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PREVIEW

**ATLANTIC REVOLUTIONS:
SLAVERY AND FREEDOM IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND
AND HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA IN THE ERA OF
THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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For Terri Lynn and Emma
Whose confidence and support enabled me to complete the journey.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

INTRODUCTION

In 1784, Benjamin Freebody wrote to his master, Samuel Freebody, from New York City, asking to know his future as a slave. In his letter he outlined his service upon a Rhode Island privateer that had been docked in British-occupied New York, and how he had been maltreated by the ship's captain. After he had been brutally punished for desertion (Benjamin contested the captain's interpretation), he fled to heal his wounds, only to suffer from small pox. Unpaid for his service aboard the privateer, Benjamin wrote to Samuel Freebody on two occasions to report the abuse of Captain Brattle, for money to pay his debts, and finally to know whether he would receive the freedom his master once promised him. Before Benjamin's arrival in New York in 1784, thousands of blacks had migrated to the city: freedmen, runaways from revolutionary masters, and slaves of white Loyalists. These black men and women developed social ties, meeting to worship or enjoy each others' company. Indeed, Benjamin's disputed desertion was the result of his spending time among blacks in the city. After being hired out by Captain Brattle to a British officer, Benjamin went to a local tavern to meet with members of New York's black community. Upon returning to Captain Brattle, the captain accused him of running away, and had him publicly whipped. Benjamin then fled and remained in a local boarding house to recover from the injury and write his master for assistance. While

awaiting word from Samuel Freebody, he remained in contact with black freedmen and slaves in New York. Through these networks he discovered that the war was ending and that blacks who had served in the British military were leaving the city to avoid re-enslavement. Offered safe passage to Nova Scotia himself, Benjamin wrote his master once more (as he was reluctant to leave him) requesting aid for his debilitated condition.

In his letters, Benjamin described a close paternal relationship which he fundamentally cherished, but ultimately questioned after his experience aboard Brattle's ship. Furthermore, he described the presence of Captain Norris in New York City, who to Benjamin's "Grate Surprise . . . had a Power to take me up and Return me to Rhode Island."¹ Benjamin was not ready to leave New York until he received his wages. Furthermore, he wanted to know his status as Samuel Freebody's servant. While Freebody said Benjamin would be free, Benjamin questioned his master's intention when Norris was sent to retrieve him. In his final letter to Freebody, Benjamin asked, "I hope your goodness will Comply with my request to let me know if Im to be free or remained a Slave if your goodness will Consent to give my discharg."² Benjamin never returned to Newport. Instead, he left for Nova Scotia with other emancipated blacks, using his service to the once Loyalist Brattle to claim he served with the British military. Benjamin was granted a certificate of military service, and sailed to Nova Scotia to live as a freedman like the thousands of former slaves who left their patriot masters during the Revolutionary War.

Benjamin Freebody's tale illustrates how the American Revolution created an environment of social disturbance that enabled enslaved blacks to claim and seize their freedom. During the Revolutionary War, numerous blacks fled their masters, some joining the British army or convening in British-occupied areas like New York City, Charleston, and Savannah. They created new social ties in

these maritime communities, adapting and formulating political and cultural bonds in the process. In these seaports, they formed families, communities, and churches; building cultural networks founded upon religious beliefs and political aspirations. The era of the Revolution produced a language of freedom that many emancipated blacks incorporated into their lives and relationships. More than dissolving the bonds of slavery, freedom meant social and economic independence as well. As the war came to an end, they sought ways to protect their newly-acquired freedom, either by leaving the United States or forming mutual-aid societies in order to escape economic dependency. Although imperial wars traditionally created opportunities for slaves to run away, they were never accompanied by a libertarian vocabulary that had the capacity to challenge slavery. The American Revolution provided such a language, enabling blacks throughout British North America to mobilize and protect their freedom. Whether using existing political and legal institutions, or forming their own organizations, they banded together to protect themselves from re-enslavement. So protective of their freedom, these men and women ultimately questioned whether it was possible to remain free in post-war North America. Whether in the loyalist controlled British North American colonies or the United States, freedmen wondered if they and their families could avoid virtual enslavement in the hostile environment of racial discrimination. Bonded by the threads of a black Atlantic culture, these men and women considered the possibility of repatriating to Africa. Here they hoped to institutionalize the ideas of economic, political, and social independence they had cultivated since the early years of the Revolution. The tradition of cultural creativity and adaptation which defined the Black Atlantic for three centuries continued would remain a defining characteristic of the colonization movement in the Revolutionary Era.

The American Revolution shook the Atlantic world. With the emergence of the United States and the re-formulation of the British North American empire, the lives of people in Africa, Europe, and the Americas were forever changed. Some British Americans were now Americans, while others remained loyal to their colonial identity, and now lived in other parts of the empire (or in Britain). British Americans of African descent were also affected by the social wrenching of the Revolutionary War. Some were free due to military service. Others were gradually emancipated because of revolutionary ideas about abolition. And still others returned to Africa, hoping to live as free people in their ancestral homeland. Despite the historic growth of the free black population, though, most black Americans remained enslaved. In fact, slavery not only emerged intact in the southern United States, it was strengthened by new legislation protecting the institution, and supported by dissenting religious sects like the Baptists and Methodists.³ In these complex ways the American Revolution was a revolution in black life. American independence produced a social upheaval that dispersed blacks throughout the Americas, Europe and Africa. Furthermore, it generated a vocabulary of freedom that began the demise of slavery in the Atlantic world, one of the most enduring social systems in Western history. Slavery may have survived the Revolutionary War, but it would not continue unchallenged. In the Americas, Britain, and Africa voices of protest argued against the holding of human chattel and demanded the abolition of slavery. Slavery traditionally connected the Atlantic world, and now its opponents used the social, political, and cultural network the slave trade created to demolish the institution that had kept the Atlantic political economy flourishing for nearly two centuries.

The Atlantic World and African Creole Slavery

Since the beginning of European colonialism in the Americas, a black Atlantic cultural, social, and economic system tied the Americas with Europe and Africa. Enslaved Africans produced resources that propelled the colonial economies and labored aboard vessels that transported those goods to Europe and Africa. In these capacities, slaves played critical roles in the emerging capitalist Atlantic world. Within this larger transformation they forged cultural and social relations that served as the foundation of an Atlantic African Diaspora. Beginning with the “charter generation” of African creoles in the sixteenth century, blacks in the Americas served as cultural and social conduits between Europeans and Africans.⁴ Born in the commercial trading centers along the African and American coasts, they developed linguistic and social skills as a means to interact with the various cultures that inhabited these trading entropôts. They worked as day laborers, artisans, and merchants, contributing to the commercial economy of the Atlantic world. Along the North Atlantic littoral, they maintained this position even as southern plantation societies turned their attention to recruiting native African labor for intensive agricultural production in the eighteenth century.

Although historians have traditionally seen slavery as an economic and social system incompatible with capitalism, others scholars argue that these systems of political economy complimented one another.⁵ Indeed, slavery would flourish in Jeffersonian and Jacksonian America as slaveholders adjusted the social, economic, and political dimensions of forced servitude to industrial capitalism. In his study of slave economies in the Americas and the Caribbean from 1492-1800, Robin Blackburn describes the ways modern slavery was defined under a mercantalist political economy and redefined during the

formation of capitalism in the eighteenth century. While slavery existed for centuries in Western societies, it proliferated during the colonial period, modernizing to accommodate to the political economy of colonialism.⁶ As Blackburn states,

Capitalist development in Europe generated new wants that could not be met from European resources . . . The plantation products were popular pleasures, with demand for sugar and tobacco often acting as the lure drawing widening circles of the population into a commodity economy; the taxes on these products also supplied a useful revenue for the major states.⁷

Even as Europe turned away from enforced servitude, European colonists gravitated towards slavery to supplement a chronic labor shortage. Invested in the development of intensive agricultural staples like tobacco and sugar, they turned to African slavery because of their experience with African servitude in the late medieval period and the latter's skills in developing these commodities.⁸ By the eighteenth century, North American plantations oriented their slave economies to capitalize upon the growing Anglo-American trading network.

In this environment, African slaves were important players in facilitating commercial exchange throughout the Atlantic littoral. As merchants, artisans, and laborers in the trading centers (known to contemporaries as factories or castles) they worked with Europeans and Africans because of their ability to navigate among various cultures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While they could use their social and cultural skills to succeed in this environment, they were also vulnerable to enslavement because few Europeans and Africans accepted them as part of their respective cultures.⁹ As plantation economies searched for a rural African labor force, urban slaveholders along the North American Atlantic continued to import Africans from the West African coast to serve as domestics, artisans, and laborers into the eighteenth century. Like the creoles of the previous generation, Atlantic Africans of the eighteenth

century were familiar with Euro-American customs, sustaining the black Atlantic world. As laborers, these men and women worked in industries that served the Atlantic slave trade such as rum distilling and iron manufacturing. They also worked as sailors aboard ships traveling throughout the Atlantic world. In this capacity they could trade goods they purchased in seaports, while sharing and learning cultural practices.¹⁰

This study examines Atlantic slavery in two maritime seaports, and the ways it affected the social and cultural lives of enslaved Africans. In Newport and Halifax, these men and women lived along the Atlantic littoral, particularly in maritime communities which fostered social and cultural diversity. Even after British Americans in the Chesapeake and Lowcountries turned away from Atlantic creoles, slaveowners in urban areas sought out slaves from the West African coast and West Indies because of the cultural skills they held. The dynamic social conditions of Atlantic societies reinforced cultural creativity and adaptation among slaves, who in turn contributed to this dynamism with the traditions they brought. When the American Revolution produced a language of nationalism tied to citizenship and race, these men and women began to turn away from the Atlantic and towards building communities in places like Nova Scotia and Rhode Island, advocating for civil rights and social justice.

Maritime Newport and Halifax, Slavery, and the American Revolution

This study specifically compares black communities in Newport and Halifax to understand if the emergence of national boundaries and political cultures influenced black culture and society in these seaports. As two communities settled by New Englanders, these towns shared social and cultural characteristics even though fundamental economic and political differences informed their colonial relationship with Great Britain. Yet, as Atlantic societies

they were connected to a larger world that accepted social and cultural heterogeneity. In this environment enslaved blacks could blend local customs with those they brought with them. Furthermore, as the Revolution dispersed blacks throughout the Atlantic littoral, these communities received men and women who had left behind relations, and now had to adapt to life in these seaports. Here they established new ties, practicing existing cultural forms such as evangelical religion while adjusting to new social conditions.

While some historians have explored African American community formation in northern seaport cities like Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston,¹¹ few have looked beyond the United States to explore the consequences of the Revolution for blacks throughout the African Diaspora in North America. However, in her book, Sylvia Frey examines how the military conflict unleashed a social migration that spread southern blacks throughout North America and the Caribbean, and how their revolutionary experience influenced their lives in the post-war period. In *Water From The Rock*, Frey illustrates how their regional cultures defined the way they interacted with each other and how they adapted to the new cultural environments in Caribbean and Nova Scotia.¹² Specifically, she discusses the ways similar views of evangelical religious culture brought many of these men and women together even though they came from different communities and social environments. In her book, Atlantic seaports such as Charleston and New York fostered an atmosphere that enabled former slaves from diverse backgrounds to develop cultural ties. Here they worshipped and banded together to protect themselves from racial discrimination. Many of these men and women would draw upon this experience to battle similar challenges in places like Nova Scotia.

Frey's study offers new ways to think about the revolutionary nature of the American Revolution. She shows how the war and revolutionary ideas

informed black resistance during this period and how revolutionary political leaders responded to slavery in the post-war period.¹³ Specifically, she has described the ways slavery was integrated into state-building and southern jurisprudence in the Revolutionary Age to structure the slave society that characterized the Antebellum South. Her pathbreaking book illuminates theoretical approaches to examine the lives of African Americans throughout British America during the Revolutionary Era. By thinking about the ways blacks were positioned in post-war society we can ask questions about the relationship of slavery to freedom in the context of race and citizenship. As political leaders struggled to build political society during and after the war, they attempted to integrate libertarian ideas with state-building. In many respects slavery challenged these ideas, and blacks were among those voicing these contradictions when offered the opportunity. In northern cities during the war, blacks used the revolutionary language of liberty and independence to argue for emancipation. In British territories, black soldiers wrote letters demanding land promised to them, in order to secure the independence for which they had just fought. Despite apparent allegiance differences, blacks supporting either the British or the revolutionaries recognized that the war presented an opportunity to acquire and secure freedom.

The issue of allegiance makes the comparison between Halifax and Newport all the more interesting. Such a comparative approach enables us to explore the complexities of black allegiance in an Atlantic context, and the meanings of freedom blacks attached to their political loyalties. Although Halifax was a small military outpost prior to the war, the Loyalist migration increased both the black and white population in its aftermath. Black Loyalists attempted to settle an independent community of emancipated blacks in Birchtown, a town about a hundred miles south of Halifax, but racial hostilities

and scarcity of resources forced many to migrate to Preston, a suburb of the seaport. Here they forged relationships with enslaved Africans to form communities, using their status as emancipated veterans to advance the issues of community members. Similarly, black veterans in Newport worked to build social institutions such as the African Union Society to promote the welfare of the town's African American population. Yet, the veterans of Halifax and Newport drew upon their military experience either as British or Continental soldiers to promote the interests of their respective communities. Although they seemed to be working for the same ends (economic independence and political rights), the means by which they advanced their concerns (petitions, memorials, and civil suits) were influenced by their different revolutionary experiences. While Haligonian blacks drew upon their loyalty to Britain to justify their claims, African Newporters discussed their issues in terms of the libertarian language of the independence movement. By exploring the similarities and differences between Haligonian and Newport Africans we may further understand the complex ramifications of the Revolution for blacks.

Few cities in the North Atlantic were as profoundly affected by the American Revolution as Newport and Halifax. While the war truncated Newport's economic prosperity, it contributed to Halifax's emergence as the economic center of Atlantic British America. On the eve of the war, Newport was the economic, social, and political capital of Rhode Island, and rivaled cities like Boston, New York and Philadelphia.¹⁴ But the war and British occupation (1776-1779) ravaged the city economically and demographically, severely impeding the city from returning to its pre-war status. Halifax, in contrast, shed its image as a provincial New England military outpost, becoming Atlantic British North America's most vital seaport. Loyalist and British migration were

the foundation of Halifax's demographic growth in the late eighteenth century even as the region suffered during a post-war economic depression.

The black population in these seaports was not immune to the social, political, and economic transformations produced by the Revolution. During colonial Newport's "golden age" ships unloaded African slaves to be sold in New England. As a result of its participation in the slave trade, Newport held more Africans enslaved proportionally than any other New England town. In fact, Newport's prosperity was directly tied to the slave trade. This trade demanded manufacturing industries like distilleries and shipbuilding while the consumer economy depended upon the disposable incomes from merchants and sailors. Ultimately, when the slave trade deteriorated as a result of the Revolutionary War, the seaport's economy faltered and constricted job opportunities for seamen, of whom a fair proportion were black. As numerous white Newporters left for fortunes in other American seaports or the farmlands in western New York and the Ohio Valley, African Newporters migrated to cities like Providence, New York, and Boston. In this social flux, enslaved and freed black Newporters tried to build social relationships and a community.

The blacks of Halifax witnessed the opposite demographic trends. Beginning in 1781, Black Loyalists and the slaves of white Loyalists were coming to the seaport as the war was ending. Few white Haligonians held slaves on the eve of the war; and here slavery emerged in the context of the seaport's connections to Atlantic economic trade as well. Africans were often purchased in Boston or the West Indies (key trading areas for Nova Scotia) and brought to Halifax as domestic servants and day laborers. With rum distillation and fishing tied to the sale and labor of African slaves, the seaport became linked to a commercial world characterized by slavery. Slavery may not have been as extensive in Nova Scotia, but it permeated everyday life as communities were

required to monitor the actions of slaves, thereby becoming key players in the slave – master relationship. As in Newport, slavery was a social system that brought people together in an intricate, complex web.

The influx of Black Loyalists and slaves changed the demographics of the population, disturbing slavery in the colony. Given that a large portion of these immigrants were free and most had come from southern colonies such as Virginia and the Carolinas, the social and cultural dynamics between black Haligonians and these immigrants would affect the African Halifax community, particularly in their religious life. While Baptists and Methodists would eventually receive the majority of black Nova Scotians, most blacks in the colony claimed Anglicanism as their denomination in the early years of resettlement. The popularity of Anglicanism in this period raises questions about the cultural heritage of those Afro – Americans who migrated from the southern colonies, a denomination to which many southern blacks were not attracted in the pre-war era. Did the social upheaval produced by the war also destabilize cultural ties? Did the Atlantic dimension of the seaports in which they resided during and after the war facilitate a black Atlantic worldview? The following study explores these questions in order to understand the ways black Atlantic culture endured the larger political consequences of the American Revolution.

Even though many of the Loyal Blacks had come from the southern colonies where Baptists and Methodists was more popular among black slaves, in Nova Scotia black Anglicans outnumbered the other two sects. As we will see, the reason why most black Nova Scotians practiced Anglicanism had less to do with the denomination, and more to do with the ways this established local institution facilitated social and cultural autonomy. In this environment, Nova Scotian blacks continued the tradition of blending and creating culture that was the hallmark of Atlantic societies in the colonial period. Furthermore, they used

this religious and social autonomy to promote a political discourse that valued freedom. Connecting evangelical religion with Revolutionary ideas, they advocated independent landholding to protect them from economic dependency. Like blacks in other parts of the North American Atlantic, once they saw that their newly – acquired freedom was threatened by racism and declining economic fortunes, they considered leaving the continent for Africa.

The Black Atlantic and Republicanism in a Revolutionary Age

Recently, Graham Russell Hodges has shown how Loyal Blacks from the Revolutionary War fused their religious ideas with their military experience to develop a republican worldview. Politicized by their military service and empowered by evangelical religion, they requested colonial and imperial institutions to provide them with resources to survive. Together, religion and politics informed their ideas of freedom, rooted in independent landholding. They maintained that in order to protect their independence, they needed adequate land and protection from whites who tried to re-enslave them or negotiate unfair labor contracts. However, it would be mistaken to characterize these men and women as “liberal” minded farmers who viewed landholding as key to individual political and economic prosperity. While historians such as Joyce Appleby have recognized this yeoman liberal impulse in the Revolutionary period, the Loyal Blacks of Nova Scotia (many of whom were trained artisans) valued independence and subsistence in an entirely different fashion. Competency, not competition, informed their ideas about economic freedom. As Daniel Vickers notes, competency was a pre – modern idea of independence that placed family needs above the individual as a way to protect family members from economic dependency.¹⁵

Despite this traditional view of land and freedom, the Loyal Blacks found themselves in a revolutionary political situation. As free men and women, they rejected slavery as a viable social institution. Moreover, they turned to political officials to recognize their status as free people entitled to the same rights and privileges as other British subjects. In their memorials and petitions they demanded lands promised them from when they joined the British army, and used the legal system to challenge efforts of whites to reduce them to dependent servants. Buttressed by an evangelical religious culture, these men and women worked collectively to preserve their freedom. In places like Birchtown, Preston, and Clements they banded together and built churches to protect themselves from racial discrimination. These churches simultaneously reinforced their political culture and their independence. Determined to preserve their newly-acquired freedom, they left Nova Scotia when offered the opportunity. Nearly a third of the free blacks from Nova Scotia migrated to Africa with John Clarkson's Sierra Leone Company to construct political and social institutions that would sustain their political culture.¹⁶

By placing the Loyal Black Refugees (as the black veterans described themselves) within the larger political revolution of the North American Atlantic, we can see how the American Revolution affected black political ideas. As Graham Hodges notes, they too absorbed the language of civic virtue and independence that galvanized artisans and farmers throughout Revolutionary America.¹⁷ Their inability to practice those ideas in Nova Scotia propelled the black veterans to repatriate to Sierra Leone to preserve emancipation for themselves and their families.¹⁸ In documenting the history of the Loyal Blacks, Hodges cements their experience in the broader ideological transformations that permeated the European and American revolutions. Lost in his account, though, is the way the existence of slavery and its apparent strength affected the Black

Loyalists' decision to leave Nova Scotia. Hodges overlooks how slavery influenced post-war political structures and ideas, particularly race and freedom. Throughout the American Atlantic, the institution of slavery was under assault in the early years of the post-war period. Its advocates and opponents were equally vocal about the future of the institution, with both groups drawing upon the language of liberty to support their cause. For supporters of slavery, the right to private property anchored their belief in holding human chattel. In the United States, a significant number of Americans elected to secede from the British Empire in order to protect their interests in slavery and the slave trade. Imperial legislation taxing molasses production generated protest and political upheavals in places like Newport, Rhode Island because it affected the twin pillars of the local economy – rum production and the trade of African slaves. Tied to the slave trade, Newporters resisted all imperial efforts to curb the local income. They were among the most vocal opponents of British imperial policies and among the most outspoken supporters of independence. While Newport ultimately paid an economic and political price for independence, it was at the forefront of the resistance movement in the years preceding the Revolutionary War.

The institution of slavery and its relation to the Atlantic commercial network thus influenced political ideas and informed a language of resistance in colonial America. As historians such as Edmund Morgan have noted, the meaning of freedom was especially potent in slave societies because slaveholders understood the slave – master relationship.¹⁹ As slavery became connected to other Atlantic industries such as ship building and fishing, not to mention rum distillation, Atlantic communities became equally invested in the commerce of African slavery. Moreover, the nature of the colonial economic system and its dependence on English capital and markets influenced the worldview of British