



Black Gotham

*A Family History
of African Americans
in Nineteenth-Century
New York City*

CARLA L. PETERSON

Yale

UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven and London

Contents

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Designed by Sonia Shannon.

Set in Caslon type by

Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Peterson, Carla L., 1944-

Black Gotham: a family history of African Americans in nineteenth-century New York City / Carla L. Peterson. p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-300-16255-4 (alk. paper)

1. African Americans—New York (State)—New York—History—19th century.
2. African Americans—New York (State)—New York—Social conditions—19th century.
3. African Americans—New York (State)—New York—Biography.
4. White, Philip, 1823-1891.
5. Guignon, Peter, 1813-1885.
6. Peterson, Carla L., 1944- —Family.
7. New York (N.Y.)—Biography.
8. New York (N.Y.)—History—19th century.
9. New York (N.Y.)—Social conditions—19th century. I. Title.

FI30.N4P47 2011

305.896'0730747—dc22 2010039306

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

A Note on Language

PROLOGUE *Family, Memory, History*

i

PART I: LOWER MANHATTAN, 1795-1865

CHAPTER ONE Collect Street: Circa 1819 35

CHAPTER TWO The Mulberry Street School: Circa 1828 63

CHAPTER THREE The Young Graduates: Circa 1834 93

CHAPTER FOUR Community Building: Circa 1840 117

CHAPTER FIVE A Black Aristocracy: Circa 1847 147

CHAPTER SIX Whimsy and Resistance: Circa 1853 188

CHAPTER SEVEN The Draft Riots: July 1863 223

CHAPTER EIGHT Union and Disunion: Circa 1864 261

PART 2: BROOKLYN, 1865-1895

CHAPTER NINE Peter Guignon's Private Wars: Circa 1862 283

CHAPTER TEN Philip White in Brooklyn: Circa 1875 310

CHAPTER ELEVEN New Women, New Men at Century's End 345

EPILOGUE Commemorations 385

Prologue

FAMILY, MEMORY, HISTORY

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. . . .
 And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother told her—and a heartbeat. . . . Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it.

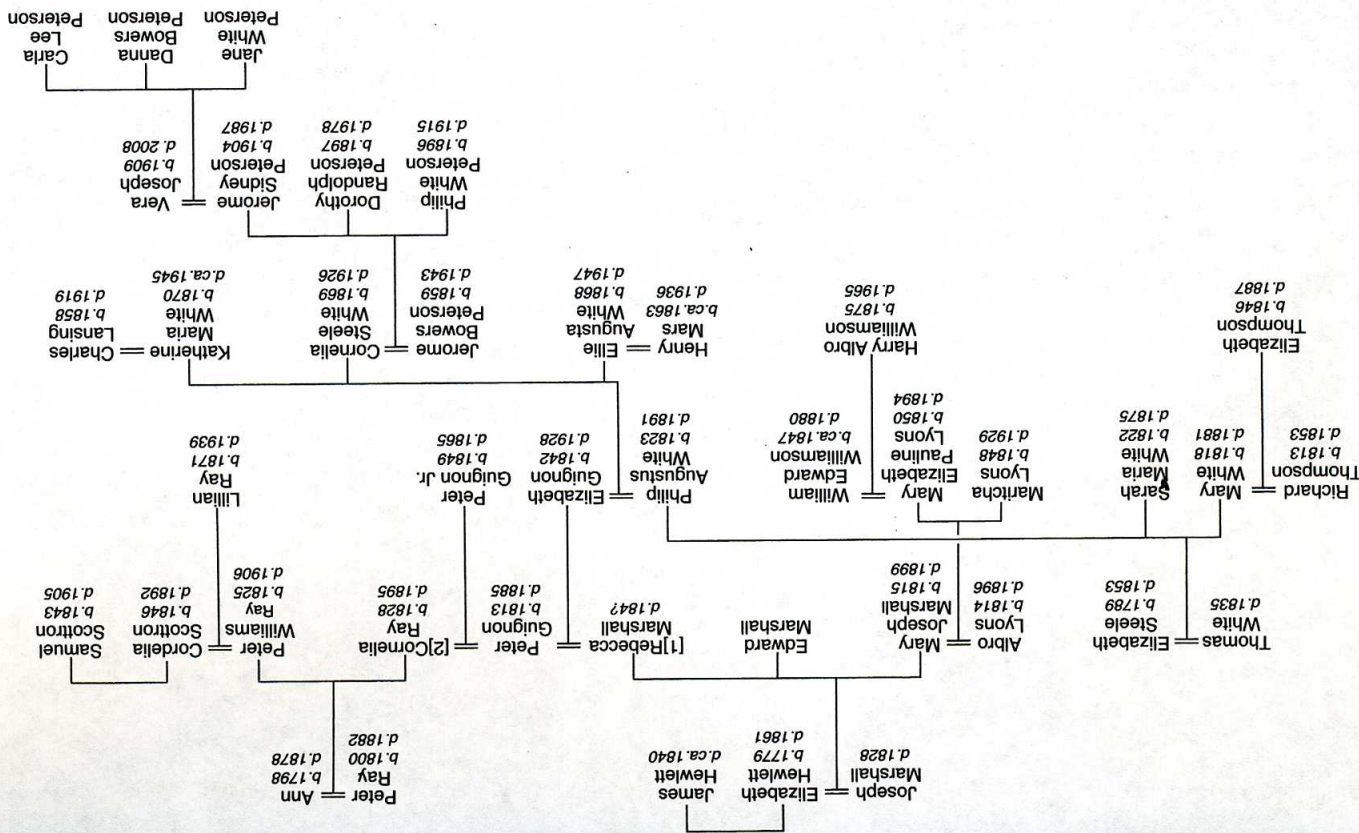
—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

I ENTERED THE MANUSCRIPT room of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture with some trepidation. It was brightly lit, uncluttered, and utterly silent. The archivists politely asked me to store my coat and bag in a locker outside the door, and then directed me to a seat facing them at a long, low, bare wooden table. They provided me with paper and pencil and left to retrieve the material I had asked for. Clearly, this was not a place for dilettantes. No chattering allowed, and please refrain from loud exclamations or emotional outbursts.

You're looking for a needle in a haystack, my historian friends warned me. But I was determined to find out more about my family's New York background and write as best I could about "what really happened, how it really was" for black New Yorkers in the nineteenth century.

Like Morrison's Denver, I had no memories of my own. Beyond that, I couldn't even rely on scraps I'd been told. All I had was a single

Family tree (Courtesy John Norton)



name, that of my paternal great-grandfather Philip Augustus White, and a story about him that eventually proved false: that he was born Philippe Auguste Blanc, a "white Haitian" who fled to Paris at the time of the revolution in Saint-Domingue (Haiti), became a pharmacist, and then emigrated to New York, anglicizing his name to Philip Augustus White.

It made sense to me to begin with a trip to the Schomburg Center, which houses the city's largest collection of archival material on black New Yorkers, to see what I could find. Going through the manuscript division's finding aid, I came across a listing for the Rhoda G. Freeman Manuscript and Research Collection. I'd already read Freeman's book, *The Free Negro in New York City in the Era Before the Civil War*. Although written in the 1970s, it was chock-full of good information, so I decided to take a look at her papers.

The collection consisted of hundreds of note cards and folded pieces of paper stuffed into approximately twelve files the size of shoeboxes. I went through them methodically, taking notes on economic conditions, political rights, community institutions, and the like until I came to a box labeled "biography." And that's when I found them: two pages torn from an unidentified scrapbook on which newspaper clippings had been carefully pasted.

The first page was made up of several different items. What caught my eye was the long skinny column on the right containing the obituary of P. A. White clipped from the February 21, 1891, issue of the *New York Age*, the city's major post-Civil War black newspaper. On the left side, there was an assortment of poems that, judging from the varied print size, had been taken from different sources. On the second page I found a three-column obituary of Peter Guignon cut from the January 31, 1885, issue of the *New York Freeman*, the predecessor of the *Age*.¹

I couldn't let out a whoop, so I just sat there quietly, my heart racing, and read through Philip White's obituary line by line, devouring every word.

According to the obituary, White had been born sixty-eight years earlier. Doing a quick calculation, I figured out that the year of his birth must have been 1823. After the untimely death of his father, White was "thrown upon his own resources." He attended one of New York's

Good For a Boy To Learn.
I'm a boy, and I have learned
That I must be very good,
And study hard to get
A good education,
For I know that I shall
Have to use it when I grow
Up, and I don't want to
Be ignorant, for that
Would be a shame.

THE LESSON OF THE BIRD
By J. C. H. W.
The bird that sings so sweet
In the woods and in the grove,
Is not so happy as we think,
For he has many a sorrow
Which we never see.

IF WE ONLY UNDERSTOOD
If we knew the cause and the cure
Of the things that trouble our lives,
We should be wiser and more true,
And the world would be a better place,
For we should be able to help
Those who are in need,
And we should be able to see
The things that are hidden from our eyes.

REFERENCES
I should not give familiar names more than of persons great,
I should not give names of things that are common,
I should not give names of things that are new,
I should not give names of things that are old,
I should not give names of things that are strange,
I should not give names of things that are common.

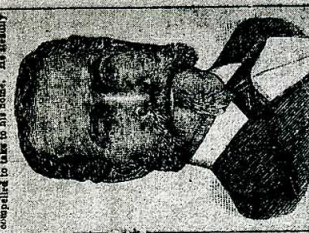
THE LORD SHOULD SAY TO ME, WHEN I GET OVER THERE,
What you were doing when I was here,
For I shall be there, and I shall be there,
And I shall be there, and I shall be there,
And I shall be there, and I shall be there,
And I shall be there, and I shall be there.

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And I shall be there, and I shall be there.

Sample of a letter
to my father

THE BIRTH OF P. A. WHITE
P. A. White was born in New York City, New York, on the 21st day of January, 1823. His father was a Frenchman, and his mother was an American. He was educated in the common schools of New York City, and he attended the University of the City of New York. He was a member of the New York State Bar, and he was a member of the New York State Legislature. He was a member of the New York State Bar, and he was a member of the New York State Legislature.



Philip White was born in New York City, New York, on the 21st day of January, 1823. He was a member of the New York State Bar, and he was a member of the New York State Legislature. He was a member of the New York State Bar, and he was a member of the New York State Legislature.

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Obituary page for Philip White, with clippings from unidentified newspapers (Rhoda G. Freeman Manuscript and Research Collection, New York State Bar, and New York State Legislature).

African Free Schools until the age of sixteen and then began an apprenticeship in the pharmacy of James McCune Smith, one of the first black doctors in the United States. While still an apprentice, White attended the College of Pharmacy of the City of New York, from which he graduated in 1844, "being the first man of our race to receive a diploma from that institution." That same year he opened his own drugstore in Lower Manhattan. Initially an unpretentious endeavor, it grew into a large retail business to which White eventually added a successful wholesale department.

The obituary intimated that White was a reserved, perhaps even staid, man. It was this sobriety that made him so successful in business. "He was in the broadest sense a self-made man," the writer opined: "studious, temperate, methodical, and always pursuing the ends of a noble manhood, in business, church, and social affairs, with punctilious regard to truth and fairness." Even though it's blurry, the photograph that accompanies the obituary suggests as much: a long severe face, piercing eyes that stare directly out, a thin aquiline nose, and a tidy goatee over which hovers a full, bushy mustache carefully swept to each side off the chin and cheeks. White's steady comportment served him equally well in both his church life and his activities outside the black community. A longtime communicant at St. Philip's Episcopal Church, one of the city's earliest black parishes, he served for many years as vestryman and then senior warden. Over time, he gained admission to the city's major professional pharmaceutical societies and became a member of both the Academy of Sciences and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Impressively, in 1883, Mayor Seth Low appointed him to the Brooklyn Board of Education. Occupying the colored seat on the board, White successfully lobbied for the improvement of education for African American children. He held this position until his death in 1891. Alexander Crummell, the most eminent African American Episcopal clergyman of the nineteenth century, to whom W. E. B. Du Bois devoted an entire chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, officiated at White's funeral.

Feeling amply rewarded, I idly picked up the second obituary. The name "P. A. White" caught my eye, and once again I became absorbed in reading. The subject of this obituary, Peter Guignon, had a daughter, Elizabeth, who had married Philip White. So Guignon was White's

father-in-law and my great-great-grandfather! Once again, I suppressed a whoop and studied the obituary closely. Its author was none other than Alexander Crummell. A close friend of Guignon's since childhood, Crummell offered a poignant portrait of the deceased. Making no reference to Guignon's father, Crummell noted that his mother had come from the West Indies to New York City, where her only child was born in 1813. As a youngster, Guignon attended the old Mulberry Street School for colored children. He was, Crummell wrote,

the contemporary at that school from about the year 1828 of the most celebrated pupils which ever were enrolled upon its records. His school-mates were George Allen, Thomas Sidney, the two Moores (Isaac and George), the three Reasons (Eliver, Patrick, and Charles L.), Isaiah Degrasse, J. McCune Smith, Henry Highland Garnett, George T. Downing. His standing and character in his school days can be seen that he was the friend and intimate companion of every one of these eminent boys, not only in their boyhood, but afterwards in their manhood and maturity.

I recognized these names, Crummell's included, as a roll call of prominent northern black leaders, and was astonished to learn that my great-great-grandfather had been their friend.

As a schoolboy, Guignon was, according to Crummell, a paradoxical mix of gravity and hilarity. Even the obituary illustration of Guignon as an older man with his broad face and full head of curly hair suggests a much less severe and reserved man than his son-in-law. In adult life, tragedy tempered without destroying the lighter side of his character. His first wife, a former schoolmate named Miss Marshall (my great-great-grandmother) died early, leaving him with young Elizabeth. Guignon subsequently married Cornelia Ray and, like White, became a pharmacist and respected businessman. But tragedy struck again some years later when his only son, a student at Oberlin College who had not yet reached his seventeenth birthday, was killed in an accident. Guignon's lasting grief over his son's death, Crummell wrote, strengthened his religious convictions. Like White, Guignon became an active mem-

ber of St. Philip's and a frequent member of the vestry. He engaged in many acts of charity. When he became ill during the last years of his life, he accepted his suffering with forbearance. Upon his death in 1885, "society," Crummell averred, "lost a unique and singular character, which it is impossible to replace."

This book is about Philip White and Peter Guignon. It's not exactly a family memoir, but neither is it traditional social history. It is a narrative that lies somewhere in between. It records my search to find my father's New York family; my success in uncovering many documents about these two men but my frustration in discovering only faint traces of other relatives, particularly women; my determined effort to tell their story despite the little I had. Peter Guignon's and Philip White's lives shape the contour of my narrative, yet they also serve as a pathway to a larger public history: the history of social movements, political events, and cultural influences in which my great-great-grandfather and great-grandfather were participants and witnesses.

We still hold certain truths about African Americans to be self-evident: that the phrase "nineteenth-century black Americans" refers to enslaved people; that "New York state before the Civil War" denotes a place of freedom; that "blacks in New York City" designates Harlem; that the "black community" posits a classless and culturally unified society; that a "black elite" did not exist until well into the twentieth century. The lives of Peter Guignon and Philip White belie such assumptions. They were born free at a time when slavery was still legal in New York state. They lived in racially mixed neighborhoods, first in Lower Manhattan and then after the Civil War in Brooklyn, at a time when Harlem was a mere village. They were part of New York's small but significant black community, and specifically its elite class.

In 1820, the city counted approximately 10,300 black inhabitants, and their numbers never reached above 16,300 until after the Civil War.² They were concentrated in the city's Fifth, Sixth, and Eighth Wards that ran from Bowery Road west to the Hudson River. In the harsh and competitive environment that was New York City, blacks suffered from the additional burden of deep and pervasive racial discrimination. Most remained mired in the ranks of unskilled and illiterate

laborers. But a minority prospered, among whom were my great-great-grandfather, many of the "eminent boys" of his school days, including James McCune Smith, George Downing, Henry Highland Garnet, Charles and Patrick Reason, among others, and, in the next generation, my great-grandfather. They received the best education available to black children at the time. In adulthood, some became tradesmen—carpenters, shoemakers, or tailors—while others gained a foothold in the professions as schoolteachers, ministers, or pharmacists. A number emerged as leaders of the city's black community; several achieved national prominence. They founded newspapers, literary societies, political associations, and schools. They engaged in political resistance, holding conventions and mass meetings, and lobbying city and state legislators.

Although their tactics often differed, these young men shared similar values and goals. Much like white middle-class Americans, they placed emphasis on education, a Protestant ethic of hard work, and strict adherence to a code of respectability. Like them, they strove for socioeconomic advancement and security. Yet, given their second-class status, they needed to fight for rights that many of their white counterparts already took for granted: the acquisition of citizenship in the country of their birth, the attainment of all the privileges and obligations that came with being an American. They sought, as W. E. B. Du Bois later wrote, "ultimate assimilation *through* self-assertion, and on no other terms."

Following the example of New York's reigning literati, members of the black elite proudly referred to the place where they lived as Gotham and themselves as Gothamites.

Theirs was a pre-Harlem world. The early presence of men like Peter Guignon and Philip White in the city overturns the commonly held notion that New York's black intellectual and cultural life began in Harlem with the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s. In fact, many of the Harlem Renaissance figures familiar to us were not native New Yorkers but came to the city as young adults from places as close as New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., and as far away as Jamaica and Guyana. But Peter, Philip, and their friends were New York born and bred. They lived downtown in the midst of the city's white popula-

tion, not in a segregated black neighborhood. They were not bohemians or rebels; to the contrary, they held values remarkably similar to white middle-class norms.

Men like Peter and Philip were, Du Bois admitted, “exceptions.” But he took umbrage with “the blind worshippers of the Average” who “cried out in alarm: ‘These are the exceptions, look here at death, disease and crime—these are the happy rule.’” Du Bois never disputed the existence of the “happy rule,” but he blamed it on a “silly nation” and insisted that the exceptional needed to be nurtured as the “chiefest promise” of the race. I follow his call.³

Remembering

So many questions swirled around in my head. How did a black elite emerge in early nineteenth-century New York? What were the educational opportunities for its members? How were they able to enter professions like pharmacy? Which city neighborhoods did they live in and what were their living conditions like? How did they relate to white New Yorkers, and to less privileged blacks for that matter? I was even more bothered by another set of questions. Why have histories of New York City ignored the presence of this nineteenth-century black elite until quite recently? More puzzling still, why did African Americans, my family included, forget this history? Why did they not hold on to their memories of the past, instead believing, as Toni Morrison wrote in the last pages of *Beloved*, that this was “not a story to pass on”? Why did I have to go to the archives to reconstruct my family’s history?

Perplexed, I turned back to the Morrison quote with which I began this chapter and thought about how Denver so desperately wished to give “blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother told her—and a heartbeat,” and how she and Beloved “did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it.” The need to remember and preserve the past is one of the most powerful of all human impulses, powerful for individuals and groups

alike. In Morrison’s novel, Denver is convinced that knowledge of her mother’s past will help shape her own identity. Not too differently, nations and other communities also hold on to memories of people and events they deem historically significant; these memories lay the groundwork for group identity, inviting each and every member to connect with one another through a shared history and a common set of values. They establish a sense of “who we are as a people.”

Morrison insisted that Denver and Beloved were trying to “create what really happened, how it really was.” This I knew to be impossible. Just as Denver and Beloved possess only “scraps” of Sethe’s life, so communities don’t always have all the facts they need to reconstruct past realities, and sometimes can’t even agree on what those realities are. There’s also the question of whose past is being remembered. Much like Denver and Beloved’s efforts to re-create their mother’s past, societies often seek to hold on to memories of earlier generations that they themselves never experienced. So we need to think of remembering—whether undertaken by individuals or collectivities—as a dynamic process, an act of imagination. Remembering shapes and reshapes the past as it reinterprets this past from the perspective of the present, assesses how it affects the present, and reflects on how it might influence the actions of future generations.

Rituals help preserve memories of the past. Denver and Beloved’s conversation is an example of how family members turn to storytelling to honor past people and events that have shaped the lives of later generations. Nations, too, make use of rituals, setting aside specific days of the year to commemorate past events and reaffirm a sense of group identity. Every July 4, for example, Americans pause to remember the war of independence and the birth of the United States as a nation founded on principles of freedom and equality. Every Thanksgiving they gather together to pay tribute to the hospitality of Native Americans to the newly arrived Pilgrims. Yet national rituals also exclude, failing to take into account the omission of African Americans and other minorities from the “men” honored in the Declaration of Independence as well as the horrific acts of violence perpetrated against Native Americans after the first Thanksgiving. Religions, much like nations, also rely on com-



Peter Guignon

opened my email to find that she had sent me copies of records she had happened upon in the archives of St. Peter's Church in Lower Manhattan. The most significant document was a bann of marriage dated February 1811, which read in part:

Alexis Duchesne has been born at Laon in champaign, & Sophie Guignon Was born in the Ile of St Domingue. This marriage was celebrated after Three Successive publications of the bans. Witnesses have been the Following, who have signed their names, Viz: Jean Baptist Gunion, Joseph Pierre Bérard, Pierre Guignon, Jacques Guignon Et autres.²

The bann placed the Guignon clan in the same social circle as the Bérards, who are well known in the historical record as *grand blanc* slaveholders forced to flee Saint-Domingue at the time of the revolution. The Bérard family arrived in New York in the late 1790s with their slaves but without the great fortune they had amassed.³ I don't

know who Sophie Guignon was or which Guignon might have fathered Peter—Pierre, Jacques (the French name for James), or yet another. But this man was clearly the “white Haitian” that my family had referred to so vaguely when I was a child. Peter's mother was undoubtedly a mulatto woman who had come with the Guignons from Haiti, as a slave, a servant, or perhaps a free woman. The deafening silence around their relationship and the father's absence from Peter's life suggested to me that they were not married.

Having reached a dead end, I decided to shift tactics and approach Peter through his in-laws, who I knew from Williamson's genealogical notes were named Elizabeth Hewlett Marshall and Joseph Marshall. They are the starting point of my story, shadowy figures in the background urging me forward to compose a picture in black and white of early social life in New York City.

The Black Families of Collect Street

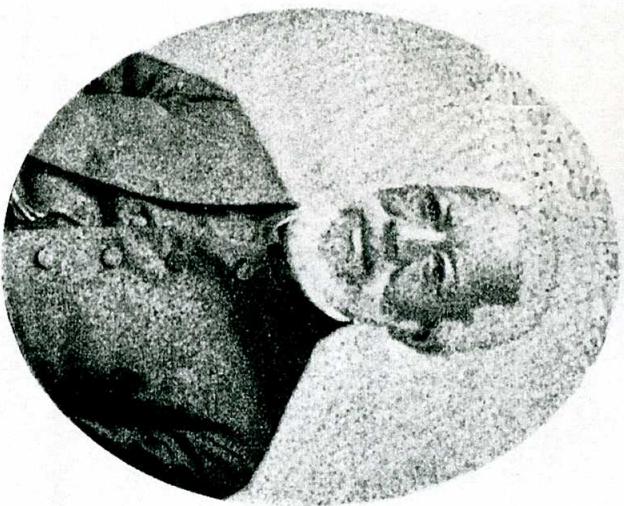
Armed with a new family name, I went to the municipal archives and plowed through city directories, tax assessment records, and minutes of the Common Council. Here's what I found.

In 1818, the City of New York sold at auction land on Lower Manhattan's Collect Street to one George Lorillard, a wealthy tobacco merchant and real estate speculator. Among the lots purchased were numbers 17, 18, and 19, also 39 and 40, 51 and 52, and 80 through 83. Lorillard promptly turned the properties around and leased or sold several to a group of black New Yorkers. In 1819, the African Episcopal Society—soon renamed St. Philip's Episcopal Church—acquired a sixty-year lease on numbers 17, 18, and 19. That same year, George DeGrasse became the owner of lots 79 and 80. In 1820, Boston Crummell acquired lot 51, and Joseph Marshall lot 40. After a house was built on his lot, Marshall's property was valued at \$900. When Collect Street was renamed Centre Street, Marshall's house was renumbered 72. In 1829, its value was listed at \$1,200. After his death, the property passed to his widow, Elizabeth Hewlett Marshall, who built a rear house on the premises. By 1838, the total value of the property had risen to \$2,000.⁴

Who were the parties to these real estate transactions? Let's begin with the black families, the DeGrasses, Crummells, and Marshalls. What were their backgrounds? How were they able to become property owners—or freeholders—in early-nineteenth-century New York? Much earlier, under Dutch rule, the director general of New Netherlands had given farmland north of the city to some thirty Africans in order to create a buffer protecting the Dutch from attacks by Native Americans. But after the slave insurrection of 1712, the New York Assembly passed “An Act for preventing suppressing and punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negroes and other Slaves.” Among other things, this act prohibited blacks from owning property. Not until 1809 would they once again be allowed to inherit or bequeath property.⁵

I searched for the names of the three men in African American history books and found some information on both Crummell and DeGrasse. Boston was Alexander Crummell's father. An amazingly prolific writer, Peter's childhood friend has left us with many letters, essays, speeches, and sermons, some published in collected volumes during his lifetime, others still stored in manuscript form in the Schomburg Center archives. Alexander maintained that his father was born in Africa “in the Kingdom of Timanee” (now Sierra Leone); some even claimed that Boston was descended from Temne chiefs. It was Alexander's belief that his father “was stolen thence at about 12 or 13 years,” arriving in the United States around 1780. Boston eventually became the slave of Peter Schermerhorn, a member of an old and prominent Dutch family, who had increased the family's wealth through the shipping industry and speculation in Manhattan real estate. Legend has it that Boston “was never emancipated,” but simply told Schermerhorn one day that “he would serve him no longer” and “notwithstanding all remonstrations and intimidations could not be got back.” Proud of his father's act of resistance, Alexander frequently referred to himself as “the boy whose father could not be a slave.”

Boston married Charity Hicks, a free woman from Long Island, who was reported to have been brought up in “the same family that produced the celebrated Quaker, Elias Hicks.” Hence, his “maternal ancestors,” Alexander asserted, “have trod American soil, and therefore have used the English language well nigh as long as any descendants of



Alex Crummell

Alexander Crummell, abolitionist, Episcopal minister, and missionary, circa 1890s (Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library)

the early settlers of the Empire State.” In freedom, Boston took up the trade of oysterman and became a highly respected member of the black community. Yet he never forgot his place of birth. Etched in Alexander's mind were Boston's “burning love of home, his vivid remembrances of scenes and travels with his [own] father into the interior, and his wide acquaintance with divers tribes and customs.” In later years, Boston hoped to return to Africa and establish a farm in Liberia, but died be-

fore doing so. It was left to his son to make that journey with his wife and children in the 1850s.⁶

George DeGrasse's background could not have been more different. Neither African nor European, he was a Hindu, born in Calcutta, and reputed to be the foster son of Admiral Count de Grasse, the commander of the French fleet that had helped George Washington triumph over the British at Yorktown in 1781. Before that, Count de Grasse had served in the French navy in the Mediterranean and India where he likely adopted George. He died in France in 1788, leaving his son in the United States.

In 1802, Vice President Aaron Burr, who had undoubtedly become acquainted with the older De Grasse during the revolutionary war, wrote a letter to his daughter Theodosia in which he referred to "my man George (late Azar Le Guen, now George d'Grasse)." Two years later, George DeGrasse petitioned the Court of Common Pleas to become a U.S. citizen. The court agreed that he had resided in the United States for a period of five years and in New York state for one. So upon showing proof of good moral character, swearing to uphold the Constitution of the United States, and promising to renounce allegiance to all foreign states, "the said George DeGrasse was thereupon, pursuant to the laws of the United States in such case made and provided, admitted by the said Court to be, and he is accordingly to be, considered a citizen of the United States." Had George DeGrasse been a black born in Africa, he undoubtedly would not have received U.S. citizenship.⁷

A naturalized Hindu American, DeGrasse chose to cast his lot with New York's black community when he married Maria Van Surley. Maria's racial background was even more complicated than that of her husband. It's believed that sometime in the early seventeenth century a Dutchman by the name of Jan Jansen Van Harlem entered the service of the sultan of Morocco and married a local woman. One of their sons, Abram Jansen Van Salee, settled in Brooklyn, where the phrase "alias the mulatto" or "alias the Turk" was regularly appended to his name. Maria was born some eight generations later. One of her and George DeGrasse's children, John, became a doctor and moved to Boston; another, Isaiah, was a Mulberry Street School classmate of Peter Guignon and Alexander Crummell. According to his contemporaries, Isaiah was

so light skinned it was impossible to distinguish any trace of African ancestry in him.⁸

But I had no luck finding Joseph and Elizabeth Marshall in any published history books. My single source of information about my great-great-great-grandparents has been Maritcha Lyons's memoir. Her comments about her grandparents are fascinating and tantalizing, but ultimately frustrating. Maritcha duly recorded that Joseph was a house painter who had been able to scrape enough money together to build a house for his family on Collect Street, and that "after his de- cease grandmother erected a rear house and converted the basement of the front dwelling into a store in which she opened a bakery." This fact is preceded, however, with an explanation of her grandparents' background that raises more questions than it answers:

My maternal grandmother, Elizabeth (Hewlett) Marshall, was distinctly a poor white of English descent. Her mother's name was King and that of her mother's mother, was Bartlett, good old English appellations. She had one brother, James Hewlett, a "play actor" as stage performers were derisively styled in bygone days. She and her sister Mary, in common with girls of their station, were apprenticed. . . . [She united] her fortunes with those of my grandfather, Joseph Marshall, a native of Maracaibo, Venezuela. His family, after the continental fashion, had planned for him to enter the Roman priesthood. This was so contrary to his desire that he hastily and secretly left home.⁹

What did Maritcha mean when she referred to Grandmother Marshall as a "poor white of English descent"? When she used the term "white," was she speaking of skin tone? Surely she was not suggesting that Elizabeth was racially white. The reference to Elizabeth's kinship with James Hewlett lets us know that, however light skinned, she was not white. A member of the African Grove Theater Company as well as a solo performer in the 1820s, and a fairly disreputable character with a criminal record in the 1830s, James Hewlett was much in the public eye. His place of birth was a subject of open debate. James McCune

umani suggested that he came from the West Indies, trying perhaps to protect the family's reputation. Yet it was a pretty well known fact that Hewlett was "a native of our own dear Island of Nassau [Long Island], and Rockaway is said to have been the place of his birth." And there was certainly no question about his race. He was regularly referred to in the press as "African," "colored," "black," and even "darky."¹⁰

In her account, Maritcha proudly emphasized her grandmother's English ancestry by noting the maternal surnames of King and Bartlett, but made no reference to Elizabeth's father. So was it Elizabeth's mother who was "a poor white," and did she marry a black man? I don't know. But if Rockaway was indeed their place of birth, I'm surmising that, just as Charity Crummell was related to the Quaker Hickses, Elizabeth and James Hewlett were members of the Hewlett family whose ancestor George had emigrated from England to America in the mid-seventeenth century. By 1658, George Hewlett had become a prominent landowner, and eventually the family gave its name to a town on Long Island.

And what about Elizabeth's husband, Joseph Marshall, a native of the port city of Maracaibo, Venezuela? In 1801 Maracaibo had a population of approximately twenty-two thousand, divided among Spanish nobility, white planters, slaves, and freedmen, mixed bloods referred to as people of color. I'm guessing that Marshall was of Spanish and African ancestry and came from this latter class, anglicizing his name upon his arrival in the United States. In the Venezuelan Spanish colony, missionary activity was as important as military conquest, administrative control, and economic exploration. Free people of color were disbarred from holding public office and restricted in the trades and professions they could practice, but they were welcomed into the priesthood. Perhaps it was that fact rather than any "continental fashion" that led to Joseph's family's plan to have him enter the clergy.¹¹

These brief sketches suggest just how complicated the racial and ethnic origins of the men and women on Collect Street were. They claimed diverse national backgrounds, were of different racial mixtures, and had complexions ranging from ebony to ivory. I'm left wondering what made them, in the language of the day, "African."

Their histories differed dramatically. Some were born in the United

States, others in Africa, India, or South America; their ancestors came from places as diverse as England, the Netherlands, Spain, Morocco, and Sierra Leone. Only Boston Crummell was pure African. The rest were Creoles, mixtures of different races. Most seemed to possess visible racial characteristics of skin color, hair, and facial features, although Elizabeth Marshall appeared white. Such complications were less of a problem in the colonial era when racial mixing was more tolerated and race itself not clearly defined. But by the late eighteenth century, racial classification schemes were rapidly spreading throughout Europe and America. The Swedish natural historian Carl Linnaeus, for example, created a hierarchy of *homo sapiens*, placing the African on the last rung below the European and the Asiatic and just above *homo monstrosus*. Linnaeus defined the African's external traits as *black skin, frizzled hair, flat nose, and tumid lips*. Mixed-raced persons were increasingly deemed African if they exhibited any of these features, even if attenuated, or if it could be proved that they had African ancestry. To the external characteristics of the African corresponded the internal, devalued traits of *crafty, indolent, negligent, and governed by caprice* that rendered him unfit for citizenship.¹²

Ethnically and racially diverse as they were and well aware of the degraded status that accompanied the term "African," the men and women of Collect Street nevertheless chose to band together, create a tight-knit community, and forge an identity and place for themselves as Africans in America. Yet they remained alive to the "elsewhere," the many places across the globe from which their forebears originally hailed. Long before my father and my aunt, they acquired a cosmopolitan sensibility that shaped their outlook in at least two important ways. Engrained in them was a profound appreciation of and respect for cultural difference. They understood that although cultures might vary, this did not mean that one was necessarily superior to the other. They also intuited that individuals like themselves could forge deep affiliations with more than one culture and hold overlapping allegiances that did not contradict one another. These understandings led them to the unswerving conviction that beyond cultural difference lay the universal, ethical value of *character* that all human beings needed to cultivate.

So what was Africa to them? For most of these men and women,

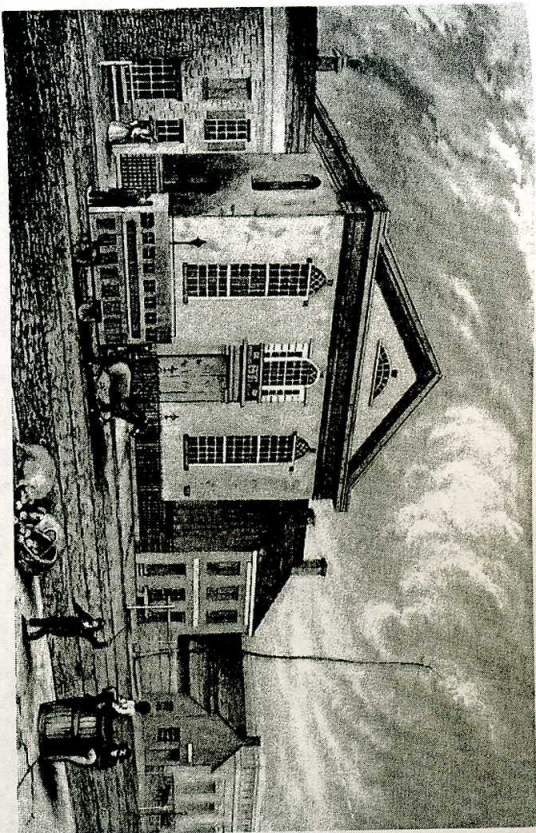
the continent was an unknown or at best distant past. Yet on a gut emotional level, its history resonated deeply. It became a metaphor for the experiences of displacement, exile, alienation, suffering, and perhaps future redemption that they and their ancestors had suffered across time and place. More pragmatically, Africa functioned as a strategy. It became a rallying cry through which to gain strength in numbers and engage in effective political and social activism. As a result, they embraced the label "African" as a common heritage and identity. In speeches idealizing the motherland, celebratory street parades, burial practices, and the like, this early "African" community made the continent a source of imagined memories and laid the groundwork for collective action.

St. Philip's Episcopal Church

In his Collect Street land transactions, George Lorillard offered a sixty-year lease on a plot of land to the African Episcopal Society, one of New York's first black community institutions and my family's place of worship. The DeGrasses and Crummells were among its first parishioners and might well have been responsible for its location close to their homes on Collect Street. In the Marshall family, Elizabeth was a Baptist and Joseph a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. But their children shifted their religious affiliation to the Episcopal denomination, and by 1840, if not earlier, both the Guignon and Lyons families were members of St. Philip's. The church's history is the uplifting story of black New Yorkers' quest to fulfill their religious needs. But it is also the more hardscrabble story of the tremendous material hardships they faced.

Many black New Yorkers chose to become Episcopalians because Anglicanism, represented by Trinity Church, dominated the city's early religious life and was the first denomination to reach out to them. Under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Frenchman Elias Neau began instructing slaves in Christianity around 1705. After his death in 1722, a succession of assistant ministers at Trinity continued his work.

The upstanding members of Trinity Church wanted their black



St. Philip's Church, Centre Street, circa 1819 (New-York Historical Society)

slaves and servants to be good Christians. But they did not want them praying next to them, receiving religious instruction with them, or buried alongside them. So Trinity's black parishioners set their sights on establishing a church of their own with three specific goals in mind: establishing a place dedicated to worship, to the religious instruction of their community, and to the burial of their dead.¹³

The Trinity Church vestry minutes provide a detailed chronological narrative. As early as 1792, black parishioners petitioned Trinity for a lot of land on which to build a schoolhouse. After the destruction of the city's black cemetery, the Negroes Burial Ground, in 1795, a group of black men requested financial aid "to purchase a piece of ground as a burial place to bury black persons of every denomination and description whatever in this city whether bond or free." The city set aside two lots of land on Chrystie Street for this purpose. Trinity contributed toward the expense and also agreed to the formation of an African Catechetical Institution for religious instruction. But the institution had no fixed location and over the years was forced to move from room to room in different buildings.

Black parishioners repeatedly begged Trinity for a permanent

end of the eighteenth century, Manhattan was undergoing a period of unprecedented growth. Its population doubled from 31,131 in 1790 to 60,529 in 1800. Economic activity boomed. The city rapidly expanded north. Most of Lower Manhattan from Broadway to the East River was owned by Trinity Church and six Knickerbocker families, Bayards, Stuyvesants, and others whose farms ranged between one hundred and three hundred acres. They had built their original homes, manufactures, and stores on this land, but they now began laying out and paving new streets, on which they constructed new and grander residences. They also divided their land into lots to sell, lease, or build rental properties—all at great profit. So began Manhattan's first real estate bubble, which lasted until the Panic of 1837.²¹

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, all three of Pierre Lorillard's sons were active participants in this real estate frenzy. They acquired property in the areas where their manufactures were located, Jacob in the Swamp on Ferry and Gold Streets, Peter and George on Chatham Street near their tobacco manufacture. But they also bought land on just about every street in Lower Manhattan, including Collect Street.

The Destruction of the Negroes Burial Ground

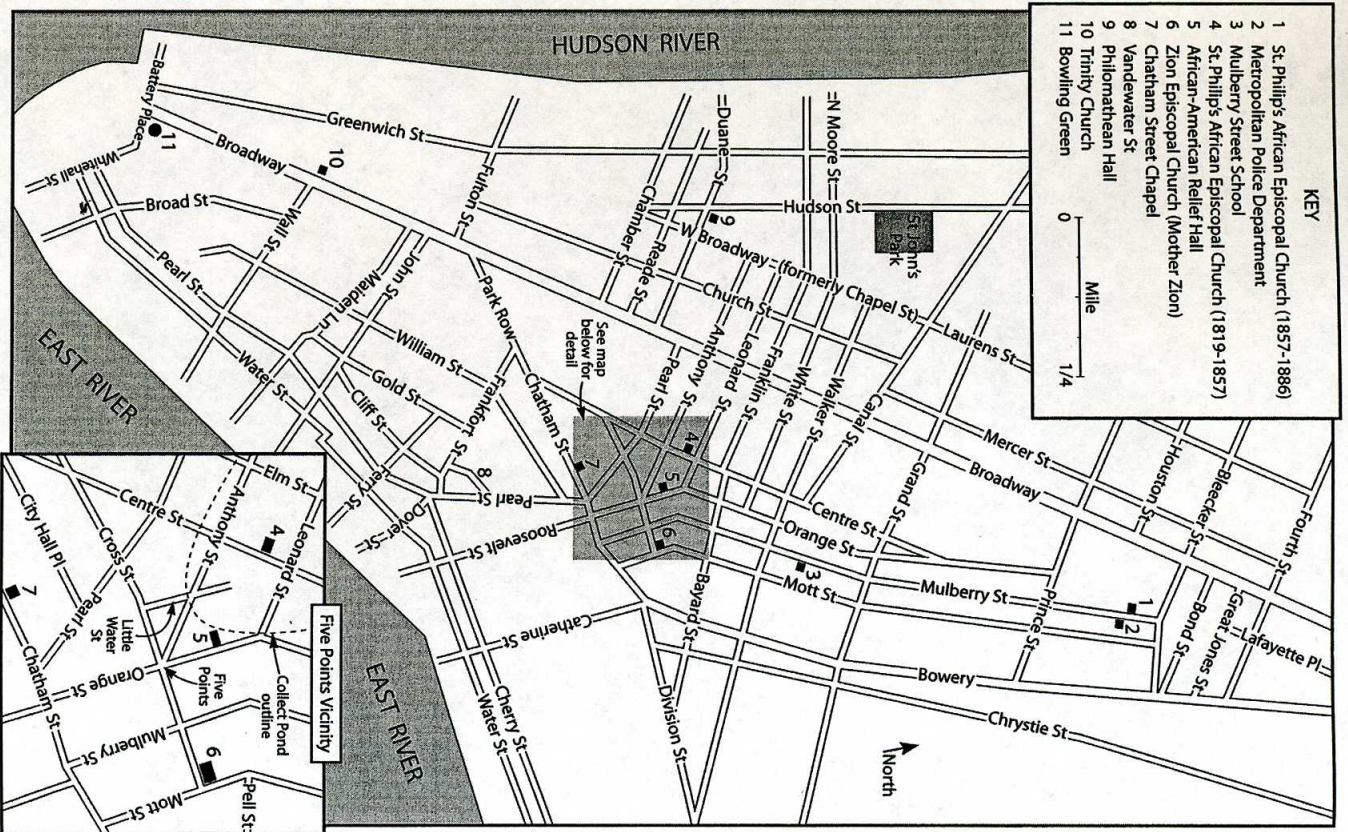
George Lorillard had sold or leased land on Collect Street to black New Yorkers. But he and his brothers had also taken from them. When black parishioners petitioned Trinity Church in April 1795 for help in buying a "burial place to bury black persons of every denomination and description whatever in this city whether bond or free," it was because the Negroes Burial Ground was being sold from under them. As speculators in real estate, George Lorillard and his brother, Peter, were indirect participants in this destruction, buying a portion of the land that had once been part of it.

A court case, *Smith, ex dem. Teller, v. G. & P. Lorillard*, tells the following story. In January 1795, a group of men of solid Knickerbocker stock—Henry, John, and Samuel Kip, Abraham and Isaac Van Vleeck, Daniel Denniston, and the estate of the deceased Samuel Bayard (from

the prominent sugar and tobacco family) obtained a deed of partition from the city of New York granting them permission to divide the Negroes Burial Ground into several lots. On today's map, the property extended from Broadway to Centre Street, and from Chamber Street north to Duane Street. Originally, the land had been part of the city's Commons, but in the mid-seventeenth century the government gave it to one Sara Roeleff for services rendered in negotiations with Native Americans upstate. At her death in 1693, Roeleff bequeathed the property to her several children; disputes among her heirs, executors of her will, and later descendants left the property largely unused. Most New Yorkers simply continued to think of it as part of the Commons, that is, as public land. But for New York's black population, this was the place allotted to them to bury their dead. In the 1790s, the Roeleff heirs recognized the enhanced value of the ground, took control of it, and agreed to its partition. One year later, Peter and George Lorillard bought a piece of this land from Bayard's estate for 560 pounds (although they were later obliged to return it to a Bayard heir in 1811).²²

As an early black institution, the Negroes Burial Ground antedated the founding of St. Philip's by a century. For New York's eighteenth-century black population, it was a hallowed place where they gathered to bury their dead and honor their memory. It was in use as far back as 1712, or perhaps even as early as 1697, when Trinity Church decided that blacks, whether free or enslaved, could no longer be buried in its cemetery. For much of the eighteenth century, the burial ground barely lay within the city limits. It was located between the palisade, which protected the city from attacks by French and Indians, and the Collect (Kalkhook) or Fresh Water Pond. Covering some seventy acres, Collect Pond was fringed by marshland created by its many outlets, and surrounded by wooded hills. A later account of the burial ground published in *Valentine's Manual* in 1847 described its location as a "desolate, unappropriated spot, descending with a gentle declivity toward a ravine which led to the Kalkhook pond. . . . Though within convenient distance from the city, the locality was unattractive and desolate, so that by permission the slave population were allowed to inter their dead there."²³

Destroyed and built over, the burial ground was rediscovered in



Lower Manhattan, 1836-1850 (Courtesy John Norton)

1991; a mere fraction of the skeletal remains buried there have been retrieved. To date, there is a dearth of information concerning it. Black families who used the Negroes Burial Ground throughout the eighteenth century have left us no written documents. Whites have provided a few accounts, although none are contemporaneous. The cemetery's archive resides in the bones themselves and the occasional artifacts found with them. They need to be unearthed, read, and interpreted.

Here's some of what we do know. *The Valentine's Manual* account briefly notes that many early black inhabitants "were native Africans, imported hither in slave ships, and retaining their native superstitions and burial customs, among which was that of burying by night, with various mummeries and outcries." Official documents of the time record that the city prohibited night burials and limited the number of mourners to twelve out of fear of insurrection. Anthropologists currently studying the site have produced additional information. During excavation, they discovered more than two hundred cowrie shells, thought to symbolize the sea and thus the return of the dead across the Atlantic to Africa or the afterlife. Other evidence suggests that the deceased were wrapped in shrouds held together by straight brass pins and buried in plain wood coffins. On the lid of one of the coffins ninety-two nails were found hammered in a heart-shaped design, perhaps a Sankofa symbol representing a turning of the "head toward the past in order to build the future." Finally, all the bodies were placed with their heads toward the east, suggesting that when the dead awoke, they would face the rising sun and their African motherland. What the bones and artifacts do not, cannot, yield, however, is any information about the "mummeries and outcries" that accompanied the nighttime burials.²⁴

But the cemetery also memorialized the violence repeatedly meted out to New York's black population. In both the Maiden Lane insurrection of 1712 and the Negro Plot of 1741, blacks accused of conspiracy were publicly executed on the Commons adjacent to the burial ground—hanged or burned at the stake. In 1741, two of the dead bodies were chained to posts on a hill overlooking the ground. The conspirators were then buried in the cemetery. Thus, the burial ground served as a cautionary reminder of the punishment awaiting blacks who ran afoul of those who so rigidly controlled their lives. Writing at the end of the

nineteenth century, white historian Frank Moss understood with amazing sensitivity just how this spot embodied the city's collective memories of racial violence (although he erroneously insisted that such violence was a thing of the past): "The imagination need not be excessively vivid, when, in going through this district, amid its present scenes of wretchedness and misery, we almost hear the death cries of the culprits and the horrible imprecations of the spectators, who gathered in large numbers to witness the tortures of the condemned wretches."²⁵

Later incidents of violence further undermined the sacred nature of the Negroes Burial Ground. In 1788, black families were obliged to petition city authorities to stop medical students from stealing corpses from the graves of loved ones and carrying away bodies "without respect to age or sex, mangle their flesh out of a wanton curiosity and then expose it to beasts and birds." Predictably, their pleas went ignored until the student "resurrectionists" began digging up bodies in the Trinity Church cemetery. White New Yorkers then took to the streets in what became known as the Doctors Riot. This time, the authorities listened. The state legislature passed an act banning "the Odious Practice of Digging up and Removing, for the Purpose of Dissection, Dead Bodies Interred in Cemeteries or Burial Places."²⁶

The demise of the Negroes Burial Ground in 1795 could only have been devastating to the city's black community. But the men who reclaimed the land as personal property were undoubtedly indifferent to the fact that the bones of a people's ancestors lay buried there. They were interested only in making money—lots of it. In this, all three Lorillard brothers were spectacularly successful. The first to die, George, left an estate valued at over two million dollars. At his death, Peter was worth many millions more; it was said that he was the first man to whom the term "millionaire" was applied. The brothers' wealth—and their means of obtaining it—occasioned vitriolic comments. When Peter died, former New York mayor Philip Hone wrote in his diary: "He was the last of the three brothers of that name, himself the eldest—Peter, George, and Jacob—all rich men; he the richest. . . . He led people by the nose for the best part of a century, and made his enormous fortune by giving them that to chew which they could not swallow." Even more caustically, one of New York's leading society figures, George Temple-

ton Strong, observed: "How many cubic miles of smoke and gallons of colored saliva are embodied in the immense fortune that was his last week."²⁷

Filth

The lots that George Lorillard sold or rented to black New Yorkers on Collect Street were hardly choice property. Quite the contrary. Not only was the land poor: in the process of enriching themselves, the Lorillards and their ilk had created a host of environmental problems that affected all New Yorkers—black and white, rich and poor, but most especially those of little means.

Much of Manhattan's land was low lying. Drainage was inadequate when rains were heavy, so lots situated below street level became "deep sunk holes, the receptacles of water in the rainy seasons, and the source of many unwholesome and noxious stenches." Human action further degraded the environment. Sewers were open and became easily clogged. Privies overflowed, emitting nauseating odors. Garbage, consisting of shells, ashes, offal, manure, human excrement, and spoiled food such as putrid meat and dead fish, piled up in the streets and went uncollected for days. In the warm weather these garbage mounds attracted swarms of flies and the odor could be smelled blocks away. The city hired cartmen to remove the garbage, but their work was spotty. They often took the manure, which they could sell at profit, and left the rest. Consequently, many New Yorkers kept up the old practice of allowing hogs to roam the streets to scavenge for garbage. But hogs added to the already foul street odors, rooted up pavements, knocked over carriages, and tried to eat children. Even deaths could not solve matters. Dead animals were simply left on the streets alongside the garbage. One citizen sarcastically wrote about how he had come across "dead horses, dogs, cats, and other dead animals lying about in such abundance as if the inhabitants accounted the stench arising from putrid carcasses a delicious perfume."²⁸

The activities of merchants and tradesmen compounded these wretched conditions. Those working in the so-called obnoxious trades

borhoods, in old and dilapidated buildings, they are held down to low associations and gloomy surroundings." Some months later, as officers of the Society for the Promotion of Education Among Colored Children, Philip and Charles Ray wrote a report of their own to the commissioners of education. Agreeing with the state assembly's assessment, they argued that the poor condition of black schools was all the more unjust since black New Yorkers paid their fair share of school taxes, and a greater percentage of their children went to school than did white children. The request that followed was a carefully calculated political and rhetorical maneuver reflecting Philip's cautious and temperate nature. Although he and Charles Ray undoubtedly knew the idea was far-fetched, they began by suggesting that New York look to Boston's recent decision to integrate its public schools. Then they backtracked. Turning pragmatic, they requested that "if in the judgment of your honorable body common schools are not thus common to all," the commissioners might see fit to erect two new buildings where "the children will be taught with far less expense in two such school-houses than in the half dozen hovels into which they are now driven."³⁰

Despite the dominance of the all-powerful Board of Education, the Society for the Promotion of Education Among Colored Children refused to disband. Instead, it devised a means to continue overseeing and encouraging the education of black children. In 1855, it instituted an annual Ridgeway Prize, named after Englishman Charles Ridgeway, a hairdresser at the Irving House who bequeathed \$650 to the society at his death. Philip and James McCune Smith were two of the three-member Prize Committee. They must have observed the annual ceremonies with pride as students sang and recited, administrators gave speeches, ministers delivered sermons, and prizes were distributed: a gold medal for mathematics; silver for general scholarship; books for the best reader and writer, as well as for best declamation, painting, and drawing. Some of the awardees, with names like Vogel-sang, Zuille, Peterson, Hamilton, Williams, were clearly children of the elite. But there were other names I didn't recognize — Wilkins, Stanley, Stokely, Remson.³¹ Who were these children? What happened to them in later life?

St. Philip's

PHILIP WHITE, VESTRYMAN

In 1886 the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published an article about prominent blacks in Brooklyn that had this to say about "Druggist White": "He is beginning to take greater interest in his race and his friends are stimulated by his progressive spirit."³² The imputation was clear: in earlier years Philip had been *less* interested in his race and his spirit had *not* been progressive. I was confused. Clearly, in the 1850s Philip had devoted himself to the cause of black education, but it's also true that he had not participated in other political or social reform organizations. The ever-independent Philip, I discovered, was charting his own path, making choices that at first glance might seem inconsistent and contradictory. Indeed, even as he worked within a separate black educational institution, Philip was fighting to gain St. Philip's admission to New York state's Episcopal Diocesan Convention, that is, to have a black parish accepted as an integral part of a white religious institution.

It was Philip's position as vestryman that gave me insight into the *Daily Eagle's* comment. The vestry minutes tell the story of Philip's rise to prominence at St. Philip's: first elected to the vestry in 1850, Philip held that position until 1854 and, with the exception of a couple of years, from 1865 to 1875. After that, he served intermittently as warden until 1880, and then was elected senior warden every year from 1884 until his death in 1891.

So Philip was a vestryman in 1852 when a fugitive slave named Preston was captured and remanded into slavery. As in the Hamlet case, black New Yorkers sprang into action, requesting that notices for a mass meeting be read aloud in the city's black churches. Smith approached St. Philip's white minister, Reverend William Morris, who, George Downing fumed in a letter to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, responded that it was "our duty to obey the Fugitive Slave Law":

The slaveholder came. . . . He disregards all obligations, all ties; he drags him [Preston] from our gates. Would that this was the last of the infamy. But our Reverend and MOST

CHRISTIAN adviser, if called upon to "put asunder" those that "God hath joined together"—to screw on the thumb screw—yes, he would feel it to be his "christian duty to obey." Aye, he even takes his place to entwine with the rope which shall bind him and keep him from fleeing to some christian gate.

As if that were not bad enough, Downing continued, St. Philip's vestry "passed a vote of thanks to said Reverend and approved of his entire course." He then proceeded to list the names of the vestrymen one by one, starting with Philip. Only one, Downing claimed, opposed the resolution, and that was his father.

Unable to let the matter rest, some two years later Downing returned to Morris's admonition, charging in yet another letter that "a white one of his vestrymen, with a sanctimonious grin, exclaims Amen! to the Reverend's exclamations."³³ Although Downing called out St. Philip's vestrymen in the plural, I think his animus was specifically directed against Philip. Downing placed his name first on the list and his reference to one of the white vestrymen could only have been a play on words: white as in skin color, racial composition, weak character, and last name.

This incident explains the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle's* later comment. I've thought it over many times, and reached the inevitable conclusion: Philip was indifferent to the plight of the slave. My initial reaction was one of utter dismay. I wanted my great-grandfather to be a dedicated race man, a hero of the antislavery cause just like Downing and Smith. But one can't choose one's ancestors, can one? So rather than condemn, excuse, or apologize for Philip's behavior, I've simply tried to understand it. It's not easy. Philip was devoted to his mother, Elizabeth; coming from Jamaica, she must have had ties to slavery, either as a slave herself or the child of a slave mother. Nevertheless, Philip's personal history was different from that of men like Smith and Garnet who had had direct experiences with slavery. And it was different from those whose fathers were white but remained distant if not unknown. Philip was nurtured by his white father for the first ten years of his life. Perhaps Thomas White impressed upon the boy lessons he would never forget:

that character, not race, was the measure of the man; that the privileges of citizenship were his due; that he should not have to fight for them, and certainly not fight on behalf of others.

In that sense it's fair to say that Philip took little interest in his race. Yes, his commitment to black education indicated that to some degree he did care, yet he wanted to educate young men to believe in themselves just as he did. And no, he did not agree with statements like the one author Frances Harper would make a few years later: "Identified with a people over whom weary ages of degradation had passed," she wrote, "whatever concerns them, as a race, concerns me."³⁴ Philip did not identify with those degraded by slavery, and their concerns were not his.

In the 1850s, Philip's goal was to help St. Philip's obtain a secure place within the American Episcopal Church. This quest created a wide cast of characters that pitted not only black parishioners against white churchmen, but also parishioner against parishioner, and churchman against churchman. Yet it also gave rise to unexpected alliances, most especially with white churchmen. Most tellingly, however, it revealed the utter whimsy of scientific racism, exposing how the character and behavior of white men (and white men of the cloth at that) were often a lot more suspect than the Negro's.

REVEREND MORRIS

In his letters to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Downing charged Philip White with being all too willing to follow the lead of St. Philip's white pastor, Reverend Morris.

Peter Williams's death in 1840 had left an aching void at St. Philip's. Quite naturally, the church wanted another black minister to lead it, but finding one proved to be a difficult task. Bishop Hobart had taken six long years to ordain Williams, and later Bishop Onderdonk had denied Isaiah DeGrasse, Alexander Crummell, and Charles Reason the requisite training for the ministry. By the mid-1840s, DeGrasse was dead, and Reason was a teacher. Only Crummell had persevered; he was finally ordained by Bishop Alfred Lee of Delaware in 1844. Crummell

had not yet left for England and Africa and was an obvious candidate for the position at St. Philip's. But his prickly personality stood in the way. Although James McCune Smith, a member of the vestry at the time, lobbied on Crummell's behalf, others were wary. He was not appointed.

With no black candidates in the ministry, St. Philip's turned first to Alexander Frazer and then after his death to William Morris. Ordained by Onderdonk, Morris had been assistant minister of Trinity Church before becoming rector of Trinity School. In 1849, the vestry appointed him officiating minister, a position he held for ten years.

Morris was his pastor, but was that reason enough for Philip to heed his call to obey the laws of the land? Like many committed Christians then and now, my great-grandfather must have concluded that there was no place for politics in the church. He undoubtedly remembered how Onderdonk had chastised Peter Williams for his abolitionist activity and forced him to resign his position in the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Philip had a quite specific reason for wanting to ban politics from St. Philip's: admission to the Diocesan Convention. St. Philip's parishioners were unshakable in their conviction that acceptance was essential to their religious identity: it would establish their church as a legitimate black parish within a larger white religious order. The Episcopal Church conceived of itself as a national institution structured around the concept of denominational unity. Individual parishes made up the local level; these were then grouped by region to form dioceses, each one headed by a bishop and administered by a convention. Diocesan conventions met annually, and General Conventions comprising all the dioceses triennially. Conventions were not mere bureaucratic meetings but were considered integral components of church structure, a demonstration of its unity. Not to be admitted to the convention meant not to be part of the diocese, not to be in union with the Episcopal denomination.

St. Philip's had a difficult road ahead. The church knew it could count on John Jay II. He came from a distinguished family of Episcopalians and antislavery activists and had taken up Crummell's cause

against Onderdonk in the 1830s, airing his denomination's racism publicly in pamphlets and newspaper articles. A majority of white Episcopalians, however, agreed with scientific racists who declared that whites were the superior race, the standard bearers of civilization, while blacks were inferior, forever mired in barbarism. Preeminent among them was George Templeton Strong, a prominent member of New York's elite, lawyer, trustee of Columbia College, vestryman at Trinity Church. Although antislavery, Strong was equally anti-black; he qualified as a "niggerologist" since he used the N-word in his diary like a tic.

There were more men like Strong than Jay in New York's Episcopal Diocese, and they were prepared to fight St. Philip's admission to the Diocesan Convention. They rested their case on the claim that Hobart had only acceded to "the admission of a colored person as a candidate for Holy Orders . . . upon the distinct understanding, that in the event of his being admitted to Orders, he should not 'be entitled to a seat in the Convention, nor should the congregation of which he may have the charge, be represented therein.'"35

SEX AND THE BISHOP

Strong operated according to the rule of whimsy. He adhered to a double racial standard according to which blacks were by nature brutes and could not be civilized, but excuses could readily be found for bad white behavior. In 1844, Bishop Onderdonk, a middle-aged, balding, graying, bespectacled, thin-lipped man of the cloth, was brought before an ecclesiastical court and charged with "immorality and impurity." His sins were twofold: excessive drinking and gross indecency toward women. For several years he had been the subject of idle gossip, openly referred to as the "touching bishop" because social drinking led him to touch those with whom he was conversing. But court records suggest more egregious behavior. In one testimony, a witness confirmed that during a thirty-minute carriage ride, Onderdonk had rested his hand on her bosom while talking with a passenger in the front seat! Although tempted to leap from the carriage, she remained silent for fear of being

heard by those sitting in front. The court voted to suspend Onderdonk indefinitely, in effect prohibiting him from further fulfilling any church functions.³⁶

Writing in his diary, Strong dismissed the charges against Onderdonk as "this most pitiful attack on the Bishop's character . . . [by] amateurs in stink and stercoration." And, he continued with breath-taking misogyny, "all I dread is that some silly slips of sickly virginity, whom the Bishop may have shaken hands with, looked at, or (shocking to relate) actually *kissed* (the ungentlemanly old ruffian!) will be brought forward, with some imperfect recollections, distilled by vanity . . . self-importance and their own impure suggestions, to swear to—heaven knows what—of an attempted rape and a heroic resistance."³⁷

The reaction of St. Philip's vestry made it strange bedfellows of the very racist Strong. Adhering to conventions of respectability as closely as they did, they would never have countenanced such behavior from one of their own. But, rather than take advantage of his plight, the vestry wrote Onderdonk a letter of sympathy, hand delivered by Peter Ray and James McCune Smith. Reading back through the minutes, Philip could find the following:

We feel especially humiliated in your humiliation, because we have reason to believe, that during the course of your ministry, we have been blessed with an unusually large share of your sympathy, support and attention. . . . Be assured that our confidence in you remains unshaken; our love, respect, and veneration unaltered; and we shall greatly rejoice when the time shall come for us again to listen to your counsel and admonitions, and the word preached by you.

To make their position official, the vestry followed up with a resolution stating "that Bishop Onderdonk should not resign the Episcopacy of the Diocese under the present circumstances." Even the usually independent minded Smith voted in favor. Onderdonk's letter of response was effusive in its gratitude.³⁸

What was St. Philip's trying to accomplish? George Strong provided one answer. In his diary he made clear that what was at stake in

Onderdonk's trial was the future direction of the Episcopal Church, which in the 1840s was riven by a deep division between High and Low Churchmen. During his episcopacy, Hobart had managed to preserve a delicate balance between evangelical truth and apostolic order. But, dedicated to High Church ideals, Onderdonk went to extremes, obsessing to the point of fussiness over every detail of what he considered proper Episcopal ritual. Onderdonk's high-handed pronouncements infuriated Low Churchmen, and they used his sexual escapades to get rid of him. As one who favored Onderdonk's policies, Strong lamented his downfall and was consoled only by "the very general feeling of sympathy for the Bishop that seems to exist even in quarters where one would least expect it."³⁹ One of these unexpected quarters was the High Church St. Philip's. Religion trumped morality, and it placed both a racist ideologue and his victims in the same camp.

St. Philip's vestry minutes provided a second answer. In a canny political move, the vestry took swift advantage of Onderdonk's predicament and newfound benevolence toward them to appeal to him for help. They appointed a committee composed of Smith and Henry Scott "to wait on Bishop Onderdonk and state that the vestry is anxious to have the parish represented in the next Diocesan Convention; and to enquire what are the necessary steps for that purpose."⁴⁰

ADMISSION TO THE DIOCESAN CONVENTION

Neither the meeting with Onderdonk nor admission to the 1846 Diocesan Convention happened. I can't imagine the sickened reactions of Philip and his fellow parishioners as they read the language of the convention's rejection, which could have been lifted straight from a Van Evrie's textbook.

When society is unfortunately divided into classes—when some are intelligent, refined, and elevated, in tone and character, and others are ignorant, coarse and debased, however unjustly, and when such prejudices exist between them, as to prevent social intercourse on equal terms, it would seem in-

expedient to encounter such prejudices, unnecessarily, and to endeavor to compel the one class to associate on equal terms in the consultations on the affairs of the Diocese, with those whom they would not admit to their tables, or into their family circles—nay, whom they would not admit into their pews, during public worship. . . . We deeply sympathize with the colored race in our country, we feel acutely their wrongs—and not the least among them, their social degradation. But this cannot prevent our seeing the fact, that they are socially degraded, and are not regarded as proper associates for the class of persons who attend our Convention.⁴¹

Given such open contempt, it's a wonder that the men of St. Philip's did not give up. They didn't, but their efforts in the late 1840s seemed at best dispirited.

Ironically, it was the arrival of William Morris that gave them new impetus. In the fall of 1852, Morris, Philip, and Peter Ray were chosen to represent St. Philip's at the Diocesan Convention. By now, Philip had displaced his former mentor, James McCune Smith, as both vestryman and convention delegate. He must have felt honored by his church's trust in selecting him to succeed Smith. The three members of the 1852 delegation—one white man and two blacks—decided on a plan of action: avoid racial politics and simply argue that as a parish in good standing St. Philip's was entitled to admission to the convention.

We can better understand Morris's seemingly contradictory actions—obey the proslavery laws of the land but fight for equal rights for a black parish—if we view his motives as inspired by purely religious beliefs in which racial thinking played no part. Morris could then simultaneously claim that true Christians (whatever their race) should not meddle in politics, and that exemplary Episcopalians (whatever their race) should be in union with their diocese. This was a position Philip wholeheartedly endorsed. So St. Philip's delegation must have cringed when John Jay II stood up during the 1852 convention deliberations and proposed a resolution repudiating admission based on "caste." The outcome was inevitable: the resolution failed and St. Philip's was denied admission.

Success finally came at the convention of 1853, and Philip was there to savor it. Jay kept silent on the issue of racial discrimination. Apparently exhausted by this drawn-out struggle, the convention bypassed debate. Nineteen parishes were presented, St. Philip's the very last. It was admitted by a vote of 215 to 46.⁴²

With quiet satisfaction, St. Philip's vestry minutes merely noted that: "Peter Ray for the Delegates to the Convention reported the application of St. Philip's Church for admission to the seventieth Diocesan Convention was successful and the church is now in full union with the rest of the Diocese." With considerable venom, Strong wrote in his diary: "Another Revolution. John Jay's annual motion carried at last, and the nigger delegation admitted to the Diocesan Convention."⁴³

I wondered what James McCune Smith thought of his former apprentice. Was he exasperated by Philip's refusal to embrace the anti-slavery cause? Dismayed that Philip had replaced him on the vestry despite his many years of service? Upset that he had not been part of the very first delegation seated at the Diocesan Convention? A brief letter Smith wrote to John Jay would seem to bear that out. In it, Smith complained that the vestry secretary (Philip) was not giving out any information about the upcoming convention. Yet as soon as he heard of St. Philip's admission, Smith fired off a letter to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* highly complimentary of the delegation: "The delegates from St. Philip's are Peter Ray, senior warden, superintendent of Lorillard's immense tobacco factory, Philip A. White, chemist and apothecary, and Henry Scott, merchant—all worthy, intelligent and respectable men."⁴⁴ By 1858, Philip and Smith were attending the Diocesan Convention together as delegates. If there had been grudges, neither man appeared interested in holding on to them. They were well aware of the importance of collaborative work in the black community.

SEX AND THE REVEREND

Philip and his fellow vestrymen expressed their gratitude to Morris in several ways: verbal thanks and a renewal of his contract for another five years. Over the next several months, it became clear that this white min-

ister was a changed man. "Our excellent pastor of St. Philip's," James McCune Smith commented approvingly, "actually preaches against the Nebraska Bill."⁴⁵ Did Morris have a change of heart and now believe that religion and politics could in fact mix? Or was he trying to get right with as many of the church's parishioners as possible?

As Philip and the rest of the congregation were soon to find out, Morris was having problems of his own—termed of a "domestic nature"—even while espousing St. Philip's cause at the Diocesan Convention. In 1856, he informed the vestry that he could no longer continue his ministerial duties because of his impending trial by the Ecclesiastical Court.⁴⁶ Once again a white man of the cloth was being charged with the kind of sexual behavior with which scientific racists demonized blacks. The details of the court records are lurid; they make Orendonk's trial pale by comparison.

It appears that sometime around 1853 Morris tired of his wife and sought to get his marriage annulled. Frustrated in his plan, he turned abusive. He allegedly referred to her as a "drunken whore," accused her of having an affair, and claimed that their son was not his child. Turning violent, on one occasion he supposedly grabbed her and dragged her across the floor; on another he pressed her against the sideboard until she was blue in the face. Mrs. Morris eventually went on the offensive, hiring lawyers and accusing her husband of the very same crimes. Her charges were a lot more specific. A witness testified that Morris had had an affair with one Jane Hayden and had seen him "kissing her, holding her on his lap and spitting into her mouth," and also taking candy out of her mouth and eating it. They had been observed together in bed. They were known to have traveled to Europe as a couple. Another witness maintained that Morris had also committed adultery with one Ann Spread. She had gone into his bedroom and closed the door, later appearing downstairs with "her dress crushed and her face flushed."

Morris's defenders had a lot more clout than George Templeton Strong. The clergy all lined up behind their colleague to give positive character testimony. Morris, they asserted, was "very cheerful, exceedingly benevolent; extravagantly so; and his conduct as far as I ever saw irreproachable." Even better, he was a "man of purity and integrity of character upright in his principles. Ingenious and unsuspecting in his

manner, liberal and generous in his disposition." The verdict was minimally damaging. On a split vote Morris was found guilty of depreciation of his wife's character and impropriety with Ann Spread. There was no ecclesiastical censure.⁴⁷

I won't even try to explain the dissonance between Morris's personal and religious behavior, or why St. Philip's kept him on rather than fire him. Surely, if one of their own had engaged in such disreputable behavior, he would have been ousted immediately. I can only surmise that they remained grateful for the way he had fought for them and were determined to stick by him.

In 1858, it appeared that harmony might at last reign at St. Philip's. The vestry still hoped to hire a black minister, but when their efforts failed, the congregation sent a petition requesting that Morris be given yet another five-year contract. I couldn't find Philip's or Peter's name on the list. But for the first time, women were signatories: they included Peter's wife, Cornelia, his daughter Elizabeth, and his former sister-in-law Mary Joseph Marshall. Women, it seemed, were beginning to make their presence felt. Morris declined the invitation, and thereafter slipped into obscurity.⁴⁸

Frederick Douglass' Paper: Defining Race and Culture

"I am a plain Dutch negro, with only one head, without horns or tail. I am well known in the Flats, and Harsimus and Bergen, and way up to Hell Gate, and am a lineal descendant from one of the folly fellows whom Washington Irving alludes to in his sketch book, as shining and laughing on our side of Buttermilk Channel."⁴⁹ I imagine Philip coming home after a long day of work, picking up his copy of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, which he subscribed to, and reading those lines in a column signed by "Communipaw" with a broad smile on his face. The article in question was part of a literary exchange carried out in the paper between 1852 and 1855 among three men writing under the pen names of Communipaw, Ethiop, and Cosmopolite. Their identities were not a mystery, but an open secret among the paper's readership. Ethiop was the Brooklyn schoolteacher William J. Wilson, Cosmopolite was Philip

McCune Smith, Charles Reason, George Downing, and John Peterson — had established the American Freedmen's Friend Society to raise money and collect clothes for black soldiers and emancipated slaves. Women of the older generation, like Cornelia Guignon, as well as of the younger, which now included Elizabeth Guignon and Maritcha Lyons, held fund-raising fairs. They sold articles to benefit the freedmen, set up a wheel of fortune for entertainment, offered ice cream to the hungry, hoping "to move many a dollar in the right direction."³

By early 1864, black women were ready to go it alone and establish their own relief organization, the Ladies' Committee for the Aid of Sick Soldiers. Led by Henry Highland Garnet's wife, Julia, the committee requested and received permission from the commander at Riker's Island to establish a kitchen connected to the hospital; in no time, the women were feeding some sixty soldiers. The organization's membership contained names I expected, wives of activists like Garnet and John Peterson, schoolteachers like Sarah Ennalls and Fanny Tompkins. I was heartened to see Philip's sister Sarah Maria White, and his niece Elizabeth Thompson, on the list. But I was astonished to read the name of one of the two men who had agreed to help the committee: in addition to Garnet, who was serving in his capacity as chaplain, the other was "Philip A. White, Auditor."⁴ Philip and Garnet were as unlikely allies as John Jay and George Templeton Strong.

Philip was beginning to take a greater interest in his race. Maybe it was the influence of the apparently more progressive women in his family. But I think it was also because he was now convinced that citizenship for all was close at hand. Philip, I believe, saw citizenship as his right and was ready to fight for it for himself and his peers. In 1860, he had joined James McCune Smith's drive for black male suffrage in the state by adding his drugstore to the list of places to pick up ballots. Now he could appreciate to the fullest the broader efforts others had shouldered — civil war and military service — to bring citizenship to all black Americans, free-born and newly freed. That was a goal toward which Philip could work.

Black Soldiers: Brothers-in-Law Peter Vogelsang and John DeGrasse

I searched in vain for names of members of the black elite on the lists of the Twentieth, Twenty-sixth, and Thirty-first Regiments, but I finally found two New Yorkers serving in other state regiments. They happened to be brothers-in-law. Peter Vogelsang, who married Theodocia DeGrasse, enlisted as a soldier in the famed Fifty-fourth Massachusetts regiment. John DeGrasse, brother of Isaiah, Theodocia, and Serena, served as an assistant surgeon with the First North Carolina Volunteers. They began their military careers with different regiments, in different states, holding different positions, but early 1864 found them on the same battlefield in Olustee, Florida. For one, service would bring acceptance and glory, and for the other rejection and humiliation.

Boston's white abolitionist community had worked hard to raise the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts. Governor John A. Andrew had authorized its formation. Prominent antislavery leaders helped in recruitment, including the parents of its first commander, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. Troops were composed primarily of free blacks, among whom were two of Frederick Douglass's sons. Shaw's father personally recruited the forty-six-year-old Peter Vogelsang. Shaw was dubious that a man that age would be able to pass the required physical exams, but in no time Vogelsang rose to become sergeant of Company H. The Fifty-fourth left Boston in May 1863, and on July 10 and 11 — just as the draft riots were erupting in New York City — the regiment launched its assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. Shaw was killed along with 116 of his men; another 156 were wounded or captured.⁵

Vogelsang was not among them. Several companies from the Fifty-fourth had been sent to James Island as a diversionary tactic. On July 16, Confederate forces attacked and forced a retreat. Nevertheless, the soldiers of the Fifty-fourth stood their ground long enough to prevent a complete rout. Forty-two men were killed, and Vogelsang was severely wounded. In a letter written to the *Liberator* from his hospital bed, he made light of his own predicament, but sorrowfully recorded the death and destruction around him. His company, Vogelsang reported, had been cut off from the rest of the regiment but continued



Peter Vogelsang (Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida)

fighting. He had “the satisfaction of dropping one little fellow” and taking his gun as a trophy. Then “the rebs came so thick and fast, and on horseback, too, that it was ‘Sauve qui Peut.’” A good runner, Vogelsang “did his prettiest and managed to outrun the rest of his party.” He swam across a creek, hid in the tall grass, then raised himself to see what was going on, “when ‘crack,’ ‘whiz,’ and I could just see a fellow (about the width of ‘West Broadway’ from me) on horseback, who had just given me ‘my dose.’” Badly wounded, Vogelsang lay helpless in the mud, water, and his own blood for hours until rescued. Once in the hospital boat, medical staff cut off his clothes, wet his wounds—“a big hole in my left chest”—covered him with tent-cloth, and told him to drink whiskey every four hours. He knew he was among the lucky

when the casualties from Fort Wagner were brought on board. “Such a sight,” Vogelsang lamented. “Blood, mud, sand and water, broken legs and arms, some dying and some dead.”⁶

Vogelsang recovered by February 1864, in time to march to Olustee, where the Fifty-fourth was ordered to help Union forces cut off supplies to the Confederate army. It was there that his regiment met up with his brother-in-law’s. John DeGrasse was an assistant surgeon with the First North Carolina Volunteers (renamed the Thirty-fifth Regiment of the United States Colored Troops). The youngest DeGrasse sibling, he received his medical degree from Bowdoin College in 1849, opened a practice in New York City, but then moved to Boston. In a truly progressive move, the Massachusetts Medical Society admitted him as a member in 1854. In spring 1863, DeGrasse mustered in as an assistant surgeon at New Berne, North Carolina. Unlike the Fifty-fourth, the Thirty-fifth was composed mainly of former slaves, but its commander came from yet another prominent New England abolitionist family: Colonel James Beecher was the younger half brother of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. When fully staffed, the regiment’s medical team consisted of a head surgeon, two assistant surgeons, and a hospital steward. Their duties ranged from ensuring the cleanliness of the soldiers’ bedding and clothing and supplying them with enough food and drink to more medical tasks: operating on wounds, changing dressings, treating diseases like smallpox, whose symptoms were high fever, nausea, vomiting, and muscle aches, or scurvy, caused by a deficiency of vitamin C.⁷

I don’t know how Vogelsang performed at Olustee, but his brother-in-law John DeGrasse insisted that he had fulfilled his duties, was “uniting in my efforts in caring for the wounded,” and stayed on the battlefield until dark. The head surgeon of his regiment, Dr. Henry Marcy, supported by the hospital steward Delos Barber, maintained that he had not. Instead of attending to the wounded, they charged, DeGrasse had become intoxicated, retired to his quarters in a drunken stupor, and could not be roused. A court-martial ensued.

Here too, the black archives failed me. I found no mention of the court-martial in the DeGrasse family papers at the Massachusetts



John Van Surlay DeGrasse
(Museum of African-American History, Boston)

Historical Society or in any histories of blacks in medicine. John suffered a much greater humiliation than his brother Isaiah ever had, and it was, I believe, a profound sense of shame that led to the suppression of the event from family and community memory. The military records at the National Archives contained, however, a full account of the proceedings.⁸ There were fourteen witnesses in all; five testified against DeGrasse, nine in his favor. Among those opposing him were James Beecher, the head surgeon Marcy, and the hospital steward Barber. Their testimony carried weight.

In all, there were five charges. Two were similar to the Olustee accusation: intoxication and dereliction of duty at Cedar Creek in June and then at Darby's Station in July. The evidence against DeGrasse in all

three instances was that he was seen drinking, smelled heavily of liquor, sat in an "unsettled position on horseback," became quarrelsome, and that once in camp fell into a deep sleep and could not be roused. In a statement at the conclusion of the trial DeGrasse rebutted the charges one by one. He began by expressing surprise, arguing that until this moment, some seven months after the battle of Olustee, nobody had ever complained to him about his supposed drunkenness. He then pointed to the many witnesses who testified that he was not intoxicated. Responding specifically to the Olustee charge, DeGrasse maintained that after the battle he had sent his horse ahead and stayed behind on the field alone with the stretcher corps until dark. After walking twenty miles to camp and suffering from "excessive fatigue," he had indeed gone to bed. Knowing that the wounded soldiers Dr. Marcy wanted him to care for had been able to walk to camp, he felt their cases could wait until morning. Turning to the Cedar Creek incident, DeGrasse noted that Beecher was hardly in a position to assess his condition since he was at the head of the regiment while he, DeGrasse, was at the rear. If he was unsettled in his saddle, it was due to heat and exhaustion. Finally, when he reached camp, he had had a bath drawn and changed into clean clothes before going to sleep, hardly the behavior of a drunken man. And if Beecher claimed he could not wake him, soldier Freeman Grice had had no problem doing so.

The other two charges against DeGrasse involved "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman." The first concerned taking liquor, specifically whiskey, from the medical supplies for his own personal use. DeGrasse readily admitted that he had done so, not for himself alone but for other officers and enlisted men as well, and not for personal consumption but as medical treatment for exhaustion. This was not a "misapplication," he argued, but entirely within U.S. Government regulations.

The last charge, in some ways the ugliest, involved a civilian. DeGrasse was accused of having insulted a black woman working as a laundress on board a steamer by making unwanted advances toward her. Specifically, he had formed his fingers in the shape of a pistol, placed his hand under his jacket near his penis, and said something to the effect of

"See how you made it stand?" or "How stiff is it?" DeGrasse categorically denied the charge, and pointed out that the only black woman who had been on board the steamer at that time had sworn the event never happened.

DeGrasse was convinced that there were hidden motives behind the charges. Although he admitted he had no hard evidence, he pointed his finger at Henry Marcy, particularly at the "uncommon and untiring assiduity with which surgeon Marcy has worked up this case, his punctual and constant attendance here for the past five days, using every effort and all the means in his power, to procure a conviction—manifesting inside and outside the court as much interest as though it was a personal matter, or a suit where his money interest was at stake."

I have no hard evidence either, but I would like to believe DeGrasse's side of the story. The bulk of the testimony concerning his intoxication and dereliction of duty came from Marcy and the hospital steward. DeGrasse's explanation that his behavior at Olustee and Cedar Creek was due to exhaustion made perfect sense. Moreover, whiskey, as Peter Vogelsang could testify, was a common medical treatment. Finally, his treatment of the black woman seems to befit a troublemaker more like the wayward James Hewlett rather than a prominent doctor, married man, and father of a newborn child.

Certainly, racism flourished among the white officers, and specifically the doctors, of the Thirty-fifth. I found evidence in an earlier incident involving DeGrasse and the other assistant surgeon, Daniel Mann, who served with DeGrasse in fall 1863. In October of that year, Mann wrote a letter complaining that DeGrasse had been placed "in the superior or at least most important position" and was "disposed to dispute my right to rank him." The response from a white officer made clear what was at stake. The presence of "Mann (white) and DeGrasse (a Negro)" made for an "unfortunate combination," he wrote, giving rise to "difficulties of a serious nature," namely the decision to "elevate the Negro doctor over the white one."⁹

But then the waters get muddied. In his letter, Mann insisted that he was not so much troubled about rank as he was about DeGrasse's management of the hospital, and that he, Mann, had an obligation to

"take care of medical supplies, especially spirituous liquors and to protect the hospital fund from misuse." Basically, Mann was accusing DeGrasse, just as Marcy did later, of misappropriating liquor. The officer who supported Mann's claim agreed that DeGrasse had "abused his privileges" and "committed misdemeanors," and concluded that charges should be preferred against him.

Interestingly enough, in this episode James Beecher stood up for DeGrasse. He did so, however, not so much because he believed in or cared about the young black surgeon but because he was stung by the accusation of intemperance in his regiment. There was not one instance," he maintained, "brought to my notice of an intoxicated officer and but one, of an intoxicated man, a thing which can probably be said of no other regiment, certainly in the Dept." DeGrasse, he concluded, was "dispensing hospital liquor to nurses and stretcher corps when on extra duty" in accordance with governmental regulations. Beecher was so perturbed that he threatened Mann with court-martial.¹⁰

Here's one way of connecting the two incidents. Henry Marcy joined the regiment as head surgeon in November 1863, right in the middle of the Mann-Beecher charges and countercharges. He might have worried that Beecher would prefer DeGrasse to him, and concluded that persuasive accusations of misappropriation of liquor and drunkenness were charges that might sway Beecher's opinion. Marcy must have been aware of Beecher's past. In the late 1850s, while serving as a missionary abroad, Beecher discovered that his wife was an alcoholic. The couple returned home, his wife was institutionalized, and Beecher made officer in a New York regiment where one of his brothers served as chaplain. He fell in love with another woman and was guilt ridden. Fearing that he was going mad and would be court-martialed, the Beecher family obtained an honorable discharge for him and placed him in a sanatorium. After his wife died, Beecher reentered the army as commander of the Thirty-fifth, courted the woman he loved throughout 1864, and married her a year later.¹¹

Here are the two possibilities I'm left with. A black army surgeon addicted to alcohol and unable to perform his duties. Or an unstable commanding officer with a history of alcoholism in his family and at-

tracted to a woman not his wife, coupled with a white doctor threatened by a competent black doctor. If the latter, the trial raises larger questions: When would a black man's authority ever be accepted? When would his word ever be taken over that of a white? When would blacks' capacity for citizenship ever be acknowledged?

DeGrasse concluded his statement with a defense. "My character as a gentleman and my upright deportment," he wrote, "have never been questioned by officers or men until these, I think, unfounded charges were preferred." To this he added a plea: "My honor and my reputation are at stake, not only here in the army, but at home and wherever I am known." He was found guilty of all charges and cashiered. Details of his life thereafter are murky. He died in Boston in November 1868.

Beecher moved his family to upstate New York. Increasingly "queer" in behavior, he eventually went mad and wandered from one insane asylum to another. In 1886, he ended his life by putting a bullet through his mouth.¹²

Henry Highland Garnet

DeGrasse's court-martial pitted black man against white, but within the black community tensions flared among black men. Perhaps James McCune Smith alone could have made his former schoolmates realize the folly of internal dissension at a time when unity against the real enemy—white racism—was essential. But he was slowly dying.

For years, Smith had suffered from an enlarged heart and what he called an "overworked nervous system." In the early 1860s, his health deteriorated rapidly; death came in November 1865. The *Weekly Anglo-African* published an obituary that was long but restrained in tone, as if any expression of sorrow would open an outpouring of uncontrollable grief. It stuck to an enumeration of facts: Smith's illustrious career at the African Free School; early apprenticeship to a blacksmith; later private education; medical school in Glasgow; position as doctor of the Colored Orphan Asylum; participation in the antislavery movement; affiliation with the Episcopal Church. Only when he reached the moment of death did the writer let himself go:

He will be greatly missed, not alone in the line of his profession, and by his immediate family connection, but as a public man; and his death is as well lamented by them as by his family and relatives. A large circle of friends, with weeping hearts, attended his funeral, among whom were ten clergymen of different denominations, and most of whom followed him to his quiet resting place.¹³

Smith had been too ill to attend the National Convention of Colored Citizens held in Syracuse in the fall of 1864. Henry Highland Garnet had called for the convention in order to figure out how best "to promote the freedom, progress, elevation, and perfect enfranchisement, of the entire colored people of the United States." Among those in attendance were old-timers Frederick Douglass, George Downing, J. W. C. Pennington, and Robert Hamilton, joined by men of the younger generation like Peter Guignon's brother-in-law, Peter W. Ray. If Garnet expected unity in a time of crisis, he was sadly disappointed. From the beginning, controversy dogged him inside and outside the convention hall. Aired on the convention podium and in newspaper columns, the disagreements were public and acrimonious.

On the city streets, delegates had to contend with the hostility of the good citizens of Syracuse. Douglass reported that he had been confronted by a group of men who demanded to know "Where are the d—d niggers going?" Worse still, a group of Irish rowdies accosted Garnet and threw him to the ground. They took his wooden leg, stole his silver-plated cane, and forced him to crawl through the mud.¹⁴ Horrific delegates took up a collection and raised forty dollars to replace Garnet's cane.

Amity between Garnet and his co-conventioners ended there, however. Garnet was unhappy that Douglass had been elected president of the convention even though he, Garnet, had been the one to call for it. Still more humiliating were the suspicions voiced over his involvement with the African Civilization Society. Garnet complained that even "at this late day in his career . . . there had been a strong disposition to throw him on the shelf, on account of his connection with the African Civilization Society." George Downing pressed the attacks. He

like Arthur and Lewis Tappan who had fled across the river to Brooklyn Heights after the New York riots in 1834 to continue their antislavery agitation.

But the greatest rabble-rouser of all was Henry Ward Beecher, who had moved to Brooklyn in 1847 to become minister of the Congregationalist Plymouth Church. Beecher's politics were consistently radical and his church was virtually synonymous with abolition, attracting Brooklyn worshippers but also churchgoers from Manhattan who crossed the East River on "Beecher's ferry" on Sundays. An eloquent speaker, Beecher electrified his audiences with his radical oratory as he condemned "Slave Power," called for immediate emancipation, and backed disunion as a last resort. As a Lincoln man, he prevailed on the presidential candidate to visit his church. He later gave sermons celebrating Lincoln's election, welcoming the advent of civil war, and calling for the admission of black soldiers into the Union army.¹⁹ Of all the events held at Plymouth Church, the most notorious were Beecher's slave auctions. As a stop on the Underground Railroad, the church sheltered many fugitive slaves. In the 1850s, Beecher hit on the device of raising money to buy freedom for slaves by holding mock auctions at the church. In response, white racists threatened to "clean out the damned abolition nest at Plymouth Church."²⁰

So racial animosity in Brooklyn was the norm, not the exception, and the tobacco factory riot of 1862 inevitably created a ripple effect. The *Brooklyn Daily Times* reported that a few days after the violence two black women walking on Court Street were accosted by two young and "partially intoxicated" Irishmen who abused them "using violent and indecent language." They were promptly arrested. Rumors also spread that a "large body of Irishmen" were planning an attack on Weeksville to "clean the niggers out." Still "smarting under a suspicion of having been caught napping" during the riot, the police came out in full force to protect Weeksville.²¹ Nothing untoward occurred.

A year later, in their coverage of the draft riots the New York newspapers intimated that many black New Yorkers sought safety in Brooklyn. It's certainly true that a number did flee across the East River, but I'm not sure how much of a safe haven Brooklyn proved to be. The

river was not exactly an impenetrable border. Trouble-minded Brooklynites crossed to New York to take part in the rioting while looters from New York fled to Brooklyn with the merchandise they had stolen from Brooks Brothers and other stores. In Brooklyn itself, the absence of the police, who were in New York helping to quell the riot, was an open invitation to violence. An angry crowd of some two hundred people set fire to two grain elevators in the Atlantic Avenue basin. Mobs assaulted black individuals and homes in nearby East Warren Street and a little farther away around Prospect Street. Fearing for their lives, some blacks sought shelter in police precincts. Others took refuge in Weeksville. When rumors spread that the area was about to be attacked, members of the community organized for armed resistance. The mob never materialized, but when rumors still persisted the next day, frightened Weeksville residents packed up their belongings and left. The safest place of all was undoubtedly Williamsburgh, where members of a German society protected hundreds of blacks in the Turn Verein Hall.²²

The Abortion Case

At the exact same moment of the tobacco factory riots, Peter Guignon and Peter Ray were being subjected to another form of racial violence, which came, not from the lowly Irish, but from elite whites, and not as a physical assault but, as in John DeGrasse's case, as an attack on their honor as professional men.

When I returned to reread the page of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* where I had found the first reference to the tobacco factory riot, my eyes unexpectedly caught the name of Dr. Peter W. Ray. The headline of the article read: "The Alleged Abortion Case in the Eastern District." Peter Guignon's brother-in-law was being charged with the death of a patient as a result of a botched abortion! Finding the article was once again dumb luck. But I wondered whether the presence of the two news items on the same page was just coincidence or whether there was a link between them.

The *Eagle*, *Brooklyn Daily Times*, *Brooklyn News*, and to a more lim-

ited extent the *New York Tribune* covered the case in all its gory detail. According to their reports, Ray had a patient named Mary Burns who gave the following statement as she lay bleeding to death:

I do not know my age; my child was born on Monday; Dr. Ray attended me, and some days previous to the birth of the child performed an operation on me with an instrument; I cannot describe the instrument because the Doctor did not let me see it; I paid him four dollars for this operation, and he did it for the purpose of effecting an abortion; he never produced an abortion on me before; I went to him without being directed by any third party; Dr. Ray has called on me since he performed the operation; he furnished me with medicine for the purpose of producing an abortion previous to the operation; I took six bottles at six and sixpence per bottle, but it did not have the desired effect; the operation was performed in Dr. Ray's office; the colored Doctor is the one I mean, and he lives in South 2d street, corner of Eleventh. The child is now in the out-house where I threw it; I know that I am in a dangerous condition, and have no hope of getting well, and knowing this, the statements I now make are correct.²³

Burns died a few days later. In confirmation of part of her story, an empty bottle was found in her room labeled "Put up by Dr. P. W. Ray for Mary Burns; June 18; to be taken three times a day; price six and sixpence." Night scavengers employed by the city discovered the infant's body in the rear of the South Third Street house where Burns lived as a servant. Coroner Murphy (note the Irish last name) decided to hold an inquest into the death of Mary and her baby. The proceedings were eerily similar to DeGrasse's court-martial.

Ray steadfastly maintained that he could not remember any patient by the name of Mary Burns; reading through the lines, it's evident that she was an unmarried white woman of Irish or maybe Scottish extraction, whom the newspapers guessed to be about forty years old. In an ironic twist on invisibility, it was now the black doctor who could

not distinguish between the many white female patients with whom he came into contact. For reasons not stated, Ray was not allowed to testify in his own defense. So what we have is the testimony of six men—four white doctors, Cornelius Schapps, L. M. Palmer, O. H. Smith, and Nelson L. North, and two colored men, Peter Guignon and his clerk, George E. Francis. Their accounts are confusing, not to say contradictory, as were the circumstances surrounding the case.

Cornelius Schapps was the first witness. He testified that he had performed the postmortem exam, and found the body to be that of a healthy woman who had hemorrhaged to death after delivering a child. In his opinion, the woman's excessive flow of blood was a result of premature labor having been provoked by "mechanical means"—not drugs—in a futile attempt to save the mother's life. According to his terminology, this constituted an abortion. The other three doctors offered a different version of events, testifying that they saw no evidence of an abortion having been performed either by mechanical means or by drugs. Hence, they concluded, Mary Burns had bled to death as a result of a miscarriage. Dr. Palmer further stated that he had attended the deceased woman several times for uterine hemorrhage and had prescribed medications, suggesting the possibility of a chronic condition. Dr. Smith gave hearsay testimony that a servant girl employed in the same family had told him Mary Burns had had a miscarriage. But all three doctors acknowledged that they could not tell whether an abortion had been performed or not. "I had no means whatever of knowing the cause," Dr. Smith admitted; "a skilled man could produce an abortion without leaving any scars and a knife might have been introduced several times. . . . I do not know that an abortion produced by drugs could be detected by examining the uterus; indeed, I do not know any drugs in the world that will produce miscarriage with any celerity."²⁴

Was Ray just such a skilled man? He specialized in obstetrics and had taken a course at Castleton Medical College where training included the use of "instruments, apparatus, and appliances." It's hard to know whether Dr. Smith's comment was a statement of fact or an insinuation.

But there was more at issue than an abortionist's knife. In her deathbed testimony Mary Burns maintained that Ray had first given

her medication to induce an abortion and, only when that failed, resorted to mechanical means. Here's where Peter Guignon's and George Francis's testimonies became relevant.

Taking the stand, Peter began by describing his work habits. As a pharmacist, he himself did not prescribe drugs, leaving that task to medical doctors; his job was simply to compound them. After filling prescriptions, he placed them in a "wire" but did not necessarily copy all of them into his book. Peter then moved on to the case at hand. He did not remember Mary Burns herself but recalled the circumstances. While standing in front of the pharmacy door smoking a cigar, a female patient had come up with a prescription in his brother-in-law's handwriting, saying that "her month was up, she hadn't any money." Peter had called his clerk, George Francis, to fill the prescription and trusted her to pay later. He concluded by saying he had never known Ray to perform an abortion. Francis concurred with Peter on almost every point—that Ray had written the prescription and that he, Francis, had filled it—but then he added: "I have sometimes put up prescriptions containing 'ergot' for Dr. Ray." Ergot, the newspaper columnist informed his readers, was "a medical substance which tends to produce abortions."

The prescription was produced. Written out to Mary Burns, it was indeed in Ray's handwriting and read as follows. "Tinct. Cinchona, comp. 1 oz.; Tinct. Gentian, comp. 1 oz.; Tinct. Cardamum, comp. 1 dr; teaspoonful 3 times a day." The doctors agreed that this was simply a tonic, "not harmful in nature."²⁵

Matters did not stop there, however. First, Dr. Schapps came forward to declare that he could detect no odor of gentian in the bottle, immediately raising the question of whether the compound it contained had been the same as the one prescribed. Given that there was not enough liquid in the bottle for a chemical analysis, it was impossible to know. The *Tribune* came right out and recklessly asserted that the content of the bottle was different from that of the prescription. Moreover, when the coroner seized Peter Guignon's prescription book as evidence, it turned out that several pages had been torn out. Following the *Tribune's* lead, the *Eagle* opined that these pages "probably contained the prescription that was really furnished."²⁶ And Francis's testimony that

sometimes Ray compounded abortifacients undoubtedly hung heavily in the air. All these facts cast both Guignon and Ray in a shady light.

Coroner Murphy had already made up his mind. He wasn't interested in going after Peter Guignon, who after all was a mere untrained pharmacist, but sought to throw the full weight of opinion and prejudice against Ray. Here's how the newspapers reported the end of the inquest:

The coroner decided that the testimony of Dr. Ray was not admissible. Coroner Murphy said that he had no more evidence to be produced. Under the testimony, which they had heard, he thought the Jury would be justified in holding him to await the action of the Grand Jury. The deposition of the woman had been substantiated in two points. She had spoken of medicine, and the empty bottle was found in her room. She had spoken of her child, and its dead body was found in the vault. At the time of the deposition she was perfectly calm and reasonable.²⁷

The jury deliberated for twenty minutes and came back with the following verdict: "That the said Mary Burns came to her death by hemorrhage caused by an abortion produced by Dr. P. G. Ray [*sic*]." When Ray was asked whether he had anything to say, he responded, "I am not guilty of the charges preferred against me. I do not know that I have ever seen the deceased." Whereupon he was taken to jail, after which he posted bail in the amount of six thousand dollars.²⁸

Now it's our turn to ask questions. How did the jury reach such a verdict? There was no proof of a mechanical or drug-induced abortion or of what was in the empty bottle. Yet the jury must have taken this testimony as true fact. But much of it—abortion by mechanical means, a compounded prescription containing ergot—was mere insinuation. Nevertheless, there are unresolved questions. Had Peter written the prescription down in his book? If so, was it on one of the torn-out pages? Who had torn them out? Had someone tampered with the prescription bottle? Had the two Peters been framed?

The *Eagle* readily acknowledged that Ray was a "well qualified physician" with an "excellent reputation in his section of the city . . . ranking among the most skillful medical and surgical practitioners."²⁹ Yet the legal system chose to believe the word of a white servant girl, who admitted that she had never seen the abortion instrument, over that of a well-qualified and respected black doctor whose testimony was deemed inadmissible. Had he done so, Ray would probably have stated that Mary Burns was one of the many unmemorable young women for whom he had prescribed a tonic to ease the pain of miscarriage. Why, then, a guilty verdict in twenty minutes? Why were competent black doctors like Peter Ray and John DeGrasse so suspect?

The Kings County Medical Society

Searching for more clues, I returned to the August 5 issue of the *Brooklyn Eagle*. What I found was yet another article on the tobacco factory riots printed on the front page in the far left-hand column. Titled "The Anti-Negro Riots," it was indeed about that incident, but the second paragraph made a rather strange detour that explicitly linked Peter Williams Ray's professional travails to larger social concerns.

Making due allowance for the condition of the two classes, there is but little difference in the quarrel between the colored factory laborers of South Brooklyn and the white laborers that they compete with, and that which took place between the doctors of the Kings County Medical Society, and a colored medical practitioner, a few days ago. The Society refused admission to the colored doctor because of his color. They do not want to associate with him. So far as they can they disqualify him from practice. Had the Kings County Medical Society been composed of uneducated laborers, they would have hustled Dr. Ray into the street for venturing to claim fellowship with him. With a clearer sense of the duty of every man to obey the law, they adopt a ridiculous sub-

terfuge, and disqualify the doctor. Their mode of action was different, and after all, scarcely entitled to more respect; but the feeling which actuated them is the same.

This would have been strong stuff from any newspaper, but it was particularly so coming from the *Eagle*, which was well known for its anti-black sentiments.

Indeed, the very next paragraph of the article went on to claim that "the never-varying edict of God" had set an insurmountable barrier between blacks and whites, and prophesied that "degradation" and "annihilation" would attend both races if any attempts were made to bridge it. Yet the *Eagle* opined that racism in the professional classes was no different, was just as insidious and ugly, as among the rabble. The only real distinction was the elite's hypocrisy, their pretense of obeying the law and resorting to "ridiculous subterfuge" to cover it up.³⁰ Although the violence involved in this subterfuge was not physical, it was no less hurtful to both Ray and Guignon (as it was to John DeGrasse). They were personal attacks on their honor, their integrity, their manhood. And they also constituted a policing of professional boundaries, a determined refusal to accept black men as professional equals out of fear that this might lead to other forms of social and intellectual equality.

Brooklyn's medical doctors were not prepared to accept black physicians as equals any more than white workers were prepared to allow blacks access to decent jobs in the Watson and Lorillard tobacco factories. Earlier in the summer of 1862, Ray had applied for membership in the Kings County Medical Society. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the New York state legislature had become increasingly worried about the medical profession's inability to regulate itself and get rid of "quacks, irregulars, and charlatans" practicing without a degree or a license. It passed legislation mandating the creation of county medical societies and compelling all practitioners to become members. In turn, the societies would license each applicant and grant a diploma.³¹ Failure to join meant forfeiture of license. So Ray was only following the law when he applied to the Kings County Medical Society.

Ray's candidacy, according to the *Brooklyn News*, proceeded

Philip White in Brooklyn

CIRCA 1875 

Philip White in Brooklyn: Circa 1875

Elizabeth might have gone to live with the Lyons family in Seneca Village right after her mother's death when the still struggling Peter felt unable to care for her. Or Peter and Cornelia might have decided to leave Elizabeth in Manhattan when they moved to Brooklyn in the mid-1850s. If so, she would have been living on Vandewater Street right down the block from her future husband. Whatever the case, Elizabeth had ample opportunity to meet Philip, given the many different interests that brought him together with her father and uncle on a regular basis—St. Philip's, meetings of the Society for the Promotion of Education Among Colored Children, agitation on behalf of black male suffrage.

Hoping that city maps might provide me with clues, I went to consult one and found my answer. It was the building of the Brooklyn Bridge. When we think of the bridge, we tend to focus on the technological skill required for its construction. We stand in awe of the heroic efforts and tragic deaths of its two chief engineers, John Roebling, who died from an infection developed after an accident crushed his foot, and his son Washington, who suffered a crippling attack of "caisson disease" that left him paralyzed and unable to leave his room. We applaud its completion and the grand inaugural ceremony held in 1883.

Yet the process of building the bridge was long and tedious. Although the state legislature first considered a proposal for a bridge over the East River in 1857, it was not until 1866 that a bill was approved. Construction became imperative after the river froze over during the harsh winter of 1867, forcing suspension of ferry services; approximately five thousand people walked over the ice to get to the other side. The first order of business was to build the unsuspended approaches and anchorages leading up to the bridge's span. On the Manhattan side, this required clearing six blocks between Chatham and Water and Frankfort and Duane Streets. According to a contemporary observer, iron and masonry ascended some 1,560 feet "from Chatham Street, over North William and William Streets, over Rose and Vandewater Streets, over Cliff and Pearl to Cherry Street."¹ Philip's drugstore on the corner of Frankfort and Gold was saved, but his home on Vandewater Street was demolished.

So it was urban renewal that forced the newlyweds to move. Per-

ACCORDING TO THE CITY directories, Philip White moved his home from Lower Manhattan to Brooklyn in 1870, but maintained his pharmacy in its same location until his death in 1891. The date puzzled me. Why hadn't my great-grandfather left in the aftermath of the draft riots, which had traumatized so many in his community? Did he believe that the protection of his neighbors and the kindness of local businessmen during the riots meant that his safety was assured for years to come and that he could continue building up his drugstore business without worrying?

If Philip hadn't moved in 1863, why not in 1867, the year he married Elizabeth Guignon? Did he not want to provide a new home for his new bride? As with Peter, I know nothing about their courtship. In 1867, Philip was a middle-aged man of forty-four and Elizabeth a young woman of twenty-five. Why did Philip wait so long to marry? Did he delay starting a family out of professional ambition? Why did Elizabeth marry a man almost twenty years her senior? Was theirs a love match? How did it come about?

In one of his reminiscences, Harry Albro Williamson remembered his grandparents' story of how Elizabeth, as a small child, came to visit for two weeks but stayed for twelve years. The census tells us that in 1850 Elizabeth was living with her father, stepmother, and their new baby on Greenwich Avenue. I'm not sure whether that twelve-year period would have been before or after that, or whether it was really that long.

haps it was just as well, since the Swamp was fast deteriorating. Many of those who saw their property destroyed were local tradesmen like Philip—butchers, grocers, and the like. But some were notable New Yorkers—among them the landlord William Astor, John Jacob's son, and the Small brothers, who were leather tanners. Some buildings had been important sites, such as George Washington's first executive mansion, at 1 Cherry Street. Nevertheless, like most port areas, Manhattan's anchorage was seedy, housing disreputable hotels and saloons where prostitution and gambling were common activities. Building the bridge offered the opportunity, as one commentator put it, of "ridding the area of its infamous associations."²

Unlike the Rays and the Guignons, Philip and Elizabeth did not settle in Williamsburgh but moved into a house at 358 Pearl Street, between Myrtle and Willoughby Streets, in a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood close to the downtown area. I'm guessing that the ever independent and practical Philip felt no need to live near his relatives but chose this location primarily for business reasons. In the 1870s Brooklyn's industry, manufacture, and commerce continued to expand at a rapid rate. Shipyards lined the East River, as did warehouses that stored anything from ice, flour, and tobacco to coal and lumber. Farther inland there were oil works, flint and glass manufactures, and white lead works. To the east, Brooklyn Heights sat on a bluff overlooking the river; even then it was the city's most prestigious address and home to prosperous merchants like the shipping magnate A. A. Low. Philip's neighborhood was located somewhat to the south in today's Borough Hall area. He was in fact quite close to City Hall, once Brooklyn's architectural jewel but by the time of the Civil War overshadowed by the massive Kings County Court House erected to the rear.³ Maps and censuses of the period indicate that frame houses lined Philip's block and, to an even greater degree than Peter's Williamsburgh neighborhood, were inhabited by a mixed population of Germans, Irish, Italians, and even Cubans.

Just as important for Philip, Pearl Street was within a short distance of the ferries. Before the bridge was finished, he was one of the 250,000 to 300,000 daily commuters who depended on the city's ferry system. Philip needed only to walk a few blocks west from his home to

Main Street and, paying his fare of two cents, catch the Catherine Slip ferry that would deposit him on the Manhattan side not far from his drugstore. After the bridge was built, the commute became even easier.

Philip was an undisputed leader of New York and Brooklyn's black elite. He was professionally successful and financially secure. He was a pillar of St. Philip's and a founder of many of the community's new institutions. His family stood at the center of elite social life.

Domestic Life

Even if the building of the Brooklyn Bridge had not forced the newlyweds to move, their growing family would have. Philip and Elizabeth had three daughters, born in rapid succession: Ellie Augusta in 1868, my grandmother Cornelia Steele in 1869, and Katherine Maria in 1870 (a fourth daughter died in infancy in 1873). As with Peter, I was told virtually nothing about Philip or his family. My oldest sister recalled that many years ago she asked our aunt Dorothy what her mother was like and whether she had a photograph of her. Dorothy apparently paused, walked into her bedroom, and came out with a photograph that she thrust in my sister's hand. It was a photograph, not of Cornelia, but of her tombstone. Years later, the bitterness the daughter felt toward her mother had not subsided. Cornelia's life story was buried with her in her grave and Dorothy was not about to dig it up.

I remembered the scrapbook page that had started me on my quest: Philip's obituary and an assortment of poems pasted next to it. I pulled the page from my files. One poem in particular caught my eye:

REFERENCES

Suppose the Lord should say to me, when I get over there:

"Your references I want to see, I hope I'll find them fair.

Where have you lived and worked and played? Give me the names of those you've known.

Who'll tell the record you have made?" I'd mention those I call my own.

I should not give familiar names nor those of persons great,

doctor, Leonard Gordon, who was also the company's chemist. Interested in more than just their physical health, Gordon opened a night school for the 250 children in the company, a sewing school for young women, and a library for all who wished to further their education. The Lorillards' book collection became the foundation of today's Jersey City Public Library.

PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS:

PHILIP WHITE, PETER GUIGNON

I wondered how the pharmacists in my family had fared in business after the Civil War. Uncertain how to proceed, I turned back to re-read each man's obituary. Emphasizing Peter Guignon's moral virtues, Crummell had absolutely nothing to say about his old friend's work as a pharmacist. White's obituary offered only the vaguest of statements: "Dr. White was also a member of various societies connected with his profession." Peter W. Ray's obituary, however, did note that he had been a member of the Kings County Pharmaceutical Society founded in 1877 (as well as its much later teaching arm, the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy). I decided to investigate.

I spent many hours calling historians of American pharmacy around the country, none of whom were much help. Finally, after warning me that I would probably come up empty-handed, one suggested that I browse through the *Druggists' Reference Register*, an annual credit rating publication of pharmacists, and the monthly *Druggists' Circular and Chemical Gazette*, one of the field's most important trade magazines, published in New York but with a national reach. The front section of each issue, he informed me, contained scientific articles on the practice of pharmacy, but the back portion had news items about the country's many pharmaceutical associations as well as several pages of advertisements.

On a hot summer day, I trudged up to the New York Academy of Medicine on Fifth Avenue, a few blocks north of Mount Sinai hospital. The reading room was dim, musty, and exceedingly hot. A sign alarmingly informed visitors that the library would close once the tem-

perature reached ninety-nine degrees (air conditioning has since been installed and the thermostat seems fixed at a chilly sixty-nine degrees). The stack attendant brought me twenty years' worth of large folios of the *Druggists' Circular*, each about the size of today's *New York Times*, bound in volumes about two inches thick. They were dusty and dirty and looked as if they hadn't been touched in more than a hundred years.

But my diligence was rewarded. I never came across Peter W. Ray's name, but I did find Peter Guignon's in several reports of meetings of the Kings County Pharmaceutical Society. So he too had been a member of this association, although I don't know when he was admitted. As stated in its constitution, the society's goals were networking, development of pharmaceutical knowledge, regulation and enforcement of the practice of pharmacy, and honesty in business. The society was active. Members met monthly to conduct business and listen to erudite papers on different pharmaceutical topics. Most notably, in its early years the society lobbied successfully for the passage of a countywide pharmacy law that would raise the occupation's standards "from a mere trade to that of a profession."²⁵ Those seeking to become practitioners would be required to graduate from a college of pharmacy (hence the eventual founding of the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy) or pass an exam administered by the County Board of Pharmacy.

My efforts to find information about Philip's professional affiliations were less systematic, and my discoveries totally serendipitous. I had traveled to the Wisconsin Historical Society seeking definite proof that Philip had attended and graduated from the College of Pharmacy of the City of New York. I had found what I was looking for in the March 1844 minutes of the Board of Trustees. But the April and May minutes informed me that while two members of Philip's class had been proposed and accepted for membership in the college a mere month after graduation, my great-grandfather had not. I assumed that it was case closed, and idly started reading through the printed reports of the college's Alumni Association stacked chronologically in a folder. The association, it appears, was founded in 1871 with only the vaguest of goals in mind: "the advancement of the interests of the College and of the Profession generally and to bring its Graduates into closer fellowship with each other." This sounded like a fancy way of saying "network-

tain's foot,
 terminated,
 pierced my heart,

its shoulders,
 's rays
 every road.

Epilogue

COMMEMORATIONS

ON A BALMY JUNE DAY several years ago, I boarded the J train to Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn. Armed with a map provided by the front office, I went searching for the graves of my forebears and their friends. The White family plot lay on flat land near a broad path surrounded by tall leafy trees. According to the printout, Philip purchased the plot in 1850, undoubtedly in anticipation of his mother's impending death in 1853. Buried next to her were her children: Sarah Maria, Mary Thompson and her family, and Philip and his family. Others lay close by: the Hewlett/Lyons/Williamsons—Elizabeth, Albro, Mary Joseph, Maritcha, Harry Albro, but not Rebecca—as well as Crummell, Charles Ray, James McCune Smith, and their loved ones. Crossing the path and walking up a hill, I found the land that St. Philip's had bought for its parishioners in the late 1850s. The Ray family plot, which included Peter Guignon, was notable for a tall obelisk that jutted skyward. Peter Williams was buried nearby in an imposing mausoleum.

In the waning years of the nineteenth century, New York's black elite reunited in this burial ground. Their graves were physical reminders of their lives and commemorations of their deaths. More than the passing of individuals, however, they constituted the passing of an entire community and indeed of an era. Reading through documents of this end-of-century period, I felt a tremendous sense of nostalgia sweep over the still-living. In myriad ways, they were seeking to make the past come alive by celebrating the achievements of those not yet gone and commemorating the struggles and triumphs of the dead as a legacy for future generations.

As if fearful of forgetting, the black elite cultivated the past with great determination. An 1889 article in the *New York Age* praised the revival of old customs—the return of the spinning wheel, the reproduction of Grandmother's home cures, the restoration of quaint tapestries, rugs, and furniture. Families and community members paid homage

the history of Africans in America. Writing from Baltimore, Bishop Harvey Johnson informed readers of the *Freeman* of his city's creation of a "race Historical Society" where "race relics and works" would be kept for reference and sale. New York's black elite was keenly aware of how many relics had already been lost. In his 1865 sketch of Garnet's life, James McCune Smith had lamented that the mayhem of the draft riots, "among other disasters, has caused the destruction of nearly all the printed minutes of conventions—our Alexandrine library—from which some of the noblest pages in the history of our people could have been selected."²

Undaunted, black Americans proceeded to record their history. The *Globe* gave extensive coverage to George Washington Williams's magisterial *History of the Negro Race in America* published in 1883. In his review in the *Age*, my grandfather Jerome B. Peterson emphasized the book's vast sweep. Beginning with early African civilizations, Williams's history continued to the present, and included biographical sketches of contemporary eminent black men and women. As editors of the *Age*, Peterson and Fortune repeatedly advertised the sale of "race literature, old and new"; in addition to Williams's volume, these included Frederick Douglass's *Life and Times*, Garland Penn's *The Afro American Press and Its Editors*, Crummell's *Africa and America*, Booker T. Washington's *Future of the Negro Race*. Alongside book titles, Peterson and Fortune also listed paintings of deceased activists; one of the most popular was a life-size bust portrait of Douglass.³

The black elite commemorated in forms other than the printed word. This meant holding ceremonies to honor past institutions and events: annual celebrations of the founding of the African Society for Mutual Relief; commemorations of Emancipation Day and the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment; observances for past abolitionists and their achievements. Whites who had helped in the cause were not forgotten. Portraits for sale of John Brown and Harriet Beecher Stowe hung next to Frederick Douglass. When Henry Ward Beecher died in 1887, black Brooklynites thronged to a memorial service at the Bridge Street A.M.E. Church. Philip was chairman of the event and, seemingly forgetful of his former indifference to the antislavery cause, commemorated Beecher with stirring words. "We have met to mourn the



George Downing and family
(Museum of African-American History, Boston)

to those still alive. Every March, John Peterson's former students—and there were many—held a birthday dinner in his honor. They also sought to give the dead a place among the living. In 1890, Albro and Mary Joseph Lyons celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, where they made sure to honor the memory of their best man, James McCune Smith, by placing his portrait in a conspicuous place for all to see.¹ An undated photograph of the Downing family depicts George Downing, now the patriarch of the family, seated in a parlor surrounded by three female family members. Every inch of the room, the walls, the tables, is taken up with portraits of those loved ones no longer—and yet still—with them.

Indeed, members of the black elite knew that their greatest responsibility was to preserve the memory of events long since over and people long since dead. They looked back on the nineteenth century from a broad historical perspective, eager to compile, analyze, and record

loss of one of the great men of the world," he declaimed. "The older people here will remember that when Mr. Beecher presented himself to the people of Brooklyn there was only one thing in the minds of the American people, and that was slavery. The man who took the highest ground on that question was Henry Ward Beecher."⁴

Aware of the evanescence of rituals as well of the word, whether spoken or printed, the black elite turned to more durable forms of commemoration. Some efforts were successful, others not. George Downing's suggestion to erect a monument in memory of John Brown came to naught. Honoring President Grant, who died in 1885, was another matter. Black New Yorkers gathered for a memorial service. T. McCants Stewart delivered a long oration in which he rehearsed the late president's life from his humble beginnings to his generalship and presidency, comparing "our Great Commander" to the biblical David, Oliver Cromwell, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and George Washington. But the black elite also participated in a more permanent memorial to the president. Grant had asked to be buried in New York, and the city's white elite took on the challenge of erecting a "grand memorial temple" in his honor patterned after Hadrian's tomb. A Grant Monument Committee was formed, and black Brooklynite Richard Greener was made secretary. Greener raised substantial funds among the black community and, after twelve years of building, Grant's tomb was opened in 1897.⁵

It was, however, the death of beloved friends and family members that affected the black elite most profoundly. Some occurred close to home, others in faraway places. The venerable patriarch Thomas Downing died shortly after James McCune Smith in the city where he had made his fame and fortune. In a moving tribute written some twenty years later, George Downing recalled how his father had been honored by a large funeral procession, which "spoke of the universal esteem in which he was held." It was composed, Downing continued, of "fellow-citizens from all classes . . . with humility upon their countenances, to pay respect to the generosity, virtue and general goodness that was true of him whose death they mourned, for he had a kind heart for all." Philip Bell died on the other side of the continent, in San Francisco, where he had settled in 1857 and founded his own newspaper, the *Elevator*. Even in the 1860s, Bell seemed nostalgic for the old days and filled

his newspaper with articles about the antislavery struggles of yore. Despite the distance and the lapse of time, when Bell fell sick in 1888 and found himself in dire need of money, the African Society for Mutual Relief answered his call and took up a subscription for him. He died the following year.⁶

The farthest away, Henry Highland Garnet, found death in distant Liberia. Forgetting past political differences, the black elite hoped to erect a bronze statue in his honor and got the parks commissioners' agreement to place it in Central Park. But Garnet was not Grant, and funding lagged. An exasperated reader wrote to the *Freeman* angrily complaining that "the race is devoid of public spirit. Education," he continued, "should teach us to perpetuate in brass or bronze the memory of those men, who, by their noble achievements, have done much towards liberalizing public opinion." "We must learn to honor our own," he concluded, "if we desire to leave a legacy in the form of worthy examples to future generations" and encourage others to "be more disposed to honor us than they are at present."⁷

The writer's judgments were perhaps somewhat harsh. It takes a lot of money to perpetuate in brass or bronze. The black elite did what it could. Newspaper obituaries commemorated the many who died in rapid succession throughout the 1880s. Although simply words on a page, they were comprehensive, wedding historical significance to character sketch. Peter Ray was remembered for his improbable rise from errand boy to general superintendent of the Jersey City Lorillard tobacco factory. Peter Vogelsang's obituary extolled his service with the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts and his elevation to the rank of lieutenant at war's end. Whenever possible, commemoration went beyond the short obituary. After Charles Ray's death, his daughters published a loving tribute to their father, *Sketch of the Life of Rev. Charles B. Ray*, in which they detailed his antislavery activity, work with the New York Vigilance Committee and the Underground Railroad, and, in conclusion, provided moving testimonies from friends; a copy of it is preserved in the manuscript room at the Schomburg Center. John Peterson was memorialized in print as "a prince among his people" and his long service to New York's black community duly noted. Alexander Crummell officiated at an elaborate memorial service held in his honor at St. Philip's.

Tributes to John Peterson had in fact started well before his death in the annual dinners celebrating his birthday, and continued for many years thereafter. As if material objects would ensure that he would not be forgotten, Peterson directed in his will that his most prized possessions be distributed to various members of the black community. He bequeathed Philip his copy of the American Encyclopedia.⁸

My great-great-grandfather was among those who died in the 1880s. Unlike the others, Peter had not participated extensively in public events and left his mark on the course of history. But Crummell seized the occasion of his death to recall the early days of the Mulberry Street School, and noted the deep and lasting impression Peter had made on all those he had come in contact with from his boyhood years until the moment of his death:

Without ostentation, without any prominent position, he possessed such peculiar mingled and superior qualities that every one will say: 'We ne'er shall look upon his like again.'

How deep was the impress of those qualities; how this true and singular character was prized, was evident at the funeral which took place at his old home. There, in that large assemblage of friends could be seen one and another and another, nay very many of his schoolmates, now gray-haired men and women, who had known and loved and played with him in the old school house in Mulberry street; and who sought the satisfaction of dropping a tear upon the bier of a dear friend.⁹

A decade younger than his father-in-law, Philip lived until 1891, when he died of phthisis, or what we now call tuberculosis. Although I knew how eminent he had become, I was astonished at the degree to which he was commemorated in print, ceremonies, and stone by both the black elite and the white community. The major Brooklyn newspapers all took note. Short obituary notices appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the *Standard*, and the *Daily Times*. The *New York Times* published an appreciative biographical sketch, while the *Brooklyn Citi-*

zen gave an elaborate account of Philip's funeral service and reprinted George Downing's eulogy in its entirety.

No newspaper, however, could outdo the *New York Age* in the length and heartfelt tributes it paid to my great-grandfather over the course of several months. On February 21, the paper published an account of Philip's life and death followed on February 28 by coverage of his funeral at his home and interment at Cypress Hills Cemetery, attended en masse by members of the black elite—among them the Downings, Albro Lyons, T. McCants Stewart, T. Thomas Fortune, Charles Dorsey—as well as members of the Brooklyn Board of Education. On March 7, the *Age* took out a supplement, in which it printed resolutions by the three institutions to which Philip had been especially devoted, St. Philip's, the New York and Newport Ugly Fishing Club, and the Brooklyn Board of Education; Alexander Crummell's funeral sermon; and a special tribute by Horace Dresser, a white member of the Board of Education. But that was not all. On March 21, the *Age* published resolutions taken by one of Brooklyn's most prominent black churches, the Concord Baptist Church of Christ, as well as an account of a commemorative ceremony held by teachers and students of Colored Public School 67. Still more memorial services were yet to come: on March 28, one at St. Philip's; on April 4, another at the Concord Baptist Church held under the auspices of the Brooklyn Literary Union and attended by Brooklyn's top officials, with Mayor Chapin presiding; and on April 11, yet another service organized by the Brooklyn Literary Union, this time exclusively for the black community. Finally, in a short piece in its May 11 issue, the *Age* took note of a tree-planting ceremony in Philip's honor at Colored Public School 67.¹⁰

Beyond print and ritual, Philip was commemorated in stone. The Brooklyn Board of Education named a school in his honor. St. Philip's placed a plaque on a wall in recognition of his service, one of the very few accorded to a layman.

As I read through these accounts, I was struck by several facts. One was the interracial nature of the tributes paid to Philip. Both black and white newspapers gave extensive coverage to his death. Both blacks and whites gathered together to mourn him at his funeral and then

at the Concord Baptist Church memorial service. And almost all of the newspaper accounts emphasized the two events that underscored Philip's successful negotiation of race relations: the saving of his property during the draft riots and his appointment to the Brooklyn Board of Education. For blacks and whites alike, his life stood as a singular model for the possibilities of racial cooperation.

I was also touched by the outpouring of admiration and respect extended to Philip by the black elite. However much they might have been dismayed by his early lack of progressive spirit, they now took full and appreciative measure of the man. Alexander Crummell put it most eloquently in his funeral oration, which he built around the concept of character. "We are here tonight," he proclaimed, "to manifest our respect for the character of our departed friend—Philip A. White." All the printed resolutions agreed on the three areas in which Philip had best exhibited his character. The St. Philip's tribute laid them out neatly. First was Philip's devotion to his church: "From early childhood to ripe manhood and through declining years, Dr. White was connected with our venerable parish. . . . To whatever position he was called he brought to it his best energy, his most lively interest, his most painstaking effort, and above all, the spirit of consecration to his work." Second was his business acumen: "In his business relation he was eminently successful. By close application, untiring industry and exact business methods, he built up a standing in business circles which brought him the respect and confidence which only such qualities beget." And third was his love of family: "In his home life he was an affectionate husband, and a devoted father; thoughtful always of those intrusted to his care."¹¹

I pulled out the scrapbook page that had started me on my quest. I now recognized that it was a perfect memorial in miniature. The obituary was a portrait of my great-grandfather's life, from poverty and adversity to prosperity and giving back to the community; one poem pasted on the page underscored Philip's commitment to education; another paid homage to St. Philip's mother church, Trinity; and a third praised his love of home life. But as I read more closely, I realized that no amount of spilled ink would ever reveal the full story of Philip's life. A fourth poem, "If Only We Understood," hinted at secrets Philip took with him to the grave. The second stanza goes as follows:

Ah! We judge each other harshly,
Knowing not life's hidden force;
Knowing not the fount of action
Is less turbid at its source;
Seeing not amid the evil
All the golden grains of good;
And we'd love each other better
If we only understood.¹²

As Toni Morrison noted, the "unwritten interior lives" of nineteenth-century black Americans have been buried with them.

As the decades passed, time buried even the public lives of nineteenth-century black New Yorkers. Peter's and Philip's contemporaries, and even members of the black elite born one or two generations later, had desperately tried to preserve their nineteenth-century history; among them were members of my family, Albro Lyons, his daughter Maritcha, and her nephew Harry Albro Williamson. Yet this history was all but forgotten by those who came of age in the twentieth century. Perhaps this new generation could not understand the past in the same ways as those who had lived it. Perhaps they saw only degradation, humiliation, and shame rather than the dignity of struggle and resistance, and so the trauma of remembering became too much to bear. Or maybe with the entry into a new century and the proclamation of a new modernity, they were determined to leave behind what they deemed old-fashioned. Or maybe it was the geographic dispersal from Lower Manhattan to Brooklyn to Harlem and beyond that contributed to the weakening of their will to remember. Within my own family, it might have been generational conflicts too great to bind the younger generation to the older.

But forgetting is not the same as erasing, destroying, obliterating. The past has survived, if only in the form of scraps. The archives in their many guises became a place for safe keeping, for storing memories of the past that were simply waiting to be brought back to light and life in the ripeness of time.

Notes

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CHAPTER ONE

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- CHAPTER ELEVEN
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