



POLITICAL ALIGNMENT AND ACTIVISM OF FREE BLACK MEN IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY NEW YORK (1790-1830)

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Introduction

The sacred principles of democracy in America ushered in by the Declaration of Independence holds that “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed”(Jefferson, 1776). Voting therefore is the power invested within the people of the United States. However, that responsibility has neither been given equally nor easily to all Americans.

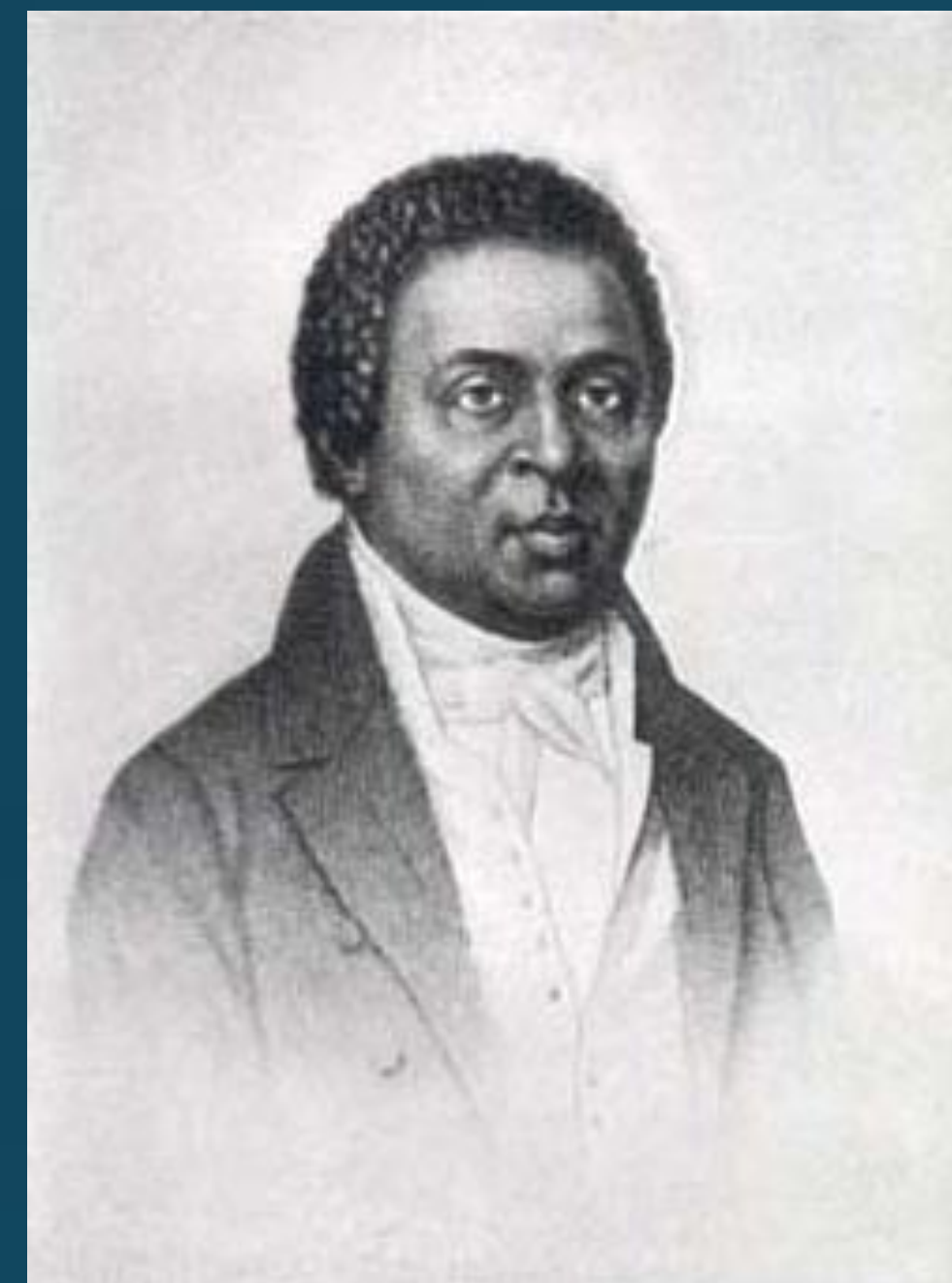
African-Americans have been a victim of this withholding of rights from the very conceptualization of American democracy. The rights of black freemen were not addressed in the Constitution or any other federal statutes not relating to slavery. Therefore, voting rights were left to state governments to decide the role of black men in their society.

Freemen in the State of New York in the early Republic from 1790 till 1830 were caught in America’s emerging struggle to define citizenship and political power, increasing the importance of enfranchisement in the most populous state in the country. Black voters gravitated towards parties and leaders that would allow for their participation in democracy, further shaping America’s ideas on race, poverty and slavery leading up to the Civil War.

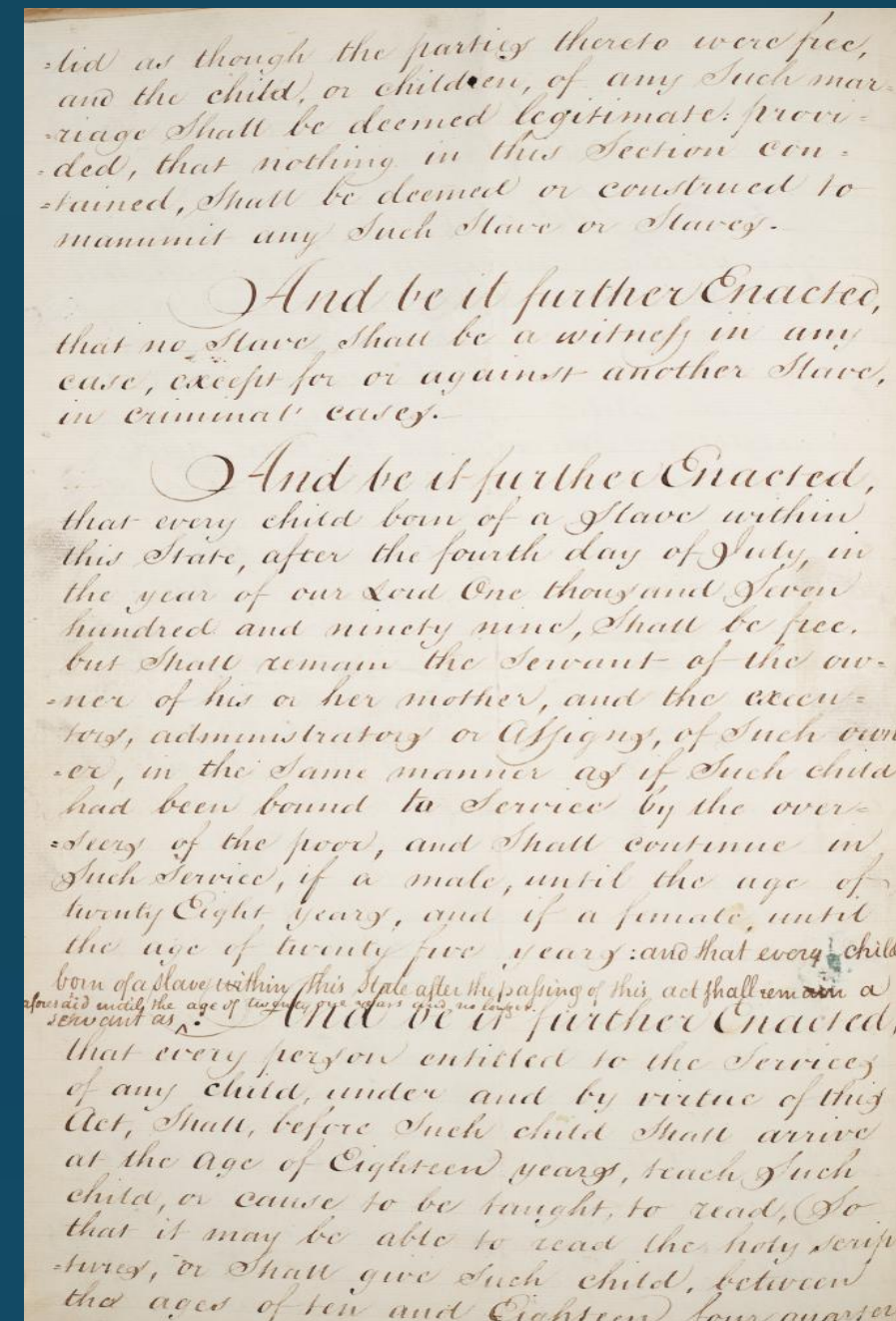
Methods

Using a list of names provided by Debra Newman and the National Archive Service with names drawn from the secondary sources for this research, I used Ancestry.com to uncover documents relating to free black men living in New York, specifically ones that were of prominence in the political community.

Additionally using Tufts University’s, *A New Nations Votes* project to comb through local and state New York elections from 1790 till 1830.



Frontispiece image entitled, “Christianized African” the Reverend Peter Williams from *The History of the Negro Church* by Carter Godwin Woodson, published in 1921. Print courtesy of UNC and “Documenting the American South” project.



New York State Archives. New York (State). Dept. of State. Bureau of Miscellaneous Records. Enrolled acts of the State Legislature. Series 13036-78. Laws of 1817, Chapter 137, Section 4.

Ideologies and Activists

The teachings of Jupiter Hammon, the first black American poet, created one of the first ideologies for gaining political recognition through moral uplift. Moral uplift would be adopted most notably after emancipation but was a fundamental ideology for black activists such as Peter Williams Jr. and Fredrick Douglass.

Created by Capt. Paul Cuffe’s trips to Sierra Leone, another ideology of the time for black New Yorkers became colonization in other countries. The successful slave revolt in Haiti offered a new alternative for the black struggle for citizenship . By 1818, Black New Yorkers had developed the Haytian Immigration Society of Coloured people with Peter Williams Jr. as the chairman (Alexander, 2008, 40).

Interest group politics became the main avenue for black men to get votes. Joseph Sidney from Hudson, New York was the black state representative that embodied this outlook. Originally a federalist, he fought for whatever party was willing to give the freemen community chances at equality through voting.

Conclusions

New York officially emancipated all slaves on July 5th, 1827, after a bill was passed for eventual emancipation in 1917. While voting rights had been highly contested leading up to this milestone, in 1821 the New York Constitution was revised to require voters to have paid at least \$250 in taxes to be enfranchised. The strategies used by Joseph Sidney in switching party allegiance and community organization through Peter Williams Jr. were halted. According to research done by Eric Foner, only 16 blacks voted in New York City during the 1830 election cycle.

As America struggled to find a common uniting identity during the Early American Republic, that same struggle for recognition was embedded in the freemen of New York. Without defined voting rights and fluctuating citizenship status, free black men were the heart of American identity hypocrisy and political misguidance.

Implications/Further Research

To this day the black population in America is being politicized and prevented from reaching equality when it comes to voting. Two of the biggest issues proliferating black voter exclusion are gerrymandering and election security actions taken by the states. It is important to look at the history behind black voter suppression to find new ways to embody equality as a national identity.

I would like to further this research by looking into the leadup to the Civil War more closely in New York because of how stagnant racial sentiment had become. How did black activists respond and was New York influential in fighting for emancipation of all slaves?

Citations

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