



Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840

By Gary B. Nash



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This book is the first to trace the good and bad fortunes, over more than a century, of the earliest large free black community in the United States. Gary Nash shows how, from colonial times through the Revolution and into the turbulent 1830s, blacks in the City of Brotherly Love struggled to shape a family life, gain occupational competence, organize churches, establish neighborhoods and social networks, advance cultural institutions, educate their children in schools, forge a political consciousness, and train black leaders who would help abolish slavery. These early generations of urban blacks--many of them newly emancipated--constructed a rich and varied community life.

Nash's account includes elements of both poignant triumph and profound tragedy. Keeping in focus both the internal life of the black community and race relations in Philadelphia generally, he portrays first the remarkable vibrancy of black institution-building, ordinary life, and relatively amicable race relations, and then rising racial antagonism. The promise of a racially harmonious society that took form in the postrevolutionary era, involving the integration into the white republic of African people brutalized under slavery, was ultimately unfulfilled. Such hopes collapsed amid racial conflict and intensifying racial discrimination by the 1820s. This failure of the great and much-watched "Philadelphia experiment" prefigured the course of race relations in America in our own century, an enduringly tragic part of this country's past.



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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Nash's masterful work of historical detection and re-creation details the black struggle that made Philadelphia the urban black center of post-Revolutionary America. Nash weaves the tale of black successes and tragedies using information from public records and private papers. He shows how early interracial cooperation, marked by antislavery aid from Quakers, disintegrated as white racial attitudes shifted to segregation; he also shows how blacks sustained themselves throughout the continuing adversity. Essential for collections on Afro-American local, social, or urban history. Highest recommendation. Winch focuses on the institutions and ideology of the relatively affluent and educated blacks who first became known in Philadelphia through the Free African Society. She traces that elite's rise to prominence from 1787 to 1822, its handling of colonization and abolition, its lead in the national convention movement of the 1830s, and the dissension and outside pressure that caused its decline. A complement to Nash's study, Winch's rich portrait of Philadelphia's black leaders and their role in shaping the lives of Northern blacks deserves a close reading. Recommended for Afro-American and antebellum collections. Thomas J. Davis, SUNY at Buffalo
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Review

Gary Nash's *Forging Freedom* is the most important book on the black experience in an American city yet written...No book better reveals how the early black experience in America became so persistently urban and naggingly ambivalent. No book better reveals how politics, social conditions, and religiosity in a colonial Quaker metropolis shaped modern Afro-American culture. And no book also better demonstrates how hard-won, carefully sculpted, historical research, sophisticated interpretation, and clear, unambiguous prose remain the historian's finest achievement. *Forging Freedom is a triumph, most obviously for Nash, but most beneficially for any student of America who wants to know how and why our deepest, most enduring paradoxes found their origins so early and so tragically in urban racial tension.* (Jon Butler, Yale University)

A distinguished historian has given us a gift of major proportion...Nash...presents a fascinating and unknown picture in remarkable detail. This moving and well-documented case study stretches all the way from Philadelphia's early Quaker years to the agitation and conflict of the antebellum era. Students of later civil rights movements will be amazed by how far back the story goes, how familiar it sounds in certain parts, and how much of it can be recovered by a patient and determined scholar. (Peter H. Wood, Duke University)

Nash is our preeminent historian of the early seaboard cities and a leading scholar of the black experience and race relations in early America. His research is energetic, absolutely current, very nearly exhaustive, and it yields an account that is vibrantly rendered. Much of the best material is on the blacks, much of the most horrifying on the whites, but always he maintains a difficult balance, capturing episodes and events as well as deeper trends on both sides of the racial divide in a narrative at once teeming and telling. (Michael Zuckerman, University of Pennsylvania)

Now comes this superbly written book by Gary Nash, one of the prolific scholars on the subject, on the early history of the races at a particularly crucial juncture that occurred in the city of Philadelphia that sheds insight into the entire process...A particular strength of his work lies in his detailing of the resiliency and creativity of black culture in the city. (Joseph Boskin Los Angeles Times Book Review)

Nash's book is a major contribution to our understanding of black life in the early American republic; it is a vivid and compelling account of the evolution of Philadelphia's black community in a period of increasing racism. (Eric Foner *American Historical Review*)

A compelling view of the development of black urban culture and society in Philadelphia. Masterfully researched and skillfully combining social scientific data and traditional documents, this work succeeds admirably as narrative and analysis. It easily ranks among the best work in the fields of black urban history and early American race relations. (Waldo E. Martin, Jr. *William and Mary Quarterly*)

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--Jon Butler, Yale University

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