ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Abolitionist Reconstructions Of July Fourth

The Fourth of July, writes Howard Martin, was "the most important national ceremonial during the last century" in the United States (1958: 393). July Fourth occasioned the largest gatherings of the year in many communities, and was celebrated with picnics, ceremonies, fireworks, songs and speeches, which typically reveled in the mythic past and glorious prospects of the nation. But "the nation" was variously imagined by Americans on July Fourth (Anderson 1983: 13-15). Americans held divergent attitudes toward the holiday and used the occasion of the Fourth to contest ideas about national character, principles, and policies.

The United States prior to the Civil War bore few institutional expressions of its (increasingly fragile) unity. There was no official flag or anthem, and holidays were largely local or state, rather than national, observances. The Fourth of July was a unique national ritual, publicly enacted in local communities. During the American Revolution, July Fourth celebrations supplanted colonial celebrations of the monarchy (such as the King's birthday), through which the colonists had declared their loyalty and identity as British subjects.

The Fourth of July expressed new national identities rooted in independence (Branham, in press). In 1778, Congress gave its official sanction to the Fourth, and the following year ordered that "the chaplains of Congress be requested to prepare sermons suitable to the occasion" (*Journals* 1779: 204). These sermons typically celebrated the revolution as the crucible of the republic, the shared and defining heritage of an otherwise heterogenous people. "It was the Revolution, and only the Revolution," Gordon Wood writes, "that made them one people. Therefore Americans' interpetation of the Revolution could never cease; it was integral to the very existence of the nation" (1992: 336). July Fourth was the principal occasion for the public contemplation of the revolution and the country it had produced. By the War of 1812, organized Fourth of July celebrations had spread from urban areas to settlements across the United States.

But American observances of the holiday were far from uniform. "What, to the

American slave," Frederick Douglass asked, "is your Fourth of July?" On the same date when communities across the country gathered to sing patriotic songs and listen to speakers laud national achievements, abolitionists and other reformers met to consider the failure of the American Revolution to secure liberty for all Americans. By the mid-1830s, the Fourth of July had become the most important annual occasion for abolitionist meetings. Abolitionists sought to subvert conventional celebrations of the Fourth. They adopted many of its rituals, but converted its symbols and themes to support the abolitionist cause. The result was what Stuart Hall has termed a "negotiated version of the dominant ideology" that was "shot through with contradictions" (1980: 137-138). The Fourth of July presented the best recurring opportunity to reveal these contradictions, to contest American policies by reference to national principles. Abolitionists reconstructed the Fourth of July, using the accepted premises and symbolic resources of the occasion to "argue the nation."

1. Independence Day

Formal Fourth of July observances were inevitably devoted to the consideration of American national identity (Boorstin 1955: 377). To celebrate the nation's independence was to justify its separate status and distinctive character, and to do so on July Fourth located the nation in the founding principles of the Declaration. In its songs, symbols, and speeches, the Fourth provoked mass participation in rituals celebrating "shared" national myths and memories (Wyatt-Brown 1991: 35). Some July Fourth observances had a religious tone, "commemorated," as John Adams had hoped, by "solemn acts of devotion" (Travers 1997: 15). In the early 19th century, many July Fourth ceremonies followed the form of a Protestant church service, conducted "by priests appointed," as the editors of *The Liberator* later commented, "under the name of orators" ("Independence Day" 1860: 1). The holy text of the Declaration of Independence was read and the sermonic oration was delivered, interspersed with prayers and hymns. "The ubiquitous salute to the day," Martin observes, "had the ring of an invocation, a call to worship" (1958: 394, 399). The Fourth of July was "the political sabbath," the highest holy day for an American civil religion in which the United States was envisioned as "God's New Israel," a divinely favored nation with a distinctive mission in the world (Larson 1940: 14; Bellah 1967: 3-21; Cherry 1971). Local Fourth of July ceremonies were often partisan and militaristic (Kammen 1991: 49).

Speeches capped most community celebrations of the Fourth. These were touted by some as "the highest form of American oratory" (Larson 1940: 12). Hundreds of Fourth of July speeches and sermons were published as pamphlets and newspapers, and some were widely distributed and reviewed in literary journals. To be selected as a community's Fourth of July speaker was an honor. Speakers looked for meaning in the occasion and strove for eloquence, but too often waxed formulaic, grandiloquent, and clichéd. The term "Fourth of July oratory" came to be, as Ohio Senator Stanley Matthews lamented, "a hissing and a byword, a scorn and a reproach" for speeches that made bombastic appeals to patriotism (1879). Independence Day orators praised the revolutionary past and dreamed of America's shining destiny (Martin 1958: 399-401). "The fourth of July," George Bancroft told his Springfield, Massachusetts, audience on July 4, 1836, "was the day on which the people assumed power, and proclaimed their power to an admiring world" (Larson 1940: 20). Orators extolled the institutions and rich resources of the ever-expanding American territory, lacing their speeches with biblical allusions and parallels to the greatness of Greece and Rome. July Fourth was typically an occasion for patriotic boastfulness.

Independence Day songs and speeches often proclaimed the success of the American Revolution in securing liberty for all Americans, despite obvious exclusions (Bellah 1975: 88). In slave-holding Charleston, South Carolina, John J. Mauger's oration on July 4, 1817, celebrated (without conscious irony) the day as one on which "millions of freemen assemble in commemoration" of the "Birth Day of American Freedom" (Larson 1940: 17). Speaking in the same city on July 4, 1820, where two years later Denmark Vesey would plot the armed revolt of those enslaved there, William Lance could say without blushing that his country countenanced "no *distinctions* of rank, no *degrees* of right, to tarnish the *natural equality* for which" the nation's founders "fought and conquered" (Martin 1958: 395). Even when Fourth of July orators decried conditions of tyranny and oppression elsewhere, most portrayed their own country as one in which such conditions had been eradicated. In his July 4, 1823, address, Horace Mann imagines the "Great Being" who, when scanning the globe, finds that there is "one spot alone" where no despot dares lift his hand to pluck a leaf from the tree of liberty" and where every heart thrills to its glories. "That spot," he concludes, "is our country; those hearts our own" (Larson 1940: 16).

Fourth of July boasts of America's status as a beacon of liberty to the world were

deeply offensive to many abolitionists. How could America be a "land of the free" when millions were enslaved? Writing about the celebratory events of July 4, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison condemned national self-congratulation: "We have lived to see once more our nation's Jubilee! Millions hailed it with exultation!. . . The orators of the day, as usual, recounted the many and great blessings which have been vouchsafed unto us. . . They eulogized in no measured terms our civil constitution, and indulged, as our predecessors have done, in high anticipations of our future greatness and glory. Who did not partake in the feelings of the occasion? Who did not join heartily in welcoming the day? But there are some, 'tis believed, who rejoiced with trembling. All ought to have done so." To "rejoice with trembling" is to recognize the fundamental paradox of American history, Garrison explains, that "while we have been vaunting our free institutions, and claiming for our country the admiration of the world, as the birth place of liberty, the asylum of the oppressed, we have been holding two millions of our fellow men in the most abject servitude" (*The Liberator* 1831: 119). Those who truly loved freedom and abhorred slavery, Garrison insisted, could not celebrate the Fourth of July in good conscience.

The Fourth of July was invested with a variety of ideological, cultural and racial meanings. For many Americans, Black and white, it was a "whites only" celebration. The liberties celebrated on July Fourth were white liberties. African Americans were denied the "self-evident" rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and restricted both from white visions of the nation and from participation in its ceremonial observances. The Rev. Dr. Dalcho, a slaveholding minister from South Carolina, insisted that:
"The celebration of the *Fourth of July* belongs *exclusively* to the white population of the United States. The American Revolution was a *family quarrel among equals.* In this, the NEGROES had no concern; their condition remained, and must remain, unchanged. They have no more to do with the celebration of the day, than with the landing of the Pilgrims on the rock at Plymouth. It therefore appears to me, to be improper to allow these people to be present on those occasions" (*Anti-Slavery Record* 1835: 115). Some free African Americans in the North observed the Fourth of July, honoring Crispus Attucks (the "first to die for freedom") and the Revolutionary War service of Black soldiers. But those enslaved or free in the South were generally prohibited from participation in white July Fourth activities (Sweet 1976: 262-263). Advertisements for the Independence Day program at Charleston's Vauxhall Gardens in 1799 made explicit that there would be "no

admittance for people of color." By the beginning of the nineteenth century, white mobs in the northern states regularly attacked African Americans on July Fourth (Travers 1997: 150, 143). Many anticipated the Fourth of July with apprehension and fear.

African American orators, poets and songwriters attempted to show white audiences what July Fourth was like for Black people.

William Wells Brown, who had himself escaped from slavery, shocked his several thousand listeners in Framingham, Massachusetts, on July Fourth, 1859, when he began his speech by reading aloud an advertisement from a recent issue of the *Winchester (Tennessee) Journal*. It announced the sale, on July 4, that very day, of an enslaved African American woman and her children, "together with a top buggy, and several waggons and horses." The Fourth of July, he informed the audience, was "the high-market day for slaves throughout the South. . .the day when more slaves were to be sold under the hammer than any other." To the slave, Brown said, the Fourth of July is "more dreaded than almost any other day of the year" (*Liberator* 1859).

Black abolitionist orators addressing predominantly white audiences at Independence Day observances frequently asked their listeners to consider the occasion of July Fourth from the perspective of one enslaved. How would one in chains feel about celebrations and songs proclaiming the nation's freedom? In what is perhaps the speech's most quoted passage of his 1852 address in Rochester, New York, Frederick Douglass (who had himself escaped from slavery) re-visions the Fourth from this perspective:

"What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all the other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license; your national greatness swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to Him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States at this very hour" (Foner and Branham 1998: 258).

Early abolitionists, particularly African Americans, condemned conventional

observances of the Fourth of July. Religious and political leaders urged people to boycott them. “The festivities of this day,” Rev. Peter Williams, Jr., preached in New York on July 4, 1830, “serve but to impress upon the minds of reflecting men of colour a deeper sense of the cruelty, the injustice, and oppression, of which they have been the victims.” Williams asked his listeners to donate the amount of money they would normally spend in celebrating the Fourth to support instead the emigration to Canada West by African Americans driven out of Cincinnati (Foner and Branham 1998: 115). The national Black convention of 1834 voted to urge African Americans not to participate in public celebrations of the Fourth . The editors of *The Colored American* in 1838 suggested that a slave whip should be unfurled as the national symbol on the Fourth, instead of the American flag (Quarles 1969: 122). Abolitionist orators attempted to raise their audiences’ awareness of their own privilege, and to temper their willingness to celebrate it while other Americans were denied liberty.

Conventional Fourth of July orators routinely characterized British rule as oppressive and tyrannical, and the American rebellion as a quest for liberty. But many American abolitionists did not share either belief. Some African Americans, such as H. Ford Douglass in his July Fourth oration of 1860, went so far as to say that they “would rather curse than bless the day that marked the separation” of the colonies from England, for had they remained British subjects, African Americans would have been freed in 1834 when Britain abolished slavery in the colonies (*Liberator* 1860: 1). The American abolition movement had been shaped in large part by its British counterpart. Beginning in 1826, British abolitionists had petitioned parliament in favor of immediate emancipation, and produced a torrent of pamphlets, newspaper articles and speeches in support of their cause. By late 1830 it was apparent that parliament would pass the measure. American newspapers reported the deliberations of the British parliament and anti-slavery activists quickly decided, as the New York *Whig* editorialized on September 23, 1831, “that this kind of reform needs to begin in our country.”

American anti-slavery activists adopted many ideas from British activists, mining British anti-slavery propaganda for facts, arguments, and rhetorical strategies that might be used in the American campaign (Barnes 1933: 29-33). British abolitionist speakers toured the United States and American speakers toured and raised funds in Britain. The success of the British abolitionists in persuading parliament to abolish slavery in the colonies in 1833 was hailed as a model for the

prospects of American abolitionism. Antebellum African Americans were more likely to extol Britain or Canada, rather than the United States, as a "land of liberty." They celebrated August 1, the date on which British slavery in the West Indies was abolished, and other dates of abolition or slave trade suspension (such as January 1 and "Juneteenth"), more often than they did the Fourth of July (Martin 1984: 53; Quarles 1969: 124-125; Wiggins 1987: xix-xx).

But anti-monarchism had been a potent force in American politics since 1775, and the Revolution was for many Americans the defining event of American national identity. The Fourth of July remained the most popular American holiday, and the occasion when national principles and texts were most regularly invoked in public ceremonies. Although most committed abolitionists by the mid-1830s felt they could not participate in standard rituals of national glorification, many also believed they could not merely ignore the holiday. The Fourth of July offered unique rhetorical opportunities for interrogating national practices, and abolitionists crafted a variety of approaches by which they might both use and distance themselves from the occasion, arguing for national change rather than self-satisfaction (Branham and Pearce 1985: 19-36).

2. July Fifth

African Americans sometimes held parallel ceremonies on the Fourth itself. On July 4, 1827, New York emancipated its slaves, and celebrations were held in African American communities throughout the state and beyond. In Rochester, New York, the emancipation act and a copy of the Declaration of Independence were read aloud, followed by an oration by Austin Steward. Steward carefully distinguished the proceedings from other Independence Day observances. He had been born in slavery and reminded his audience that while they enjoyed their freedom in New York, "we should remember, in joy and exultation, the thousands of our countrymen who are to-day. . . writhing under the lash and groaning beneath the grinding weight of Slavery's chain." "We will rejoice," he advised, "though sobs interrupt the songs of our rejoicing, and tears mingle in the cup we pledge to Freedom" (Foner and Branham 1998: 107). The following year, Steward emigrated to Canada.

In order to differentiate their celebration of New York's emancipation from the national holiday and to avoid physical attacks from drunken whites on July 4, many African Americans held their observances on July 5 (Quarles 1969: 119-122). This postponement also represented the fact that the liberties celebrated by white Americans on the Fourth had not yet been extended to them.

Peter Osborne explained to his New Haven audience on July 5, 1832, that "on account of the misfortune of our color, our Fourth of July comes on the fifth." Only when the terms of the Declaration of Independence were "fully executed," he explained, "may we then have our Fourth of July on the fourth" (Foner and Branham 1998: 124). July Fifth became a common meeting date for gatherings that featured speeches, music, and organizational elections. It was an occasion when, as Leonard Sweet writes, African Americans "could symbolically express their alienation from the promises of July 4 (1976: 259). July 5 provided critical distance from July 4, yet its proximity made commentary on the Fourth inevitable.

The most famous July Fifth denunciation of the Fourth is undoubtedly Frederick Douglass's brilliant oration, "What, to the Slave is the Fourth of July?," delivered in Rochester, New York, in 1852. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and its enforcement in Northern states the following year made no place within American borders safe for any African American. Bounties and a lack of due process meant that even "free" Blacks were falsely charged and sent into slavery (Martin 1984: 59). Rochester was an important stop on the Underground Railroad and the Douglasses offered many fugitives their last American shelter before crossing the border into Canada. In 1851, Douglass hid three men who had shot and killed the slaveholder who pursued them. Despite the man-hunt mounted for them, Douglass personally made the perilous drive with the fugitives to the boat that would take them to freedom in Canada (Bontemps 1971: 194-196). When he accepted an invitation the following year to deliver a Fourth of July oration in Rochester, Douglass explained his alienation from the occasion: "I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn" (Foner and Branham 1998: 255).

Douglass feels he can take no part in the national celebration. He is an "aliened American," as Joshua Simpson puts it. From the outset of his speech, Douglass distances himself from his predominantly white audience, even those who oppose slavery. Douglass makes clear that their subject positions are very different. "The freedom gained is *yours*," Douglass tells his white listeners, "and you, therefore,

may properly celebrate this anniversary." Douglass delimits the "liberty" and "equality" typically proclaimed on the Fourth, revealing that these are privileged rather than universal conditions in America (Lucaites 1997: 47-70). Douglass compares the expectation that African Americans would join in the celebration of July Fourth and the singing of patriotic songs that accompany it to the predicament of the ancient Israelites during their exile in Babylon. He quotes Psalm 137: "For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, sing us one of the songs of Zion." Douglass asks, in the words of the Israelites, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?;" How, he insists, can we sing a song of freedom in a land where we are not free? Whatever song Douglass is to sing on this day, he explains, must pierce the melody of "national, tumultuous joy" with "the mournful wail of millions, whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are today rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them." The song he sings in this strange land, then, must itself be strange, estranged from dominant ideology and custom.

African American abolitionist Joshua McCarter Simpson composed just such a song in "Fourth of July in Alabama," set to the tune of "America" and published in his collection, *The Emancipation Car*, two years after Douglass' speech. Like Douglass, Simpson imagines the holiday from the perspective of one enslaved. He includes a prefatory paragraph, explaining that the song is "the meditation and feelings of the poor Slave, as he toils and sweats over the hoe and cotton hook, while his master, neighbors, and neighbors' children are commemorating that day, which brought life to the whites and death to the poor African."

Though cannon's [sic] loudly roar,
And banners highly soar –
To me 'tis gloom.
Though "lads" and "lasses" white,
With face and spirits bright –
Hail thee with such delight,
With sword and plumes.
I hear the loud huzzas,
Mingled with high applause,
To Washington.
The youth in every street,

Their notes of joy repeat;
While Patriots' names they greet,
For victory won.
Brass bands of music play
Their sweet and thrilling lay,
Which rend the skies;
Old fathers seem to feel
New animating zeal,
While tones of thunder peal
On every side.

Yet we have got no song.
Where is the happy throng
Of Africa's sons?. . .
How can we strike the strains,
While o'er those dismal plains,
We're bleeding, bound in chains,
Dying by scores?

While e'er four million slaves
Remain in living graves,
Can I rejoice,
And join the jubilee
Which set the white man free,
And fetters brought to me?
'Tis not my choice.

O, no! While a slave remains
Bound in infernal chains
Subject to man,
My heart shall solemn be –
There is no song for me,
'Till all mankind are free
From lash and brand (1854: 41-42).

Because "America" was strongly associated with the Fourth of July (the occasion on which it premiered in 1831 and for which it remained a favored text), it was frequently parodied or reconstructed at abolitionist observances on that date. The

abolitionists crafted dozens of alternate versions of "America," some designed specifically for use on July Fourth, to distinguish between national boasts and realities (Branham 1996: 623-652). Simpson's song describes the familiar sounds and customs of July Fourth, but from the perspective of one enslaved. He sings of his inability to join in the performance of national songs, saying: "There is no song for me." For Simpson, it is a holiday celebrating the "jubilee/ Which set the white man free/ And fetters brought to me." He is not within the compass of those liberties celebrated. Simpson's first-person lyric dissents from the imaginary national unanimity of the Fourth. He chooses not to sing of America as a "sweet land of liberty" so long as "four million slaves/ Remain in living graves." Simpson replaces the falsifying words of Smith's "America" with his own song of freedom.
Simpson, Douglass, and other abolitionists sought to construct a critical observance, rather than celebration, of the Fourth of July. They used the occasion to interrogate and subvert its conventions and sacred texts, such as "America" and the Declaration of Independence, which provided poignant intertextual referents for the abolitionists' own messages (Watson 1997: 91-112). In their own songs and speeches, abolitionists strove to reconstruct the Fourth of July, to make use of its rhetorical opportunities and invest it with new meanings.

3. Reconstructing the Fourth of July

The Fourth of July was always a political occasion, as conventional Fourth of July ceremonies reinforced the legitimacy and power of the state. But celebration of the Fourth of July was never universal or uniform. Its observance varied dramatically by region, year, race, and political orientation. Many groups, including trade unions and political parties, held their own Fourth of July gatherings, with particular meanings. Beginning in the 1790s, Philip Foner has written, American trade unionists celebrated the Fourth as their day and drank toasts to "The Fourth of July, may it ever prove a memento to the oppressed to rise and assert their rights" (1976: 1). Trade union gatherings used the occasion to draw attention to the oppression of workers, to lament the unfinished business of the Revolution, and sometimes proposed alternative Declarations of Independence to replace or supplement the original document. In Boston, the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans held competing Fourth of July celebrations to rally their members (Travers 1997: 11). Frances Wright's "scandalous" Fourth of July orations of 1828 and 1829 combined appeals for a variety of radical reforms, including women's rights, sexual liberty, and abolitionism (Eckhardt 1984:171). She viewed July Fourth as the ideal occasion

for appeals to social reform. She denounced patriotism as a sentiment that ”surely is not made for America” and argued that the Fourth was a day best devoted to “celebrating protests against it” (1836: 195, 181).

The Fourth of July was used by a variety of political groups to grant legitimacy to their causes by aligning their diverse visions of the future with the myths and principles of the Revolutionary past. At the same time, reformers contested and refashioned the meanings of the Fourth and the national texts it celebrated. Abolitionists made use of the Declaration of Independence almost from the moment it was issued. African American minuteman Lemuel Haynes reprinted the Declaration on the title page of his 1776 pamphlet on “Liberty Further Extended; or, Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-keeping,” arguing that according to its principles, America must “let the oppressed go free” and recognize the “undeniable right” of the African American to liberty (Newman 1990: 2-4).

The Fourth of July was used to protest slavery at least as early as 1783, two months before the Treaty of Paris was signed. At a celebration of American independence in Woodbridge, New Jersey, according to an account in the *Newark Eagle*, a prominent local physician mounted the platform along with fourteen whom he had enslaved and emancipated them on the spot, citing the principles of the Declaration of Independence: “As a nation, we are free and independent, – all men are created equal, and why should these, my fellow citizens, my equals, be held in bondage?,” he asked; “From this day, they are emancipated” (Nell 1855: 164). On July 4, 1791, four years after ratification of the Constitution, George Buchanon, M.D., a member of the American Philosophical Society, delivered *An Oration Upon the Moral and Political Evil of Slavery* at a public meeting in Baltimore of the Maryland Society for the Abolition of Slavery. Buchanon’s speech was dedicated to Thomas Jefferson and invoked the language of the Declaration in support of abolition. His speech was widely circulated in pamphlet form and read by President George Washington, among others (1793). The universal human rights proclaimed in the Declaration, and its justification of resistance to oppression, made the Fourth of July an irresistable opportunity for anti-slavery activists to argue for reform based upon accepted premises.

The earliest regional and national efforts to encourage local anti-slavery observances of July 4 were undertaken by the American Colonization Society. The American Society for Colonizing of the Free People of Color in the United States was founded in 1816 and had may eminent supporters, including James Monroe,

Daniel Webster, Henry Clay and Francis Scott Key, the author of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Its efforts to promote the emigration of free African Americans to Liberia were at first supported by many white anti-slavery activists and a few African Americans, who despaired of ever gaining equality in America. The Colonization Society's prejudicial rhetoric, however, which urged whites to support the removal of free Blacks as an inherently inferior and troublesome group, soon produced unified opposition (Quarles 1969: 3-8). In the 1820s and 1830s, the Colonization Society sponsored annual Fourth of July meetings, using the occasion to wrap their controversial programs in the garments of patriotism. These were the colonizationists' best attended and most lucrative fund-raising events (Hay 1967: 129-130, 132; Friedman 1975: 188-189).

On July 4, 1829, at a ceremony sponsored by the American Colonization Society in Boston's Park Street Church, twenty-three year-old William Lloyd Garrison delivered his first major public address against slavery. Garrison would soon abandon the colonizationists and denounce their schemes to deport free blacks to Africa as racist and supportive of slavery. In this speech, he was already far more militant than most colonizationists. He denounced the Fourth of July as "the worst and most disastrous day in the whole three hundred and sixty-five." Yet Garrison made much use of the occasion in his speech, finding support in the Declaration of Independence for his thesis that slavery was a national sin, and contrasting the hypocritical proclamations of national virtue that characterized conventional celebrations of the Fourth ("that pompous declamation of vanity, that lying attestation of falsehood, from the lips of tumid orators, which are poisoning our life-blood") with national realities (1852: 46; Thomas 1963: 92-101).

From 1830, Garrison and many other anti-slavery activists denounced slavery as a sin and embraced the goal of immediate emancipation. They made astonishingly rapid gains in membership and organization. The New England Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1832, and the American Anti-Slavery Society began the following year. States and towns formed their own anti-slavery societies, which sent delegates to regional and national conventions. The network of organized anti-slavery activities expanded from 47 societies in 1833 to more than 1,000 in 1836 (Richards 1979: 108). The new abolitionist movement drew upon the religious fervor of the revivals that had swept America during the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s. The revivals had preached of personal salvation and national perfectionism, invigorating an array of social reform movements. Most

abolitionists initially believed moral suasion to be the key to individual and national redemption. Abolitionism became a form of evangelism, and its proselytizers sought to spread the word through publications, revival-style meetings, and songs. They encouraged national reform by reference to national principles and texts, which they argued were at odds with the practice of slavery. The Fourth of July seemed to many abolitionist leaders the ideal opportunity to interrogate national pretensions and promote social reform.

Garrison's *Liberator* and the intensification of abolitionist activities in 1831 fueled efforts to organize alternative observances of July Fourth. Black abolitionist Anna Elizabeth of Philadelphia published "A Short Address to Females of Color" in *The Liberator* on June 18, 1831, noting the suggestion "by some of our best friends" (Garrison chief among them) "that the approaching fourth of July be set apart, by us, as a day of humiliation and prayer." She asks African American women to join her in acting accordingly (98). July 4, 1831, was probably the first Independence Day on which abolitionists organized counter-observances across localities and states in competition with those of the colonizationists. At an observance in Lynn, Massachusetts, on that day, orator Alonzo Lewis proclaimed the appropriateness of the occasion for anti-slavery appeals, noting that "On a day like this, it is highly suitable to speak of whatever has a tendency to advance or retard national honor, happiness and prosperity" ("Independence and Slavery" 1831: 94-95.

In the next issue of *The Liberator* (July 9, 1831), Garrison criticized non-abolitionist observances of the Fourth. He denounced the hypocrisy of conventional celebrations: "Our love of liberty increases with the multiplication of our slaves." Despite the fact the the American "slave population is larger by sixty thousand souls than it was at the last anniversary;" Garrison asked, "when have we made so extensive and boisterous a parade of our patriotism?" Garrison voiced particular disdain for the July 4, 1831, sermon by Lyman Beecher in favor of colonization, in which Beecher urged "every man, woman child to put their hands into their pockets, and contribute money" for "the removal of the whole colored population to Africa" (111). Criticism of conventional and colonizationist observances of the Fourth would become a standard feature of abolitionist rhetoric and a basis for differentiating their own Independence Day events.

July Fourth was a holiday with very different meanings for different groups of Americans. Although there had been scattered prior uses of the occasion by abolitionists, it was still associated with a wide variety of reform causes. Garrison and others began a campaign to seize the day for antislavery purposes. In *The*

Liberator three weeks later, Garrison reprinted a column in which the editor of the *Lynn Record* argued that "no day, perhaps is better adapted to urge an appeal" on behalf of those enslaved "than the Fourth of July." Beginning the following year, Garrison and others promoted annual counter-observances of July Fourth. Abolitionists sought to make the day their own, a day when many Americans would contemplate the paradoxical proclamations of freedom amidst the continuing practice of slavery.

Anti-slavery uses of July Fourth competed with uses of the occasion for other causes. Some of these (such as colonization) were contrary to abolition, while others (temperance, for example) were causes supported by most abolitionists. Recognizing that Independence Day had already been employed by temperance activists and other reformers to promote their causes, Garrison argued in the *Liberator* that anti-slavery activities should be given the highest priority in use of the day. For other causes, he explained, "there are other seasons quite as appropriate and just as useful." But July Fourth offered unique opportunities for anti-slavery organizing, he insisted, and those in bondage should "have the first and highest claim upon our sympathy and aid on Independence Day." "It should be made 'The day of days' for the overthrow of slavery," Garrison concluded, "as formidable to domestic as it ever was designed to be to foreign tyrants" (*Liberator* 1852: 106).

From 1833 through the beginning of the Civil War, July Fourth was the most important annual meeting day for abolitionists, marked by huge gatherings, speeches, songs, and fund-raising. *The Liberator* on 28 June 1834 carried notices for six anti-slavery Fourth of July observances in three states, and in 1835 listed sixteen. These were largely local affairs, although some invited notable outside speakers and advertised to attract attendance from other communities. The New-England Anti-Slavery Society, for example, sponsored a regional anti-slavery meeting on July 4, 1834, in Boylston, Massachusetts, attended by delegates from several states ("Fourth opf July" 1835). But the logistical difficulties and expens of travel prevented large-scale regional gatherings until the development of rail lines. In the interim, abolitionist leaders urged the proliferation of local observances "in every place where a society exists for the furtherance of this holy and patriotic work" (Libertas 1835: 94). Anti-slavery Fourth of July activities were designed to motivate anti-slavery sympathizers to take concerted action, and to contribute financially through "free-will offerings." July Fourth anti-slavery activities also appealed to the unconvinced. "Many new volunteers enrolled

themselves under the banner of immediate emancipation" as a result of these gatherings, Garrison claimed in 1836 (111). Antislavery activists regarded July Fourth as an occasion that offered unique rhetorical and organizational opportunities.

Just as conventional Fourth of July ceremonies linked local communities together in the invocation of nationhood, so too did anti-slavery gatherings, which connected local communities with national issues. At the Plymouth County (Massachusetts) Anti-Slavery Society's July Fourth observance in 1837, hymn by George Russell set to the tune of "America" asked:
Shall Despotism sway,
Its iron sceptre *here*,
Our lips to close?
Sons of the pilgrims! Say!
Will ye proud lords obey,
And ask *them* when ye may
The *truth* disclose? (Russell 1837: 128).

Russell's song asks those gathered to consider the national Congressional gag rule as a restriction on their own speech, and to see in their local heritage (as "Sons of the Pilgrims") a national responsibility.

The spread of rail lines in the 1840s and 1850s enabled the physical as well as rhetorical consolidation of anti-slavery forces. Anti-slavery July Fourth rallies in some cases attracted thousands of participants. In his 1886 memoir of anti-slavery activities in Maine, Austin Willey recalled that "the fourth of July had been much used" in "the cause of liberty to which it belonged, and with great benefit." On July 4, 1847, anti-slavery meetings were held throughout the state, "in groves and churches, with speeches and music, the women preparing the picnic." By July 4, 1852, improved transportation, as well as the impetus to anti-slavery organizing provided by passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, enabled the Maine societies to stage an enormous anti-slavery rally. The featured speaker was Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. An estimated "six to ten thousand" people convened in a grove near East Livermore. Normally used for Methodist camp-meetings, the grove was festooned with banners bearing mottoes (including "No Compromise With Slavery," "The Daughters of Freedom Opposed to the Nebraska Bill," and "Temperance and Liberty"), and pictures of Aunt Chloe and Uncle Tom's cabin. Those assembled listened to speeches and anti-slavery

songs, followed by a picnic lunch, then more speeches and resolutions (Willey 1886: 318, 442-445).

From 1852 through 1860, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society sponsored huge annual "Anti-Slavery Celebration[s] of Independence Day" in rural groves. Five thousand people from throughout Massachusetts attended the July 5, 1852, gathering at Abington "to listen to the speeches of freemen, and sing the songs of freedom" ("Anti-Slavery" 1852: 119). Horses and carriages "stood almost innumerable in the shade of the trees" and "booths well filled with wholesome viands, but containing nothing which could intoxicate, stood all around." African American abolitionist Charles Lenox Remond was elected president of the day's gathering and delivered the principal oration (*Liberator* 1852).

Beginning in 1853, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society held large annual July Fourth meetings in Framingham. Framington's Harmony Grove was a popular tourist attraction in the 1850s for urban residents who wished to spend a day in the country, rowing on the lake or perhaps playing round-ball or cricket on the adjoining field (Herring n.d.; *Gleason's* 1852: 384). "The Grove itself," Rev. Elias Nason recalled, "consists of several acres of tall, majestic pine, oak, maple and chestnut trees, whose spreading branches form a dense and grateful shade" from summer's heat. "The squirrel leaps from bough to bough; the song birds fill the air with melody" (Potter 1896: 1). The air of Harmony Grove was also filled with speeches. Anti-slavery and temperance meetings were held in a natural ampitheater, 250 feet long and 150 feet wide, that seated over a thousand people. Special trains carried attendees from Boston, Worcester, and other towns and cities for the July Fourth rallies. These were frequently all-day affairs. The thousands who attended the Framingham event in 1857, for example, "spent some six hours in the various exercises appointed for the occasion" ("Anti-Slavery Celebration" 1857). Speakers included Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Charles L. Remond, William Wells Brown, Frances Ellen Watkins, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (*National* 1857). The Framingham Anti-Slavery Fourth of July rally gained national attention in 1854, when Garrison first burned a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law, then a copy of Judge Edward G. Loring's decision approving the seizure of Anthony Burns as a fugitive slave. Finally, he burned a copy of the U.S. Constitution, which he pronounced a pro-slavery "covenant with death and agreement with hell." The crowd erupted in a mixture of cheers and hisses (Garrison and Garrison 1885: 412).

The Framingham rallies intensified the national debate over slavery. "It has been

said that a small nest of hornets attending strictly to business can break up a camp meeting," Edgar Potter, curator of the Framingham Historical Society, wrote in 1896, and the Framingham rallies "kept the whole country in an uproar" (1896: 2). The rallies incorporated some elements of traditional Fourth of July gatherings but differentiated their purposes. Like traditional gatherings, abolitionist observances of July Fourth featured oratory, music, family picnics, political campaigning, banners and national symbols. Abolitionists capitalized on established conventions of the holiday in order to reconstruct its meanings and purposes.

4. Arguing the Nation

Those who wished to highlight the inconsistencies between slavery and national principles could ask for no better occasion. "A people yet suffering under oppression," Garrison explained, "should use all occasions when the word FREEDOM is spoken, to remind themselves and each other they have it not" ("Independence" 1860). On a practical level, July Fourth was one of the few dates when large-scale attendance could be secured for day-long meetings. In urban areas, at least, it was a day free from labor and commerce, when most people were free to attend. The primary attraction of July Fourth, however, was rhetorical. It held powerful associations and made available certain symbols and lines of argument that were less poignant on other occasions.

In his July 5, 1852, Rochester address, Frederick Douglass oppositionally decodes the symbols, themes, and conventions associated with July Fourth, turning the occasion against itself. He subverts the characteristic elements of the generic Fourth of July oration. He too invokes the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, civil religion, the flag, and the American landscape, and he too speaks of the nation's singularity. But Douglass revises these concepts and symbols. He refigures, for example, the concept of national unity traditionally expounded on the Fourth by speaking of the nation as "unified" in evil by the passage of the Fugitive Slave law, through which "slavery has been nationalized in its most horrible and revolting form." The United States is defined by its national support of slavery. "By that act," he explains, "the power to hold, hunt and sell men, women and children as slaves remains no longer a mere state institution, but is now an institution of the whole United States. . . coextensive with the star-spangled banner and American Christianity." Douglass, like most conventional Fourth of July orators, proclaims the singularity of the nation, but by insisting that "for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns

without a rival" (Foner and Branham 1998: 258).

In their own observances, abolitionists incorporated many of the themes and symbols associated with July Fourth. Polemicists of all sorts used the Fourth of July to identify their own causes with the American Revolution, as Ronald Reid has observed, emphasizing their own contributions to the Revolution, drawing parallels between the Revolution and their own causes, and purporting to continue or complete the Revolution through their proposed reforms. "It is peculiarly proper," anti-slavery orator James Eels of Ohio observed on July 4, 1836, "to link together these two American Revolutions, and to celebrate the triumph of one and the progress of the other, at the same Anniversary; for they are intimately allied, and have relations so closely interwoven, that they could not well be separated" (Reid 1978 68-69, 70).

Abolitionist speakers and writers praised the colonial revolutionaries who took up arms against the British oppressors. Their narratives emphasized those aspects of the American Revolution most analogous to the anti-slavery campaign. Abolitionists drew parallels between their numbers (three million colonists then, three million enslaved now), objective (liberty), their animating principles ("that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. . ."), and their willingness to die for their freedom. The Declaration of delegates at the 1833 National Anti-Slavery Convention, for example, recast the story of the American Revolution as one in which "three millions of people rose up as from the sleep of death, and rushed to the strife of blood; deeming it more glorious to die instantly as freemen, than desirable to live one hour as slaves" ("Declaration" 1833: 426). By drawing parallels between the Revolution and their cause, abolitionists made use of the mythic structure through which the Fourth had long been conventionally celebrated. But Douglass and others recast the roles in the Revolutionary morality play. It is the abolitionists, he argues in his July 5, 1852, Rochester address, who are most akin to the "agitators and rebels" who led the Revolution of "the oppressed against the oppressor." Those now in power, who hate "any great change (no matter how great the good to be attained, or the wrong to be redressed by it)," are today's tyrants and Tories (Foner and Branham 1998: 250-254). The Revolution is thus refashioned as a justification for the radical actions of the abolitionists.

Linguistic references to the American Revolution were woven throughout the speeches and promotional materials for anti-slavery July Fourth gatherings. A

notice for the July 4, 1860, event in Framingham was headlined "THE INSURRECTION OF 1776!" and urged "all who hate despotism in the garb of Democracy and Republicanism as well as of Monarchy, and would overthrow it by every weapon that may be legitimately wielded against it" to assemble" (*Liberator* 1860: 90). Linking the Revolution to abolitionism was made easier by the hyperbolic language used to describe the patriot cause. The Fourth of July was "the glorious day – / When slavery's clouds were chased away," a poet wrote in the *Florida Herald* in 1829 (82). The Revolution was justified as a response to tyranny, "breaking the chains" of British oppression. The metaphoric description of British colonialism as bondage and slavery suggested obvious connections to the abolitionist cause. Conventional Fourth of July orations regularly analogized the Revolution to the Israelites' providentially guided escape from Egyptian bondage (Hay 1967: 192-193). Abolitionists made the simple leap from figurative and Biblical bondage to literal contemporary slavery, which they argued meant that their cause was even more noble than that of the American Revolutionaries. The grievances of the colonists, delegates to the National Anti-Slavery Convention declared in 1833, "were trifling in comparison with the wrongs and sufferings of those for whom we plead." "Our fathers," they explained, "were never slaves – never bought and sold like cattle – never shut out from the light of knowledge and religion – never subjected to the lash of brutal taskmasters" ("Declaration" 1833: 426-427. The colonists had less cause to revolt, abolitionists argued, than did they.

Pro-slavery forces accused abolitionists of fomenting slave rebellions, although many abolitionists denied the charge. While abolitionists drew parallels between their own cause and the principles of the American Revolution, most differentiated their tactics. The Revolution was "effected by the sword and bayonet," James Eels explained on July 4, 1836, but abolitionists would succeed through "argument and persuasion" (Reid 1978: 70). In an 1848 song, "The Liberty Army" (set to the tune of "America"), the abolitionist singers pledged: "No bloody flag we bear;/ No implements of war,/ Nor carnage red shall mar/ Our victory" ("Liberty" 1848: 194). Some abolitionists, however, embraced not only the principles but the means of the American Revolutionaries. July Fourth presented a unique rhetorical opportunity to defend armed resistance to slavery. Those enslaved staged hundreds of revolts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in efforts to gain their freedom. These uprisings were sometimes violent and were greatly feared by whites. Abolitionist orators and

writers drew upon the threat of further uprisings in order to alarm their listeners and prod them to action. Rev. La Roy Sunderland's *Anti-Slavery Manual*, a pocket handbook of facts and arguments used by many anti-slavery speakers in the 1830s, includes accounts of twenty-four slave rebellions from 1712 to 1831. Speakers were instructed to present these "facts demonstrating the danger of continued slavery," which made further violent rebellions inevitable (1839: 86-91).

Abolitionists regularly invoked the prospect of slave uprisings on July Fourth, a day in which rebellion was celebrated by most Americans. Conventional Fourth of July celebrations often included military parades and themes. Orators praised the willingness of the Revolutionaries "to conquer or die" in armed resistance to British oppression. Some abolitionists, such as Garrison, asked, "Do they not fear lest their slaves may one day be as patriotic as themselves?" ("Walker's" 1995: 77). The Fourth of July, he argued, must not only "embitter and inflame the minds of slaves," but "furnish so many reasons" why "they should obtain their own rights by violence" (*Liberator* 1831: 120). In an oration delivered in Lynn, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1831, as "America" premiered in nearby Boston, Alonzo Lewis warned his listeners that they must emancipate those enslaved before they "deluge our southern cities with blood" ("Independence and Slavery" 1832: 24). That same day, Nat Turner had originally planned to stage his Virginia uprising, the bloodiest in American history, before illness forced him to postpone it (Aptheker 1943: 297). In the South, July Fourth was a common occasion for acts of resistance and retaliation by those enslaved (Travers 1997: 148).

By whatever means, abolitionists and other reformers argued that the duty of the current generation was to complete the unfinished American Revolution. Members of the 1833 Anti-Slavery Convention pledged their support "for the achievement of an enterprise, without which, that of our fathers is incomplete" ("Declaration" 1833: 426). The Declaration of Independence was regarded as a statement of principle, rather than an accomplished vision of the nation (Reid 1978: 70). July Fourth was an occasion on which abolitionists, as well as those who attended conventional celebrations, rededicated themselves to the nation's founding principles. "An Appeal to American Freemen" (1859) consisting of four stanzas set to the tune of "America" and designed for use at anti-slavery July Fourth observances, instructed celebrants to initiate a second American Revolution, to: "Light up again the fires/ Once kindled by your sires/ In Freedom's cause (Justitia 1859: 104).

Although July Fourth was popularly referred to as the "Nation's Jubilee," celebrating the "birth of freedom," abolitionists denied this, insisting that the "day of jubilee" was yet to come. Abolitionists used the Fourth to expose the failure of America to fulfill its founding principles, and to dream of a future day of emancipation. The military success of the American revolutionaries against overwhelming odds offered assurance to anti-slavery workers that their struggles would also some day succeed. In his 1836 song, "Day of Jubilee," set to the tune of "America," A. G. Duncan imagined the celebration that one day would be.

Roll on thou joyful day,
When tyranny's proud sway,
Stern as the grave,
Shall to the ground be hurled,
And freedom's flag unfurled,
Shall wave throughout the world,
O'er every slave (87-88).

Duncan displaces the language, occasion and featured melody of Independence Day celebrations. A true Independence Day, he insists, is contingent and deferred, but possible through concerted action. Abolitionists used the Fourth of July to reimagine the nation as a "sweet land of liberty" in fact as well as in song.

5. Conclusion

The thousands who attended the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's Framingham rally in 1859 heard Thomas Wentworth Higginson announce that "This is our day – our Fourth of July. We can claim it, if nobody else can" ("Address" 1859). Abolitionist counter-observances of July Fourth were more than alternative, self-contained events. Abolitionists saw themselves as transforming the occasion, "redeeming the Nation's birth-day from the utter perversion and desecration which it everywhere suffers at the hands of a degenerate and time-serving people" ("Anti-Slavery Celebration" 1857). Abolitionists sought to reconstruct July Fourth, changing its meanings and implications for a broader public. July Fourth and July Fifth were occasions on which abolitionists "argued the nation," contesting common conceptions of national character and reconstituting national identities.

Abolitionists sought to problematize participation in conventional Fourth of July celebrations. They equated participation in conventional July Fourth celebrations and the singing of national songs with support for slavery. "We'll meet beneath no

gilded arch with pomp and show and pride," the participants in Framingham's July 4, 1860, anti-slavery meeting declared, refusing "To chant the songs of freedom, while we swell Oppression's tide" ("Our Fourth" 1860). Abolitionist orators, songwriters, and poets sketched scathing portrayals of conventional Independence Day speeches and celebrations, in part to differentiate their own efforts on that date. If the most important function of conventional Fourth of July celebrations was, as Len Travers has written, "to mask disturbing ambiguities and contradictions in the new republic, overlaying real social and political conflict with a conceptual veneer of shared ideology and elemental harmony," the primary function of abolitionist Fourth of July observances was to reveal these contradictions and strip away the veneer of harmony (1997: 7). Abolitionists hoped that their audiences would reflect on the irony of the terms ("liberty," "freedom," "independence") and texts (such as the Declaration of Independence or the song "America") used to celebrate the Fourth in a land of slavery. They publicly desecrated national symbols and subverted patriotic texts on the Fourth, when doing so would be most shocking and, they hoped, thought-provoking.

By the Civil War, July Fourth gatherings were regarded by abolitionists such as William Wells Brown as "the most important meetings held during the year." It was an occasion that drew large crowds and exposed ironies that "deepened the impression" upon those who attended (*Liberator* 1859). The Fourth offered rhetorical resources less effective on other occasions, enabling the abolitionists to draw parallels between the American Revolution and their own cause. Abolitionists employed patriotic appeals as premises from which to argue for reform. Like other Americans on July Fourth, many voiced their loyalty to cause and country. But the country to which the abolitionists pledged loyalty was not the United States as presently constituted. Decades before the Gettysburg Address and Reconstruction, abolitionists imagined a future reconstituted nation without slavery. "That's my country, that's the land,/ I can love with heart and hand," James Russell Lowell writes; "Of her glories I can sing" (1857: 127). Those who attended anti-slavery gatherings on the Fourth joined together in singing of their mutual commitment to create a "land of liberty" where none yet existed, a commitment that would eventually find expression in civil war.

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