further disturbances, on 24 March, the church authorized the Prudential Committee to “consider the expediency of so altering the deed of pews as to prevent coloured persons procuring deeds of the same.”⁸²

⁸⁰*Boston Daily Courier*, 12 February 1830 and 15 February 1830. Hinks, *Afflicted Brethren*, pp. 67–68, raises this possibility although the support for it is unclear from the record.

⁸¹“City Affairs in Board of Aldermen, Monday, August 23, 1830,” *Boston Daily Courier*, 26 August 1830. The group withdrew their petition when the aldermen explained that they had no power to pass the requested regulation. Walker died on 6 August 1830.

⁸²Entry of 24 March 1830, Records of the Park Street Church, p. 451. The church first held a special meeting on Tuesday, 23 February at which the “Bros expressed their minds freely on the subject” of how to “prevent individuals who would disturb the peace & harmony of the Society procuring deeds of pews.” Entry of 23 February 1830, p. 447. This supports a date of 21 February 1830 for Brinsley’s first visit to the church. On 3 March, the church met again and adopted a resolution authorizing the “Prudential Committee for the time being to prevent the intrusion into the Meeting House of all improper persons who may disturb or incommode the Congregation and

The Prudential Committee did just that. For his meeting with Brinsley, Denny had prepared an entirely new deed for the pew from the deacons on a printed form authorized by the Prudential Committee, backdated it to 24 December 1829, and filled the blanks in his own hand. The effect was to erase Farnam from the chain of title for anyone tracing ownership of the pew from the present backwards. That new deed recited that Brinsley was, in fact, the rightful owner of the pew, having paid the deacons \$550 “in hand for the use of said church.” The final line conceded much: “we do hereby acknowledge, **Do by these Presents**, covenant and agree to and with the said *Frederic* and his heirs that he or they shall have, hold and enjoy the Pew No. *Eighty-Two* in the *Church on Park Street*.” Ironically, Denny misspelled Brinsley’s first name just as Farnam had originally written “Francis” on the first deed.

At the foot of the form was a newly adopted covenant, giving the Deacons the right to seize and sell the pew if Brinsley failed to meet the church’s conditions, including the payment of dues. Here the handwriting changes, part of the only physical artifact remaining of Frederick Brinsley:

I the above named *Frederick Brinsley* do hereby freely acknowledge that I receive and hold the above mentioned Pew upon the conditions aforesaid, and if I or my heirs shall neglect or refuse to perform all or any of them, that upon such neglect or refusal, it shall be lawful for the Deacons of said Church, for the time being, or a major part of them, to take the said pew as aforesaid, and sell the same as

to remove all such persons” and to employ a “peace officer or officers” to that end. As the clerk noted, “After prayer by the Pastor” the meeting adjourned. Entry of 3 March 1830, pp. 447–48. This supports Abdy’s account that Brinsley attended Park Street worship for three weeks. Abdy, *Journal*, 1:134–35. See also Entry of 10 March 1830, pp. 448–50. Each of these meetings began with prayer and most ended with it. The question of restrictions on the transfer of pew ownership to “prevent a person, who might from any cause be obnoxious” to the church from becoming “Proprietor of a Pew” without unduly infringing upon the proprietors’ property rights occupied the church through the summer and into October. Entry of 11 October 1830, p. 460. See also letter of William P. Hubbard, Esq. to the Prudential Committee, Boston, 28 September 1830, containing the ultimate form of a new deed deemed to be sufficiently protective of both church and proprietor interests. Miscellaneous Papers, 25 February 1828 to 1832, Records of the Park Street Church.

mentioned. In Witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand the day and year mentioned.

Brinsley did set his hand to the deed. He signed it with a flourish, in a large, bold, if slightly tremulous hand—just as he had filled in his own name in the covenant, the only times his first name was spelled correctly in the entire text.

Although Brinsley had forced the church to acknowledge his rightful ownership of the pew, it was a limited victory. On the left-hand margin of the last page of the deed, in the same format Farnam used to transfer the pew to Brinsley in the first place, there is a notation, again in Brinsley’s hand:

Boston, May 6th 1830, I hereby request that this Pew be transferred to Mr. George Denny, having received of him a valuable consideration therefor.⁸³

It is signed again in Brinsley’s hand, with flourishes worthy of John Hancock—the same signature that graced the covenant at the bottom of the deed. It is tempting to read something of the event into that signature; it looks like the handwriting of a very proud and very angry man, perhaps somewhat nervous on account of the moment—the size, the embellishment, and above all, a slight quiver of the pen.

Whether Brinsley drove a hard bargain with the church is difficult to say. The term “valuable consideration” is legal boilerplate that could mean anything. On the other hand, according to Boston tax records, in 1830 Brinsley’s property was valued at 500 dollars, the highest figure recorded during his nine years in Boston.⁸⁴ It is tempting to think that he received something of pecuniary value for his pains.

⁸³Pew Deeds by Society, 1820–1830, Liber 2, p. 134, Records of the Park Street Church. The original deed to pew 82, which reflects Farnam’s 1813 purchase and 1829 transfer to Brinsley bears a notation to the place in the later records where the May 1830 deed was entered; however, anyone tracing the pew ownership from the present back to 1830 would not find a reference to the earlier deed.

⁸⁴The deed itself values the pew at 550 dollars but authorizes the Deacons to sell it for “the most it will fetch” Deed to Pew 82, Pew Deed by Society, 1820–30, Liber 2, p. 134; City Valuation Book for 1830. In 1829, Brinsley’s net worth was \$400; in 1831, it had declined to \$300. City Valuation Books for 1829, 1831.

As with his role in the petition to the aldermen, there are indications that Brinsley was one of those who filled the leadership gap left by Walker's death in August 1830. Not only did he find himself a member of the MGCA's Corresponding Committee, alongside Hosea Easton and Thomas Cole after the annual meeting of May 1831, but he played a key role at the May 19 celebration of the group's anniversary, timed to coincide with the Boston annual meetings of many of the organizations that comprised the Benevolent Empire. The account in *The Liberator*, apparently provided by the MGCA, placed Brinsley among the group's core members: "The ceremonies were commenced by the Rev. Washington Christian, followed by an appropriate address by Mr. Thomas Cole. Concluding prayers were by the Rev. Samuel Snowden. Blessings craved at table by the Rev. Hosea Easton. After partaking of a well provided dinner, there were regular toasts given by Mr. Frederick Brinsley, Toast Master, and followed by others from the members generally; sentiments which were (if we are judges) indicative of moral, political, and religious principles existing among us, however disputed by the Colonization Society."⁸⁵

The Liberator contains a tantalizing suggestion of the content of Brinsley's toast in an article run two weeks later in support of a campaign to repeal the Massachusetts law that penalized interracial marriages. At this point, Garrison was at some pains to maintain that the change in the law would not lead to an increase in intermarriage, but rather would remove "a disgraceful badge of servitude" from the black population. To reinforce this point, Garrison ran a piece from another newspaper with the lede, "The following toast given at a late African celebration, is in the true spirit: The Rising generation—Very promising; and black enough for the white man to let him alone."⁸⁶ If, indeed, this was the toast offered by Brinsley, as the timing suggests is possible, it shows that he, at least, was among those committed to building separate black institutions and a separate black identity within white America.

⁸⁵*The Liberator*, 28 May 1831.

⁸⁶*The Liberator*, 11 June 1831. The first quotation is from Garrison's own editorial, the lede is from material taken from the *Commercial Gazette*.

Brinsley died not long after. In one last tweak at the establishment, Brinsley appears in the 1831 tax records with a personal estate worth three hundred dollars and without an entry for his shop; his occupation was listed as “gent.[leman].”⁸⁷ Brinsley’s taxes for both 1830 and 1831 were marked as “abated,” relief granted by the city authorities in cases of illness or death of a taxpayer in order to avoid charging the decedent’s estate. After that, he disappears from the public records altogether. Frederick Brinsley was no more than fifty-six years old. However, he left a legacy to the MGCA and, ultimately to the New England Anti-Slavery Society: he shared with them his correspondence with the church, which his associates carefully preserved to substantiate the hypocrisy of white Christians, if any such demonstration were needed. Thus, it was that in the summer of 1833, Edward Abdy could recount that an unnamed abolitionist put a “curious document” into his hands and proceed to spell out in detail the entire story that went with it. And Abdy could provide final testimony that Brinsley was one “now removed from this scene of persecution and mortification, to a place ‘where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.’”⁸⁸

V.

In the years that followed, the impetus of the black civil rights movement drained away from the MGCA into other channels, primarily those that promised alliance with white activists. Segregated worship—and the Park Street incident in particular—provided a fulcrum in creating this new alliance and in shifting the impetus of northern abolitionism to an integrated, immediatist movement in Boston that had as its hallmark a commitment to civic equality for blacks. In this, the Park Street protest may have succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its planners.

⁸⁷City of Boston Tax Book for 1831. Since tax bills could be deferred until as late as the summer of the succeeding year—for example, mid-1831 for the 1830 taxes—it seems likely that Brinsley died sometime around the middle of 1831 at a time when there was a serious epidemic of pulmonary disease in Boston.

⁸⁸Abdy, *Journal*, 1:135.

Segregated worship resonated throughout the black community as the ultimate symbol of the “despotic reign of prejudice.” To use Hosea Easton’s vivid phrase, it was “the death thrust of slavery carried into the hearts of its victims,” an evil whose “gigantic tread on the Sabbath day, pollutes the altars of the sanctuary of the Most High.”⁸⁹ But the issue also affronted the consciences of white reformers otherwise attracted to colonization, such as Boston evangelical Lewis Tappan, who later unsuccessfully carried a campaign for integrated church seating to New York City.⁹⁰

As with so much else in the abolitionist movement, the dynamic first openly played itself out in the pages of *The Liberator*. In December 1830, barely a year after Frederick Brinsley acquired title to pew 82, William Lloyd Garrison spoke to a group of Boston’s black leaders—including members of the MGCA—about his plans to launch a newspaper devoted to their cause. While MGCA Secretary James Barbadoes was immediately supportive, other community members, including John Hilton, were skeptical and needed to be won over. Thus, in the early numbers of *The Liberator*, Garrison was quick to seize on pew segregation and the Park Street protest as something that would convince blacks of his solidarity while drawing the support of religious-minded whites to an integrated movement.

Less than four months after *The Liberator*’s first issue, Garrison penned a lengthy front page editorial responding to the newspaper’s earlier reports of segregated seating in Hartford churches, pointing out that the same discrimination was true of Boston. In the article, he provided the first detailed print account of the Park Street incident and, what is more, proposed to survey all Boston’s meeting houses to “ascertain what places are provided for the accommodation of our colored people,” concluding that a “house dedicated to the worship of Almighty

⁸⁹Easton, *Treatise*, pp. 104–12.

⁹⁰Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1969), pp. 177–79.

God, should be the last place for the exercise of despotic principles.”⁹¹ A week later, in a review of David Walker’s *Appeal*, the paper singled out as an example of the invidious racism that might justify Walker’s harsh language, that “[e]ven in this city, the birthplace of freedom and the first cause of happy revolutions,” a man “whose crime is a dark skin . . . gains not admittance to a convenient part of even God’s temple.”⁹² By May, the campaign was in full bore, with Garrison declaring “I can never look up to those wretched retreats for my colored brethren, without feeling my soul overwhelmed with emotions of shame, indignation, and sorrow.” Again alluding to Park Street, he lamented that “no black man, however respectable or pious he may be, can own or occupy a pew in the central part of the house.” In a voice worthy of Walker himself, Garrison concluded, “Did I not know the deceitfulness of the human heart, and the amazing strength of prejudice, the devil would succeed in persuading me that in Boston we have merely the form of religious worship without the substance.”⁹³

At the same time, in the spring and summer of 1831, Boston’s black community was focused on two projects, reflecting its still divided strategic vision. The first, an example of the nascent alliance with white groups, was white minister Simeon Jocelyn’s plan to establish a “manual labor” college in New Haven for the “liberal education of Young Men of Color,” a plan avidly supported by Garrison and newly-minted immediatist and religious conservative Arthur Tappan, whose fortune was to bankroll the school. The second was the First Annual Convention of People of Color to be held in Philadelphia in early June. Boston delegates to the meeting included MGCA members Hosea Easton and James Barbadoes, as well as Robert Roberts (Easton’s

⁹¹*The Liberator*, 23 April 1831. Garrison was considerably more successful in pursuing his goals of an interracial alliance with his focus on church segregation than with his campaign to overturn the Massachusetts law against interracial marriage.

⁹²*The Liberator*, 30 April 1831.

⁹³*The Liberator*, 21 May 1831. The article was followed by an eight-stanza poem entitled “The Black at Church” by HLG, presumably Helen Garrison. Although its literary merit is dubious to say the least, its sentimental commitment to equal treatment is straightforward. See also PhiloAfricanus, *The Liberator*, 6 August 1831.

brother-in-law), Henry H. Mundy, and Methodist minister Rev. Samuel Snowden, all community stalwarts. Barbadoes and Mundy were named vice-president and secretary respectively for Massachusetts, with the mission of raising funds to support the movement's works and to aid the group's general agent, Rev. Samuel Cornish.⁹⁴ The two strands came together at the convention where the manual labor school was the subject of lengthy and enthusiastic discussion, with Garrison, Tappan, and Jocelyn all in attendance. Apart from endorsing plans for the school, the convention adopted an agenda directly out of the MGCA's playbook, focusing on racial uplift, securing the "rights and immunities of citizenship" guaranteed to "every freeman born in the country," and opposition to the ACS as the "unhallowed source" of "many of our unconstitutional, unchristian, and unheard-of sufferings."⁹⁵

In early July of 1831, Dalton and Hilton, as well as James H. Howe, called a meeting of the "Gentlemen of Color" from the Boston area to discuss the school. Although they were leaders of the MGCA, they did not mention the organization in the notice. Indeed, the published account demonstrates how rapidly community energy was draining away from the MGCA and flowing into other projects, primarily those dominated by Garrison and his allies. Although the meeting resolved to "lend every aid in our power to the accomplishment" of the plan for the New Haven school, it also passed three resolutions focused on Garrison, the first thanking him for his "unwearied exertions," the second asking the assembly to patronize *The Liberator*, and the third requesting they buy copies of Garrison's recent address about the New Haven venture.⁹⁶ In a follow-up meeting a week later, the group voted to defer any decision regarding the college until further information was received from "our brethren

⁹⁴Cornish was a founding editor of *Freedom's Journal* but left in 1827 to take charge of New York's Free African Schools under the aegis of the New York Manumission Society.

⁹⁵"Minutes and Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the People of Color held by adjournment in the City of Philadelphia from the sixth to the eleventh of June, inclusive, 1831," *The Liberator*, 22 October 1831.

⁹⁶*The Liberator*, 9 July 1831 and 16 July 1831.

of the Convention, at the South.”⁹⁷ By the end of the summer, the plan was dead. Galvanized by Nat Turner’s August rebellion, New Haven’s resistance to the college reached its apogee at a September 10th town meeting that vehemently rejected the project. The next day rioters attacked Tappan’s summer home near the Yale campus, part of a wave of anti-abolitionist and anti-black violence that swept the free states.⁹⁸

For the next two years, newspaper announcements indicate that the MGCA held its annual spring meeting as before, but the announcements were not followed up by the usual accounts of dinners or festivities.⁹⁹ In fact, apart from these brief notices, the record seems silent.¹⁰⁰ The remaining core membership drifted apart: James Gould died as had Walker and Brinsley, Walker Lewis moved to Lowell, and Hosea Easton became pastor of the Talcott Street Congregational Church in Hartford. Dalton’s energies seem to have been directed toward the African Humane Society and possibly occupied by personal matters, including the death of his wife.¹⁰¹ Hilton, Barbadoes, Thomas Cole, and John Scarlett were drawn further into the Garrisonian orbit. Then, on 15 January 1833, following years of ever-closer relations with Garrison, the members of the MGCA petitioned to become an auxiliary of his recently formed New England Anti-Slavery Society, effectively ending the MGCA’s independent existence.¹⁰² As next generation

⁹⁷*The Liberator*, 23 July 1831.

⁹⁸*The Liberator*, 17 September 1831 and 22 October 1831.

⁹⁹Notice of MGCA meeting for “particular business,” signed by James G. Barbadoes, Secretary. *The Liberator*, 5 May 1832,

¹⁰⁰But see, Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 912 stating that the MGCA sent a petition to Congress in 1832 demanding abolition of the slave trade in Washington, D.C.

¹⁰¹*The Liberator*, 13 August 1831, giving Gould’s age at death as fifty-nine, and on 28 July 1832, Patience Dalton’s at forty-two. Founder Coffin Pitts remained active in community affairs and was the employer of famed fugitive Anthony Burns at the time of his capture in 1854.

¹⁰²Nell, *Colored Patriots*, p. 346, reproduces the text of the letter “cordially approving the objects and principles of the New England Anti-Slavery Society” and requesting to become an auxiliary. Dalton was still president, William G. Nell was vice-president, and James G. Barbadoes was secretary. Among those who subsequently became officers of the New England Society were Reverend Samuel Snowden, Joshua Easton, James

activist and committed integrationist William C. Nell remarked, “complexional Anti-Slavery Societies . . . were absurdities, to say the least” and the distinctions that Walker and others had fought so hard to establish “soon melted into thin air.”¹⁰³ The baton passed to a new generation of activists whose names are far more familiar to history. But, at that pivotal moment in 1830, Brinsley’s protest confronted white America with its betrayal of its own most profound principles and gave white activists such as Garrison an immediately accessible entry point to the world of black activism and its deepest concerns.

Although the ensuing history of the fight against pew segregation is beyond the scope of this article, black activists continued to stage challenges to the practice throughout the antebellum period and to decry it as a “degrading distinction” that transgressed the gospel message and withheld the rights of citizenship to which they were entitled as Americans.¹⁰⁴ White abolitionists joined in the challenge, sharing their pews, sitting in the sections of the church reserved for blacks, lobbying their ministers to serve black worshippers on terms of equality, and writing treatise after treatise condemning segregated seating as contrary to the “levelling principle . . . which renders the Gospel the antagonist of every system of despotism.”¹⁰⁵ By 1839, Boston had its first integrated free church, part of a movement directed at eradicating both segregated worship and

Barbadoes, and John Hilton. But see, *The Liberator*, 27 April 1833 for the Notice of a 30 April meeting of the MGCA signed by Dalton as president and Barbadoes as secretary showing that the group retained some independent existence at least in the year after it joined the Garrisonian organization.

¹⁰³Nell, *Colored Patriots*, p. 346.

¹⁰⁴Rev. Theodore S. Wright, Address to the New York State Anti-Slavery Society in Utica on 19 October 1836, reported in *The Liberator*, 5 November 1836. Wright was a black graduate of Princeton and pastor of the First Colored Presbyterian Church in New York.

¹⁰⁵Harvey Newcomb, *The “Negro Pew” being an inquiry concerning the propriety of distinctions in the house of God, on account of color* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837). See e.g., Child, *Illustration*, pp. 54–61, “Review of Abdy,” *Spectator*, p. 564. For a modern secondary account collecting challenges to pew segregation, see Litwack, *North of Slavery*, pp. 199ff, and sources cited therein. For the difficulties encountered by white abolitionists attempting to establish integrated churches in the 1830s and the divisions within the abolitionist camp over the issue, see, Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan*, pp. 175–78.

private pew ownership. These efforts met with substantial—and sometimes violent—resistance by church members worried about the value of their pews and the leveling of all distinctions in society. In what is perhaps the ultimate irony, this very discrimination fuelled the growth of independent black churches,¹⁰⁶ organizations that came to stand at the institutional center of black community life and at the forefront of the African American fight for abolition and civic equality through the twenty-first century, fulfilling, at least in part, the vision of those early founders of the MGCA who sought to treat with white America from a position of racial solidarity and strength.

¹⁰⁶Edgar C. Lane, *A Brief History of Tremont Temple* (Boston: Tremont Temple, 1947), p. 1. See, e.g., Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Henry Louis Gates, ed., *Douglass Autobiographies*, (New York: Library of America, 1966), pp. 359–61. Douglass, writing in 1845, described his 1838 experience of segregated church seating and communion in New Bedford which caused him to affiliate with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

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