"Finally, let us urge upon you a total abandonment of prejudice against color," abolitionist leaders instructed the thousands of rank and file who had enlisted in the cause by 1837. Were slaves white skinned, they told them, no one would tolerate their bondage for an instant. White abolitionists who harbored color prejudice never could be efficient advocates of the cause because American slavery was racial in character and justification. "The abandonment of prejudice is required of us as a proof of our sincerity and consistency," abolitionists affirmed. Seven years earlier, at the outset of his conversion to immediate abolition, William Lloyd Garrison had reached the same conclusion: "O that [my countrymen] might feel as keenly for a black skin as for a white skin."

The black leader Samuel Cornish understood the significance for his people of the emergence of these white immediatists, despite their shortcomings: "They have shown that God created all men EQUAL."

In the 1830s, for the first time in American history an articulate and significant minority of white Americans embraced racial equality as both a concept and a commitment, although it was an ideal far more difficult to live up to than to profess. Earlier proponents of racial equality were isolated voices that left few traces. This new development marked a change in the history of race relations in America—and in the struggle for racial justice—at a time when the dominant view among elites and common folk held that there was no future for free blacks in the United States. For nearly a century, from Thomas Jefferson in the 1770s
to Henry Clay in the 1820s and Abraham Lincoln in the 1860s, the idea of colonization, relocating African Americans elsewhere, preferably to their ancestral lands, seemed the only practical solution to the American race problem. Freeing the slaves, were that feasible, would settle nothing, according to received opinion, since few believed that the two races could live productively or harmoniously in the same country. The first wave of emancipations at the end of the eighteenth century reinforced this conviction.

In the half-century following the American Revolution, a large free black population emerged for the first time in American history, the fruit of state-sponsored abolition north of the Mason-Dixon line and individual manumissions in the slave states. By 1830 their numbers had grown to three hundred thousand. These free blacks proved to be a troubling presence. To Henry Clay, echoing common opinion in the 1820s, they were "the most corrupt, depraved and abandoned" people in the country. Whether one attributed their condition to inherent defects of character and intelligence or to white prejudice that prevented them from developing their capacities, Clay believed that blacks would forever remain a degraded people as long as they lived in the United States. "No talents however great, no piety, however pure and devoted, no patriotism, however ardent," Clay was certain, ever could earn African Americans equal rights or respect in the land of their birth. White prejudice was permanent, unalterable, "invincible." In African repatriation lay the only hope.2

By 1817, African colonization had become more than a speculative idea. In the next decade, hundreds of prominent Americans—political leaders including Presidents Madison and Monroe and religious leaders in most of the large denominations, from Presbyterian Lyman Beecher of Massachusetts to Episcopalian bishop William Mead of Virginia—threw their prestige and influence behind the America Colonization Society (ACS), which established the colony of Liberia in West Africa. One of the most impressive voluntary societies of its day, the ACS boasted over two hundred state and local auxiliaries by 1830. It was quietly assisted by President Monroe and endorsed by state legislatures and the major religious denominations, as well as by an illustrious panoply of notables.3

The ACS unintentionally mobilized black opposition, however, and though this opposition was ignored at first, it eventually made profound inroads on white opinion. From the outset, African Americans in the free communities from Boston to Baltimore defiantly rejected colonization,
warning that they never would freely abandon the land of their birth, which they had drenched with their blood and sweat. They would struggle for full equality, encouraged by the impressive advances they already had made in the decades since winning their freedom. By the 1820s, the free black communities of the large Northern cities had developed resources, leadership, self-confidence, and militancy that proved formidable, even against so weighty an opponent as the ACS. By 1830, African American leaders had begun to convince whites who supported colonization that racism underpinned slavery and colonization, that colonization stood in the way of emancipation, and that as long as Northern whites embraced both, there was no prospect for ending slavery in the United States. By insisting on their inherent equality, by acknowledging but explaining black deficiencies as the result of slavery and persisting white prejudice afterward, and by pointing with pride to their patriotism and piety and to their achievements through education and industry, blacks affirmed bourgeois values that they shared with whites. Black confidence that whites could overcome prejudice if they only opened their eyes to black aspiration and accomplishment thus challenged a core assumption of colonization.

By the early 1830s, free blacks had convinced a small but prophetic vanguard of white men and women to repudiate colonization and embrace immediate emancipation and racial equality. By virtue of their personal example and through the power of their argument, they created the modern biracial abolitionist movement. Their faith in the ability of white people to change, to abandon colonization for integration and racial prejudice for equality, was the triggering force behind the emergence of racial egalitarianism. Yet the fact that only a small sector of white opinion proved susceptible to African American persuasion necessarily complicates any explanation of the origins of racial equality in Jacksonian America. Along with the story of the fight against racial prejudice, the story of that prejudice also must be told.
Racial Equality in the Era of the American Revolution

The American Revolution launched the debate over the future of blacks in the United States. As long as most blacks had been slaves, law and custom had fixed their place, fastening the institution on colonial America without confronting conscience, save for isolated exceptions. The American Revolution, however, inspired the first wave of emancipations. Republican natural-rights ideology reinforced latent Christian benevolence to abolish slavery everywhere north of Maryland, thereby endowing the new revolutionary order with a glow of moral legitimacy and ideological consistency. The vanguard republic became the vanguard emancipator, at least in half of the new nation.¹

Yet the first wave of abolitionism suffered from severe limits. It failed to penetrate those states where slavery was the foundation of the labor and property systems and where the size of the black population made emancipation seem an unthinkable danger. Even in the new “free states,” few gave much thought to the status and future of the newly emancipated. In Pennsylvania (1780) and New York (1799), gradual emancipation laws stretched out and blurred the transition from bondage to freedom. In 1800, over half of Philadelphia blacks still resided in white households, and many remained indentured for a term of service. So while legal status had changed, the life experience of many freed people of color remained closely linked with the past.²

Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1784 by judicial interpretation of its new republican constitution, but in 1788, the state sought to
discourage any further settlement of blacks under a warning-out law adopted that year. When hundreds of Bay State blacks expressed interest in African colonization in the 1780s, Samuel Adams, patriarch of the Revolution, favored state assistance. A generation later, Massachusett's whites remained troubled by the influx of free blacks, regarded by many as degraded and dangerous. In 1822, a legislative investigation explored the desirability of halting further growth of the black population, but factional divisions stalled action. Elsewhere, too, states made clear that blacks should avoid their territory. Three years after Ohio entered the Union as a free state, it prohibited blacks from settling, but because the law went unenforced, blacks continued to flow north across the Ohio River into Cincinnati. A white backlash erupted in the late 1820s, forcing hundreds of frightened African Americans to find refuge in lower Canada.

In the slave states, too, the growth of a large free black population triggered a reaction, especially after the bloody events in Haiti in the 1790s and Gabriel's Revolt in Virginia in 1800. In 1806, Virginia repealed the post-Revolutionary manumission law under which conscience-stricken masters had freed nearly thirty thousand slaves. Thereafter, no newly emancipated slave could remain in Virginia for more than one year, at risk of reenslavement. Neighboring Kentucky also excluded free blacks, as did all the new states of the lower South.

 Everywhere, the presence of blacks posed anomalies for white emancipators, who had not thought through the implications, civic or spiritual, of emancipation. The first abolitionist societies formed after the American Revolution affirmed that God had "made no essential distinction in the human race, and that all the individuals of the great family of mankind have a common claim upon the general feeling of natural bounties." Accordingly, the abolitionist societies exhorted whites to aid the freed blacks to raise themselves up, but except for the work of the state societies, especially in providing for schooling, this appeal fell on unreceptive ears. What is the good of "removing the sorrows of slavery," the abolitionists wondered, "if the new made man is relieved from the power of one, only to be sensible of his hopeless inferiority to all?" The abolitionists themselves were a feeble band, made up of a handful of benevolently minded men, some notable, others obscure. Though a few of the state societies displayed some vigor, notably in Philadelphia and New York City, the national meetings never attracted more than twenty-five delegates and sank to as few as nine in attendance during the first eight conventions held between 1794 and 1803. It is doubtful that
such numbers exerted much influence on white opinion, let alone on social policy, despite the earnestness of their appeals.Outside these ranks, even among Northerners opposed to slavery, free blacks fared poorly. Support for abolition did not imply belief in racial equality. When Quakers liberated their slaves to conform with the new antislavery ethic that became part of the denomination’s discipline after 1750, they did not welcome blacks as members of the faith. Not until 1790 did the bar formally come down, but by then, blacks who had been freed by Quaker masters had found spiritual nourishment elsewhere. In other denominations, blacks were expected to worship with whites, but to occupy segregated spaces in the galleries and far corners, the more out of sight the better. When blacks, denied opportunities to buy pews, no longer could tolerate the humiliation, they withdrew and formed all-black congregations and in time new black denominations.

When it came to schooling, they were also largely on their own, though a few whites offered help. Eager for educational opportunities, the first generation of free blacks found most public schools closed and their requests for tax revenues for black schools refused. Opportunities in the job market proved equally meager. Freed blacks were anxious to learn a trade, hire on as an apprentice, demonstrate their talents, and work their way up, but few masters could overcome their own prejudices or those of the journeymen to give industrious blacks a chance.

So unprepared were whites for black citizenship that the suffrage laws enacted during the Revolutionary era failed to specify whites only until a wave of black voting triggered a wave of exclusions, in Maryland in 1783 and again in 1810, in Connecticut in 1814 and in the 1818 constitution, in New York in 1821, in Rhode Island in 1832, and in Pennsylvania in 1838. When a black ran for office in Maryland in the 1790s, the anomalous silence of the law was quickly remedied. Likewise, the militia laws failed to bar blacks, but when patriotic blacks rallied to the flag, they were turned away, in Maryland in 1810 and, a decade later, in Rhode Island, though in times of dire need whites relented to allow blacks to defend the country, for example when the British threatened New York City and assaulted New Orleans during the War of 1812.

Even those few whites sympathetic to black uplift and integration qualified their commitment to racial equality in crucial ways. Anthony Benezet, the pioneer Quaker antislavery agitator who opened a school for free blacks in the 1780s in his last years, worried whether any pious person could be found to continue the work at the school endowed in his will. Pride and ignorance fostered racial prejudice, even among
Quakers. Perhaps, Benezet thought, some blacks would be better off migrating abroad.\textsuperscript{10}

Samuel Hopkins, the Edwardean theologian and pioneer abolitionist in Newport, Rhode Island, reached a similar conclusion. Though Hopkins had appealed to the Continental Congress in 1775 and later to the federal Constitutional Convention to take action against slavery on Christian and republican grounds, and though several blacks gained full membership in his Newport church and he mingled with African Americans in public, Hopkins doubted that integration was practical, even though he thought the races equal. Because of the physical differences between the races, white prejudice seemed inveterate, and Hopkins concluded that some blacks would prosper better in Africa, although he opposed forced colonization and linked colonization with emancipation.\textsuperscript{11}

Even the two most important defenders of the unity of mankind and the equality of races in the young republic could not conquer color phobia. Benjamin Rush was an early supporter of black self-help and uplift. He aided blacks in establishing their own places of worship, fought for schooling, and participated in the 1790s in an integrated funeral for a black worthy in Philadelphia and in a roof-raising party for a black church at which whites and blacks took turns serving dinner to one another. Here were surely heroic, symbolic efforts at bringing the races together in everyday life. Yet Rush, one of the early republic’s foremost scientists, believed blackness to be a disease, an affliction related to leprosy. Someday a cure would lift the curse of color. Princeton’s Rev. Samuel H. Smith was no better able to conceive that black skins are beautiful. While arguing on biblical grounds the unity of humanity, as the product of a single act of creation, Smith believed white skins to be the norm and blackness an accident, a deformity of nature caused primarily by climate. In North America’s temperate climate, Africans were whitening, Smith soothingly assured his countrymen. Time dealt unkindly with Smith’s theory.\textsuperscript{12}

Few publicly challenged Hopkins, Rush, Smith, and others who adhered to the prevailing eighteenth-century Enlightenment belief in environmental explanations of racial difference. Yet few accepted racial equality as a matter of social policy or practice. Thomas Jefferson was notable for admitting his “suspicion” that blacks were created inherently inferior to whites in intellect, though many shared his conclusion that colonization offered the solution to the race question. Jefferson appealed to the evidence offered by history and recent experience. Neither in
Africa nor America, he believed, had Africans achieved a level of civilization remotely comparable to the levels that the once-backward European peoples had reached—the Germanic tribes, for example, "civilized" by the Romans—levels that Jefferson predicted Native Americans some day would achieve.\textsuperscript{13}

By the 1820s, forty years of freedom had reshaped the African American communities in the large cities north of Baltimore. Black preachers, school graduates, craftsmen, businessmen, and property holders, upwardly mobile folk who through hard labor and sacrifice had achieved respectability by any white, bourgeois standard, backed articulate and militant black leaders who forcefully challenged Jefferson's "suspicion" and rejected Jefferson's favorite panacea, colonization, in favor of integration and equality. These African Americans offered impressive new evidence for judging the inherent nature and potential of dark-skinned Americans. And while most free blacks remained mired in poverty and ignorance, the progress of the minority suggested that Jefferson's doubts rested on shaky evidence. In 1801, St. George Tucker, acknowledging the unity of mankind, prophetically warned that once freed, blacks "would never rest satisfied with anything short of perfect equality." By 1830, Tucker's statement was no longer prophecy.\textsuperscript{14}

The environmentalist argument for racial equality in the eighteenth century had not rested on strong contemporary empirical evidence. In the half-century after the American Revolution, black progress gave environmentalism strong empirical grounding for the first time. Blacks themselves persisted in the quest for equality, however daunting the obstacles. In New York, where a gradual-emancipation law delayed the end of slavery, black self-manumissions and industriousness persuaded whites of blacks' devotion to freedom and led the legislature to advance the end of slavery in 1827, touching off joyous celebrations of this new day of Jubilee. In Baltimore, blacks, aided by white businessmen who also preferred a freer market in labor services, successfully fought the white cartmen who had sought in the late 1820s to secure legislative sanction for their monopoly of the trade.\textsuperscript{15} The dozens of black churches, schools, Masonic lodges, and benefit and improvement societies established by 1830 all testified to black devotion to self-improvement through hard work, sacrifice, and institution building.

These developments within the free black community in the early nineteenth century precipitated the first great crisis in American race relations. Some whites now began forcibly to resist black advances and aspirations. Until 1805, the Fourth of July in Philadelphia had brought
blacks and whites together to celebrate the national birthday, but race relations had soured as blacks advanced, Irish immigrants swelled the growing working class, and insecure whites no longer welcomed black participation. Elsewhere, white resistance took a violent turn. Rioters in Boston in 1826, Providence in 1823 and 1831, Cincinnati in 1829, and Philadelphia in 1829, 1834, and 1835 sought to reassert white supremacy in the face of black advances and to remind the former slaves of their status as an inferior caste, forever excluded from the promise of American life. The target of the rioters' rage was typically some symbol of black achievement, such as a church or home.\textsuperscript{16}

The idea of America as a “Herrenvolk republic” did not spring Medusa-like out of the minds of white folk. It emerged only after the progress and demands of free blacks compelled whites to clarify and make explicit their understanding of American republicanism as the white race's exclusive gift.

The most important effort to construct a Herrenvolk republic was the formation in 1816 of the American Colonization Society, which aimed to remove free blacks to Africa. Black resistance to colonization culminated in a struggle between 1826 and 1833 that left the ACS badly wounded and Garrisonian immediatism in the ascendancy in the North. The ideas of black removal, inherent inferiority, and the invincibility of white prejudice remained powerful, even dominant in antebellum America, but now these ideas faced an unprecedented challenge from below. In the course of this struggle, African Americans forged the first biracial alliance with a mass movement among white people committed to the idea and practice of racial equality.