Section 1

Forces for Freedom

Slavery Begins to Unfold

During the decades after the War for Independence ended in 1783, a strong trend in the North and the Chesapeake favored **emancipation**. It had roots in economic change, evangelical Christianity, and a revolutionary ethos based on the natural rights doctrines of the Enlightenment. African Americans took advantage of these forces to escape from slavery, purchase the freedom of their families and themselves, sue for freedom in the courts, and petition state legislatures to grant them equal rights.

In the postrevolutionary North, slavery, although widespread, was not economically essential. Farmers could more efficiently hire hands during the labor-intensive seasons of planting and harvesting than they could maintain a year-round slave labor force. Northern slaveholders, therefore, were a tiny class with limited political power. Moreover, **transatlantic immigration** brought to the North plenty of white laborers, who worked cheaply and resented slave competition. As the Great Awakening initiated a new religious morality, as natural rights doctrines flourished, and as a market economy based on wage labor emerged, northern slaveholders had difficulty defending perpetual black slavery.

In Chapter 4, we saw that emancipation in the North was a direct result of the War for Independence. But the *process* of doing away with slavery unfolded in these states only after the war. Meanwhile the national Congress set an important precedent in discouraging the expansion of slavery, and antislavery societies proliferated in the North and upper South.

Northern Emancipation

Emancipation in the North did not follow a single pattern. Instead the New England states of Massachusetts (which included Maine until Maine became a separate state in 1820), Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Vermont moved more quickly than did the mid-Atlantic states of Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey (see Map 5–1). Slavery collapsed in the New England states because African Americans who lived there refused to remain in servitude and because most white

GUIDE TO READING

- What forces worked for black freedom in the first years after the Revolution?
- Why did emancipation happen more quickly in New England than in the mid-Atlantic states?
- What were the most important features of the Northwest Ordinance?
- What factors contributed to emphasis among antislavery activists on gradual emancipation?

KEY TERMS

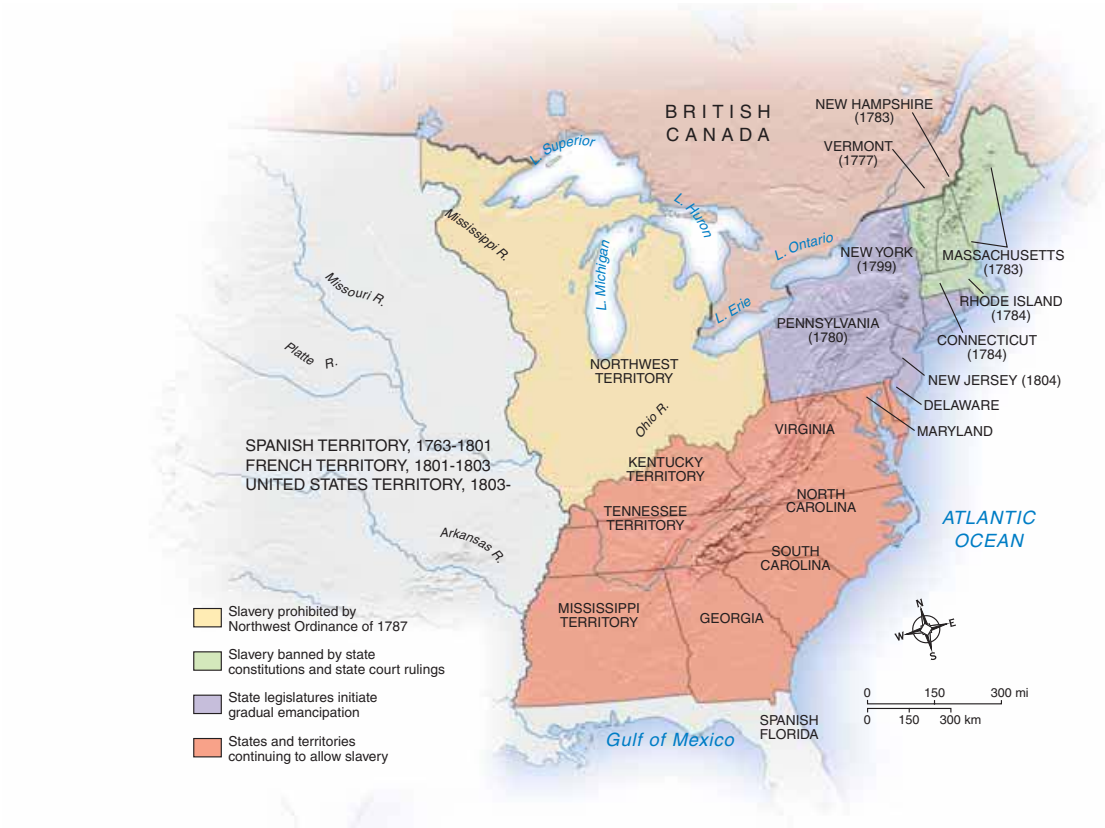
- emancipation, p. 141
- transatlantic immigration, p. 141
- Articles of Confederation, p. 145
- Northwest Ordinance, p. 146
- abolitionist, p. 146
- antislavery society, p. 146
- compensated emancipation, p. 146
- manumission, p. 147

Guide to Reading/Key Terms

For answers, see the *Teacher's Resource Manual*.

Recommended Reading

James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton. *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. This is a well-written interpretation of the northern free black community and its origins.



MAP 5–1 Emancipation and Slavery in the Early Republic

This map indicates the abolition policies adopted by the states of the Northeast between 1777 and 1804, the antislavery impact of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, and the extent of slavery in the South during the early republic.

Why did the states and territories shown in this map adopt different policies toward African Americans?

residents agreed. The struggle against slavery in the middle states was longer and harder because more white people there had a vested interest in maintaining it.

The New England States

Vermont and Massachusetts, certainly, and New Hampshire, probably, abolished slavery immediately during the 1770s and 1780s. Vermont, where there had never been more than a few slaves, prohibited slavery in the constitution it adopted in 1777. Massachusetts, in its constitution of 1780, declared "that all men are born free and equal; and that every subject is entitled to liberty." Although this constitution did not specifically ban slavery, within a year Elizabeth Freeman and other slaves in Massachusetts sued under it for their freedom.

Meanwhile, another slave, Quok Walker, left his master and began living as a free person. In response, Walker's master sought a court order to force Walker to return to slavery. This case led in 1783 to a Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling that "slavery is . . . as effectively abolished as it can be by the granting of rights and privileges wholly

Map 5-1

Varying regional economic factors, including the northern market economy based on wage labor versus the southern economy based on the production of cotton and slave labor, resulted in different territorial policies toward African Americans.

incompatible and repugnant to its existence." At the same time, another judge used similar logic to grant Freeman her liberty. These decisions encouraged other Massachusetts slaves to sue for their freedom or—like Walker—to leave their masters because the courts had ruled the law did not recognize the right of slaveholders to their human chattel.

As a result, the first U.S. census in 1790 found no slaves in Massachusetts. Even before then, black men in the state had gained the right to vote. In 1780 Paul and John Cuffe, free black brothers who lived in the town of Dartmouth, protested with five other free black men to the state legislature that they were being taxed without representation. After several setbacks, the courts finally decided in 1783 that African-American men who paid taxes in Massachusetts could vote there.

Document

5-1 *John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Slavery" 1774*
John Wesley distributed this anti-slavery tract in England and America under his own name. However, it is a short piece from an earlier work entitled, *Some Historical Accounts of Guinea*, published in Philadelphia in 1771 by Anthony Benezet, an American Quaker. Today's students will find it interesting to know that in the eighteenth century, people considered literary "borrowing" as an endorsement and not plagiarism.

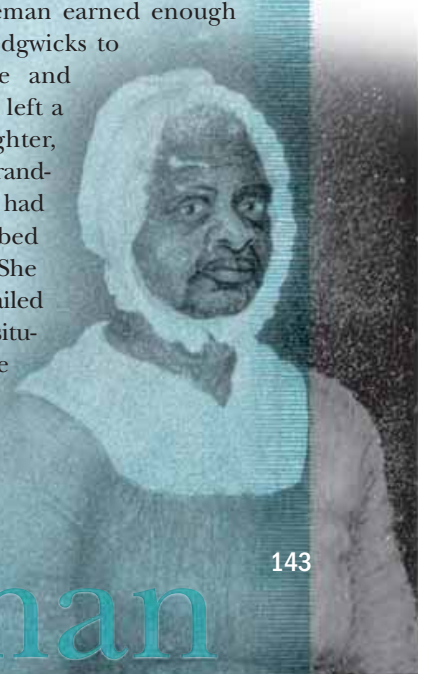
PROFILE ❖ Elizabeth Freeman

Known as Mum Bett, Elizabeth Freeman showed a strength of character that impressed everyone she met. Although records are contradictory, she was probably born in 1744 in Claverack, New York. Because her parents were African slaves, she was also a slave. On the death of her first master in 1758, Freeman and her sister became the property of Colonel John Ashley, a court of common pleas judge, in Sheffield, Massachusetts. She married while quite young, gave birth to her only child—a daughter—and became a widow when her husband was killed fighting on the Patriot side in the War for Independence.

Freeman, who was illiterate, may have first learned of natural rights when in 1773 a group of men met at Ashley's home to draft a protest against British policies in the American colonies. "Mankind . . . have a right to the undisturbed Enjoyment of their lives, their Liberty and Property," the document declared. She took these words to heart, and when she learned while serving as a waitress in 1780 that the state of Massachusetts had adopted a bill of rights asserting that all people were born free and equal, she was ready to apply the doctrine.

In 1781 Freeman received "a severe wound" to her arm when she attempted to protect her sister from Ashley's wife, who "in a fit of passion" was threatening her with a hot kitchen shovel. Outraged at this attack, Freeman left the Ashley home and refused to return. Instead, she engaged the legal assistance of Theodore Sedgwick Sr. in a suit for her freedom on the basis of Massachusetts's new bill of rights. The jury found in Freeman's favor and required Ashley to pay her thirty shillings in damages. It was at this point that Mum Bett changed her name legally to Elizabeth Freeman. Shortly thereafter, the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared slavery unconstitutional throughout the state.

For the remainder of her active life, Freeman worked as a paid domestic servant in the Sedgwick household and moved with the Sedgwicks to Stockbridge in 1785. Freeman earned enough while employed by the Sedgwicks to purchase her own home and retire. When she died she left a small estate to her daughter, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. Charles Sedgwick had the following lines inscribed on Freeman's gravestone: "She never violated a trust, nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial, she was the most efficient helper, and the tenderest friend. Good mother fare well."



The Abolition of Slavery in the North

1777	Vermont constitutional convention prohibits slavery within what becomes the fourteenth state
1780	Pennsylvania begins gradually abolishing slavery within its borders
1783	Massachusetts's supreme court abolishes slavery there
1784	Connecticut and Rhode Island adopt gradual abolition plans
1785	New Jersey and New York legislatures defeat gradual abolition plans
1799	The New York legislature provides for gradual abolition within its jurisdiction
1804	New Jersey becomes the last northern state to initiate gradual abolition

New Hampshire's record on emancipation is less clear than that of Vermont and Massachusetts. In 1779 black residents petitioned the New Hampshire legislature for freedom. Evidence also indicates that court rulings based on New Hampshire's 1783 constitution, which was similar to Massachusetts's constitution, refused to recognize human property. Nevertheless, New Hampshire still had about 150 slaves in 1792, and slavery may have simply withered away there rather than having been abolished by the courts.

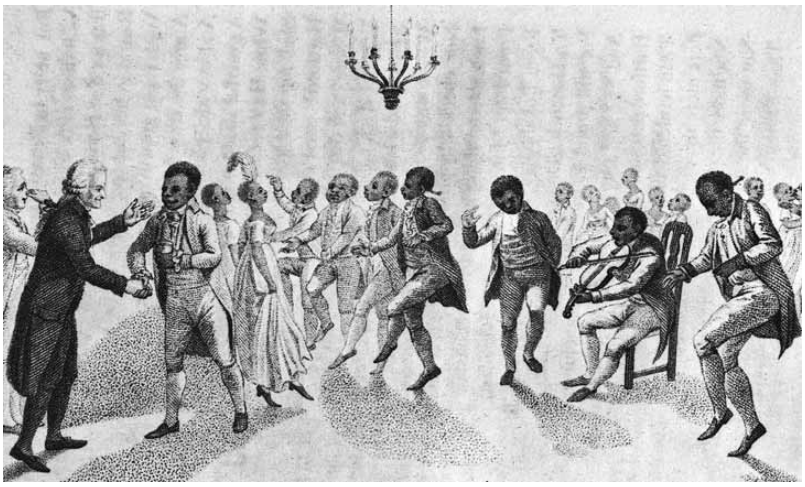
In Connecticut and Rhode Island, the state legislatures, rather than individual African Americans, took the initiative against slavery. In 1784 these states adopted gradual abolition plans, which left adult slaves in bondage but proposed to free their children over a period of years. In Connecticut all children born to enslaved mothers after March 1, 1784, were to become free at age twenty-five. Rhode Island's plan was less gradual. Beginning that same March 1, it freed the children of enslaved women at birth. By 1790 only 3,763 slaves remained in New England out of a total black population there of 16,882. By 1800 only 1,339 slaves remained in the region, and by 1810 only 418 were left (108 in Rhode Island and 310 in Connecticut).

The Mid-Atlantic States

In New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, the investment in slaves was much greater than in New England. After considerable debate, the

Teaching Notes

In comparison to other parts of the Atlantic world, emancipation in the northern portion of the United States began early. Its first stages preceded the revolt that had, by 1804, ended slavery in Haiti, the first independent black republic. It preceded by a much greater margin the initiation in 1838 of peaceful, gradual abolition of slavery in the British Empire and the termination in 1848 of slavery in the French Empire. Northern emancipation was exceptional in that it was not the result of force or outside intervention by an imperial power. Although free black communities were emerging throughout the western hemisphere, those in the North were distinctive because they included the bulk of the region's black population.



This engraving suggests the progress African Americans had made in the North but also the contempt in which many white northerners held them.

TABLE 5–1 Slave Populations in the Mid-Atlantic States, 1790–1860

	1790	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860
New York	21,324	20,343	15,017	10,888	75	4		
New Jersey	11,432	12,343	19,851	7,557	2,243	674	236	18
Pennsylvania	3,737	1,706	795	211	403	64		

Source: Philip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans, from Africa to the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom*, vol. 1 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975), 374.

Pennsylvania legislature in 1780 voted that the children of enslaved mothers would become free at age twenty-eight. Under this scheme, Pennsylvania still had 403 slaves in 1830 (see Table 5–1). But many African Americans in the state gained their freedom much earlier by lawsuits or by simply leaving their masters. Emancipation came even more slowly in New York and New Jersey. In 1785 their legislatures *defeated* proposals for gradual abolition. White revolutionary leaders, such as Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, worked for abolition in New York, and Quakers had long advocated it in New Jersey. But these states had relatively large slave populations, powerful slaveholders, and white workforces fearful of free black competition.

In 1799 the New York legislature finally agreed that male slaves born after July 4 of that year were to become free at age twenty-eight and females at age twenty-five. In 1804 New Jersey adopted a similar law that freed male slaves born after July 4 of that year when they reached age twenty-five and females when they reached age twenty-one. Under this plan, New Jersey still had eighteen slaves in 1860.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787

During the 1780s, Congress drew its authority from a constitution known as the **Articles of Confederation**. The Articles created a weak central government that lacked power to tax or to regulate commerce. Despite its weaknesses, this government acquired jurisdiction over the region west of the Appalachian Mountains and east of the Mississippi River, where several states previously had conflicting land claims.

During the War for Independence, increasing numbers of white Americans had migrated across the Appalachians into this huge region. Some of the migrants brought slaves with them. The migrants also provoked hostilities with Indian nations. Those migrants who moved into the Northwest faced British opposition, and those who moved into the Southwest contested with Spanish forces for control of that area. In response to these circumstances, Congress formulated policies to protect the migrants and provide for their effective government. The new nation's leaders were also concerned with the expansion of slavery, and

Teaching Notes

Even in parts of the Old Northwest, some African Americans remained unfree after 1787. The first governor of the territory forced those who had been slaves before the adoption of the ordinance to remain slaves. In 1803, when Ohio became a state, the remainder of the Northwest Territory legalized indentured servitude. The result was that in southern parts of what became Illinois and Indiana, a few African Americans remained in involuntary servitude well into the nineteenth century.

Retracing the Odyssey

Monticello, Charlottesville, Virginia. One hundred and thirty African Americans worked on this plantation during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century.

Amherst History Museum, Amherst, Massachusetts. Includes an exhibit on free black people who lived in eighteenth-century Amherst.

Thomas Jefferson sought to deal with both issues. First, he suggested that the western region be divided into separate territories and prepared for statehood. Second, he proposed that after 1800 slavery be banned from the entire region stretching from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River and from Spanish Florida (Spain had regained Florida in 1783) to British Canada.

In 1784 Jefferson's antislavery proposal failed by a single vote to pass Congress. Three years later, Congress adopted the **Northwest Ordinance**. This legislation applied the essence of Jefferson's plan to the region north of the Ohio River—what historians call the Old Northwest. The ordinance provided for the orderly sale of land, support for public education, territorial government, and the eventual formation of new states. Unlike Jefferson's plan, the ordinance banned slavery immediately. But, because it applied only to the Northwest Territory, the ordinance left the huge region south of the Ohio River open to slavery expansion.

Yet, by preventing slaveholders from taking slaves legally into areas north of the Ohio River, the ordinance set a precedent for excluding slavery from U.S. territories. Whether Congress had the power to do this became an issue after President Jefferson divided the huge Louisiana Territory in 1803 (see p. 152). The issue continued to divide northern and southern politicians until the Civil War.

Antislavery Societies in the North and the Upper South

While African Americans participated in the destruction of slavery in the northeastern states and Congress blocked its advance into the Old Northwest, a few white people organized to spread antislavery sentiment. In 1775 Quaker **abolitionist** Anthony Benezet organized the first **antislavery society** in the world. It became the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1787, and Benjamin Franklin became its president. Similar societies were founded in Delaware in 1788 and Maryland in 1789. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were societies in New Jersey, Connecticut, and Virginia. Organized antislavery sentiment also quickly rose in the new slave states of Kentucky and Tennessee. However, such societies never appeared in the deep South.

From 1794 to 1832, antislavery societies cooperated within the loose framework of the American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and Improving the Condition of the African Race. Only white people participated in these Quaker-dominated organizations, although members often cooperated with black leaders. As the northern states adopted abolition plans, the societies focused their attention on Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. They aimed at gradual, **compensated emancipation**, encouraged masters to free their slaves, attempted to protect free black people from reenslavement, and frequently advocated sending freed black people out of the country.

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5-4 *Congress Prohibits Importation of Slaves, 1807*

President Thomas Jefferson strongly supported the congressional bills to prohibit the importation of slaves. The bills were an outgrowth of the section of the Constitution that stated "The importation of persons as any of the States shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the year 1808. . . ." At Jefferson's behest, both the House of Representatives and the Senate introduced bills outlawing the importation of slaves. This excerpt outlines the law and the penalties regarding the importation of slaves.

Experience with emancipation in the northern states encouraged the emphasis on gradual abolition. So did the reluctance of white abolitionists to challenge the property rights of masters. Abolitionists also feared that immediate emancipation might lead masters to abandon elderly slaves and assumed that African Americans would require long training before they could be free. Yet gradualism played into the hands of slaveholders who, like Thomas Jefferson, opposed slavery in the abstract but had no intention of freeing their own slaves.

The antislavery societies of the upper South tended to be small and short lived. A Wilmington, Delaware, society established in 1788 peaked at 50 members and ceased to exist in 1800. The Maryland society organized in 1781 with 6 members grew to 250 in 1797 but disbanded in 1798.

Manumission and Self-Purchase

Another hopeful sign for African Americans was that after the Revolution most southern states liberalized their **manumission laws**. In general, masters could free individual slaves by deed or will. They no longer had to go to court or petition a state legislature to prove that an individual they desired to manumit had performed a "meritorious service." Virginia led the way in 1782 by repealing its long-standing ban on private manumissions. Delaware in 1787, Maryland in 1790, Kentucky in 1792, and the slaveholding territory of Missouri in 1804 followed.

As a result, hundreds of slaveholders in the upper South began freeing slaves. Religious sentiment and natural rights principles motivated many of these masters. Even though most of them opposed general emancipation, they considered the slave system immoral. Yet noble motives were not always the most important. Masters often negotiated self-purchase agreements with slaves that, although ending in manumission, gave masters a profit. To purchase their freedom, or that of loved ones, slaves raised money over a number of years by marketing farm produce or through outside employment. This allowed masters to enjoy income in addition to the slave's labor over the period of time the slave needed to raise the entire purchase price.

Masters also sometimes manumitted slaves who were no longer profitable investments. A master might be switching from tobacco to wheat or corn—crops that did not need a year-round workforce. Or a master might manumit older slaves whose best years as workers were behind them. Frequently, however, slaves, usually young men, presented masters with the alternative of manumitting them after a term of years or seeing them escape immediately.

Self-purchase often left African Americans in precarious financial condition. Sometimes they used up their savings to buy their freedom. In other instances, they went into debt to their former masters, to white lawyers who acted as their agents, or to other white people who had

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5-3 *Venture Smith Narrative, 1798*

Venture Smith was born in Africa but was captured and enslaved when he was 8 years old. He was named Broteer by his father, a "Prince of the tribe of Dukandarra" in Guinea. He was reported to be a giant of a man, weighing more than 300 pounds. Smith believed his ancestors were "very large, tall and stout race of beings, much larger than the generality of people in other parts of the globe." It comes as no surprise to learn that Smith's size and his refusal to suffer insults caused great difficulties for his owners. He was sold several times before he was able to purchase his freedom in 1765, at the age of thirty-six. Smith believed he had "lost much by misfortunes and paid an enormous sum for my freedom." He told his story to a local schoolteacher, which was published in 1798. On September 19, 1805, Smith died; he was 77.

Recommended Reading

Ira Berlin. *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. New York: New Press, 1974. The early chapters of this classic study indicate the special difficulties the first large generation of free black southerners faced.

Reading Check

In the decades after the War for Independence, a strong trend in the North and in the Chesapeake favored emancipation. This trend had its roots in economic change, evangelical Christianity, and natural rights doctrines.

Recommended Reading

Philip S. Foner. *History of Black Americans, from Africa to the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975. This is the first volume of a comprehensive three-volume history of African Americans. It is detailed and informative about black life between 1783 and 1820.

loaned them money to cover their purchase price. On occasion, masters reneged on their agreement to manumit after receiving money from a slave. Many of the freedom suits that became common in the upper South during this period resulted from such unethical behavior.

The Emergence of A Free Black Class in the South

As a result of manumission, self-purchase, and freedom suits, the free black population of the upper South blossomed. Maryland and Virginia had the largest such populations. Between 1790 and 1820, the number of free African Americans in Maryland climbed from 8,043 to 39,730 and in Virginia from 12,766 to 36,889. By 1820 the upper South (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, District of Columbia, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, and Tennessee) had a free black population of 114,070, compared with a northern free black population of 99,281. However, most of the upper South's black population remained in slavery while the North's was on the way to general emancipation. In the North, 83.9 percent of African Americans were free in 1820, compared with 10.6 percent of those in the upper South.

In the deep South (South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi), both the percentage and the absolute numbers of free black people remained much smaller. During the eighteenth century, neither South Carolina nor Georgia restricted the right of masters to manumit their slaves, but far fewer masters in these states exercised this right after the Revolution than was the case in the Chesapeake. Manumission declined in Louisiana following its annexation to the United States. Generally, masters in the deep South freed only their illegitimate slave children, other favorites, or those unable to work. Only 20,153 free black people lived in the deep South in 1820. In North Carolina, a transitional area between the upper and deep South, the state legislature made manumission more difficult after 1777. But many masters—especially those who were Quakers—freed their slaves anyway or let them live in quasi freedom.

The emergence of a free black class in the South, especially in the deep South, produced social strata more similar to that in Latin America than was the case in the North. As in the Caribbean, South America, and portions of Mexico, there were dominant white people, free people of color, and slaves. In southern cities, such as Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, some free African Americans not only identified economically and culturally with their former masters, they also acquired slaves.

Slavery still existed in Pennsylvania when John Lewis Krimmel recorded this scene. It is likely that the black woman who is selling pepper-pot (a type of stew) was free.

Reading Check What forces worked for black freedom in the first years after the Revolution?