FREE BLACKS AND SLAVES

1790–1861

Overleaf:

"Washington Capitol, Front," *1839, by William Henry Bartlett and J. M. Brandan, shows blacks in front of the building.*

A slave coffle passing the Capitol, c. 1815.

The First Black Washingtonians

Before the District of Columbia was chartered, Congress wrangled over where to put it. Congressmen representing slaveholding states were determined that the capital be in a region favorable to slavery—somewhere under the influence of wealthy plantation owners and out of the hands of eastern industrial capitalists.

A ten-square-mile district—Virginia's Alexandria, Georgetown, and the rural countryside of Maryland—fit the bill. African Americans—some free, most enslaved—lived on the few settlements and plantations. To their numbers were added the first influx of black Washingtonians. They came as hackney coachmen, carpenters, bricklayers, painters, laborers, and other construction workers to build the city's new public structures and private buildings. Blacks helped to construct the Navy Yard, from 1800 to 1806, and then worked there. Free black women and hired-out slave women came to wash clothes and to sell produce, poultry, small game, fish, and whatever else they could to the workers. Blacks were also cooks, stewards, caterers, and porters for the boarding-houses, hotels, and restaurants that served the population. Some blacks also owned and operated such establishments.

As the capital grew, blacks dominated certain hospitality and service occupations, such as hauling and transporting, driving coaches, baking, cleaning and washing, and especially working as

waiters. E. S. Abdy, traveling through the District in the early 1830s, observed that virtually all of the menial jobs—particularly in the hotels—were held by slaves, and that by the time of his visit, many free blacks eschewed these positions, having access to better ones. In Alexandria the fishing piers and the bakeries employed large numbers of black men. The Potomac River was also an important source of income. The historian Letitia Woods Brown writes in *Free Negroes in the District of Columbia, 1790–1846:* "The fishing landing in Alexandria continued to offer extensive job opportunities. In 1835 one booster for the District maintained that there were 150 fisheries on the Potomac requiring 6500 laborers. The 450 vessels used in the shad and herring fishing business used 1350 men to navigate them."

A Fluid Labor Market

Letitia Brown suggests that despite popular notions of a nineteenth-century black society rigidly divided along the lines of free and slave, black people in the District of Columbia experienced widely diverse work relationships and thus enjoyed very different levels of citizenship. Slaves for life, slaves for a specified term of service, indentured servants, hired-out slaves, and runaway slaves in hiding—all struggled toward freedom. In *Free Negroes* she writes,

> With the peculiar demands for building and service skills which grew with the capital, and the absence of a firm tradition that slavery was the only possible accommodation of black to white, a variety of work relations did occur. Many Negroes took advantage of the situation to work out arrangements that netted freedom. The same fluid labor market made it possible for free Negroes to survive. Humble as their jobs were, for the most part, they could find employment sufficient to sustain themselves.

Black men, both slave and free, were essential to the trade between eastern cities and the territory west of the District. They operated flatboats, sailing craft, and other vessels, and drove wagons loaded with merchandise and produce. Within the District, they provided public transportation between the boardinghouses and residences in Alexandria and Georgetown and the public buildings near Capitol Hill. Brown further notes, "Coachmen, dray-

men, waggoners, and hostlers were generally recruited from among the Negroes, slave and free."

Free blacks—African Americans who sold their own labor—were, however, at a distinct disadvantage. They had to compete with slaves in the District and those from Maryland and Virginia. After the 1820s a wave of Irish immigration drove many free blacks from jobs that they had traditionally held. In large-scale projects, such as the construction of the major canals in the late 1820s, managers hired mainly immigrants to fill the lowest levels of labor, instead of free blacks as they had previously done.

A Free Majority

After 1830 the absolute number of slaves and their percentage relative to free blacks began to decline. By 1840 the majority of the black population was free, as noted by Keith Melder in *City of Magnificent Intentions: A History of Washington, District of Columbia:* "Of all cities in the slave states, only in St. Louis, Baltimore, and Washington did free black people attain a majority in the African American community before the Civil War." Many free blacks immigrated to Washington from states such as Virginia and North Carolina, where existing laws were much more restrictive than in Washington. Other blacks in the District gained their freedom by being manumitted upon their owners' death (that is, by last will and testament), or they were deeded their freedom by their owners. Still others managed to buy their freedom—and often that of family and friends as well.

The growing community of free blacks formed a base of support for others' efforts to make their way out of slavery. Many free blacks made loans or contributed from their own savings to help friends meet their purchase price. Others donated in church or responded to petitions from strangers who needed to raise money to buy their freedom. Often such petitioners went door to door in the District, seeking contributions.

The Black Codes

The city was a hostile place for free blacks. By 1808 black codes regulated the movement and the activities of free blacks, and in 1812 the city council devised a pass system. Free blacks were kidnapped

and sold into slavery in the city's teeming slave markets. Parents who were lax about keeping an eye on their children might find them chained to a slave coffle. Adults were waylaid, rendered unconscious, and sold south, where no one could verify that they had been free. Survival under such conditions depended on blacks' forming alliances with white people, preferably with men of wealth or power who would vouch for a black person's character in writing—as required by city statutes—and act as a safeguard for that individual's freedom. This dependence created a galling and insecure existence but was preferable to not having an endorser at all.

Black codes crippled the development of African American businesses and institutions: for example, certain ordinances in 1836 required large bonds of free blacks, restricted them to certain occupations, and placed them under permanent curfew. Sandra Fitzpatrick and Maria Goodwin write in *The Guide to Black Washington: Places and Events of Historical and Cultural Significance in the Nation's Capital:*

> The prohibition of "all secret or private meetings or assemblages whatsoever" beyond the hour of 10 o'clock p.m. was peculiarly oppressive and also inhuman, because directed against the various charitable and self-improving associations, including the Masonic, Odd-Fellow, and Sons of Temperance brotherhoods which the colored people had organized, and the meetings of which, to be dispersed before 10 o'clock, could be of but comparatively little benefit to the members. These societies in those years were more or less educational in character, and an important means of self-improvement. . . . These restrictions were, moreover, rigorously enforced, and it was but a few years before the war that a company of the most respectable colored men of the District, on their return from the Masonic lodge a few minutes of 10 o'clock, were seized by the scrupulous police, retained at the watch-house till morning, and fined.

The Center for Slave Trading

After 1830 Washington became the center of the interstate slave trade. According to Frederic Bancroft in *Slave Trading in the Old*

South, "Because the slave population in the District was small, trading depended on slaves brought from Maryland and Virginia, and fully nine-tenths were for distant markets. . . . What might be called the daily life of local trading was in or near the taverns or small hotels, at the public or the private jails, and about the country markets." Slave-owning farmers visiting open-air markets were often approached by traders seeking to buy the farmers' slave assistants. Most slave pens in the District were located downtown.

Local newspapers were filled with boldface ads for the sale and the auction of slaves. Some ads specified particular kinds of slaves that were wanted or were available. Until the market was thoroughly canvassed, newly purchased slaves were held in the city's public jails. Bancroft continues: "The largest gangs were likely to be from Baltimore, where the agents of District traders grouped selections from the best slaves received from the Eastern shore. The women with little children were carried in some vehicle. When more than a few, the men, handcuffed in pairs, fastened to a chain and followed by boys and girls, walked in double column, and the trader's mounted assistant brought up the rear."

After the slave trade was outlawed in 1850, local enforcers threw themselves into the Fugitive Slave Act, and the city's black codes were made even more stringent.

Free Black Academies

Washington's free black community went to heroic lengths to build educational institutions for black residents. The first black school was started in 1807 by Moses Liverpool, George Bell, and Nicholas Franklin. According to David L. Lewis's *District of Columbia: A Bicentennial History,* "A nominal tuition was required and, 'to avoid disagreeable occurrences,' an early announcement emphasized, 'no writings are to be done by the teachers for a slave, neither directly nor indirectly, to serve the purpose of a slave on any account whatsoever.' Great caution was essential; Mayor Robert Brent, sympathetic to their endeavor, had barely succeeded in quashing a council resolution to ban the instruction of free blacks." After the establishment of the Bell School, free black academies followed pell-mell. Mrs. Mary Billings of Georgetown

opened her school on Dumbarton Street in 1810, moving to H Street in Washington City eleven years later. America's first black historian, George Washington Williams, wrote that "many of the better educated colored men and women now living . . . received the best portion of their education from her, and they all speak of her with a deep and tender sense of obligation."

The Great Influx of the 1860s

Before the great influx of ex-slaves during and immediately after the Civil War, the black population was concentrated north of the central city, southwest of the central core—in an area known as "the Island," because the Tiber River cut it off from the rest of the city—and in Foggy Bottom. Herring Hill, named for the main food staple that neighborhood families fished from Rock Creek, was a fifteen-block area that was home to east Georgetown's black community.

But after the 1860s, the District's black population was also "scattered throughout the southeast quarter of the city. The greatest concentration was along 4th Street, between the Navy Yard and East Capitol Street, with the blocks between 3rd and 5th Streets SE (east of the present Folger Library and the Library of Congress Annex) having the largest number of black homeowners. Black property owners resided elsewhere on Capitol Hill and along 9th and 10th Streets in the southwest section. The majority of blacks in the District lived in the northwest section, south of P Street and west of New Jersey Avenue." (Letitia Brown and Elsie Lewis, in *Washington from Banneker to Douglas, 1791–1870*.)

Many poor blacks lived in alleys, places with colorful names such as Slop Bucket, Temperance Hall, Willow Tree, Goat Alley, Pig Alley, and Tin Cup Alley. The living conditions in the alleys varied—some were dismal, squalid, and unhealthy; others were thriving communities of poor laborers and domestic servants.

A visitor to the District in the 1860s would have noticed the introduction of public streetcars. Although black coachmen protested the takeover of the city's lucrative transportation trade by these modern horse-drawn vehicles, the coachmen were unable to prevent the decline of their occupation. It was a troubling sign of the times.

1731

November 9. Benjamin Banneker is born in rural Baltimore County, Maryland. The son of Robert and Mary Banneker, an ex-slave and an English indentured servant woman, he teaches himself mathematics in his spare time. In 1753 he draws considerable attention from neighbors in the surrounding Maryland countryside when he constructs a working clock made entirely from wood. The wooden clock attracts many visitors, and Banneker becomes somewhat of a local celebrity. Borrowing books and a telescope from neighbors, including his friend and patron Andrew Ellicott, he teaches himself the fundamentals of astronomy.

1782

May. The Virginia Assembly passes legislation that spells out the legal requirements for manumission: slaveowners are allowed to free slaves by last will and testament or by written deed.

1784

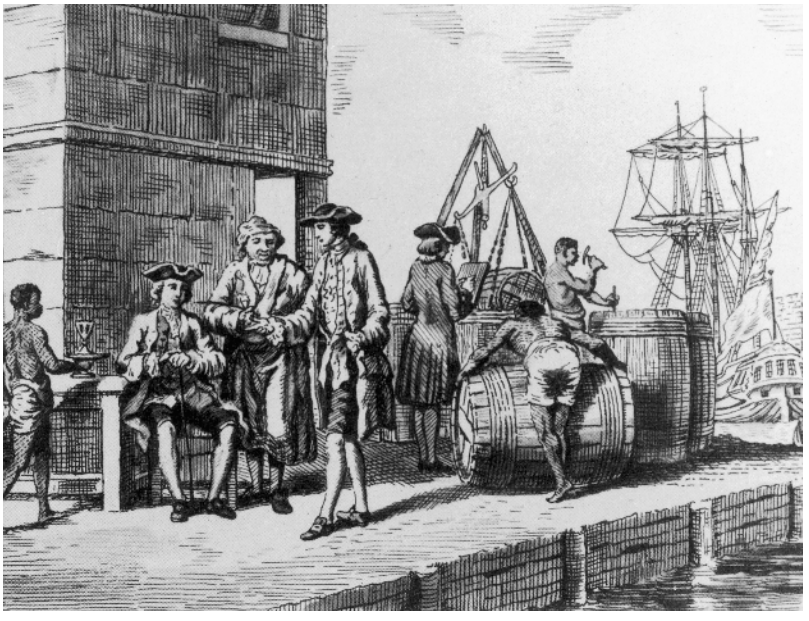
March 23. Tom Molyneux is born to slave parents in Georgetown. His father, Zachary, considered the "founder of boxing in the United States," must have seen potential in Tom, who subsequently won local renown as a young boxer. When Tom was still a teenager, his master promised him freedom and $100 if he could defeat a local slave in the ring. Molyneux won the bout and, in doing so, won his freedom. He left for London, where he enjoyed success in the ring for a number of years.

1787

Holy Trinity Church is established in Georgetown. Its founding members include both white and black Catholics.

1788

Maryland cedes land for the capital. Some of the free black families living within the boundaries of the ceded territory include the Butlers, Days, Fletchers, Harmons, Hollands, Proctors, Rounds,



A tobacco wharf along the shores of the Chesapeake, c. 1750.

Savoys, Shorters, and Thomases. Prominent free black families in Prince George's County include the Allens, Grays, Nicholses, Plummers, and Turners.

1789

April 30. George Washington is inaugurated as the first president of the United States.

Virginia cedes land for the capital, including the town of Alexandria. Free black families in Alexandria at this time include the Coles, Fletchers, Jacksons, and Pisicoes.

Josiah Henson, the model for "Uncle Tom" in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* is born to slave parents in Charles County, Maryland. As a young man, Henson sells produce at the markets of Georgetown and in the District, where he meets abolitionists for the first time. Henson later moves to Kentucky, where he escapes with his family, and in the 1840s becomes a well-known abolitionist.

1790

July 16. Congress passes the Residence Bill, making way for the construction of the national capital on a site along the Potomac River, using land from both Maryland and Virginia. The laws of each state will govern the territory that each ceded to the District until Congress makes other provisions. The bill also gives the president the right to appoint three commissioners to oversee the development of the city.

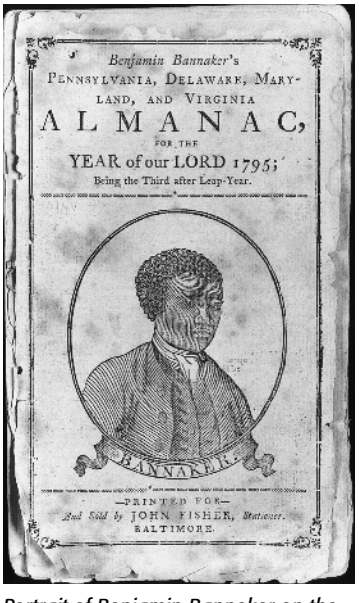
The first census in the United States shows that the population of free blacks in the town of Alexandria is 52; there are 543 slaves.

Black laborers (slave and free) break ground, clear roads, and haul construction materials—including limestone from Aquia Creek quarry. Hired-out slaves provide much of the labor for buildings in the new capital.

1791

President Washington hires Major Andrew Ellicott to survey the boundaries of the ten-mile District of Columbia. Ellicott chooses Benjamin Banneker to assist him, despite Banneker's advancing age.

Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson appoints Pierre Charles L'Enfant to draft plans for the sites of major public buildings and primary streets of the federal city, which is to be called Washington City. Banneker occasionally joins Ellicott and L'Enfant at dinner in Suter's Tavern to discuss their progress. After working only three months, Banneker leaves Ellicott in Washington and returns home at the end of April 1791, due to poor health.


Benjamin Bannaker's
PENNSYLVANIA, DELAWARE, MARYLAND, AND VIRGINIA
ALMANAC,
FOR THE
YEAR of our LORD 1795;
Being the Third after Leap-Year.
BANNAKER.
—PRINTED FOR—
And Sold by JOHN FISHER, Mathematician.
BALTIMORE.

Portrait of Benjamin Banneker on the frontispiece of his almanac, 1795.

1792

The Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, an abolitionist group, helps Benjamin Banneker publish his first almanac, which is based on his own astronomical calculations. That same year Banneker writes to Thomas Jefferson, challenging Jefferson's belief in the racial inferiority of black people. Banneker publishes his almanacs yearly until 1797.

1794

George Bell and Sophia Browning Bell, a Maryland slave couple acquainted with Benjamin Banneker, earn a little money by preparing meals in their small cabin across the Eastern Branch for Major

Andrew Ellicott and his commissioners. Sophia, the mother of four, adds this to the other money she earns selling produce in the market stalls in Alexandria.

1796

Maryland legislation spells out the legal requirements for manumission: by final will and testament or by written deed, witnessed by two whites and submitted to a justice of the peace.

December 11. The School for Negroes opens in Alexandria with seventeen students under Archibald McLean.

1797

March 4. John Adams is inaugurated as president.

1799

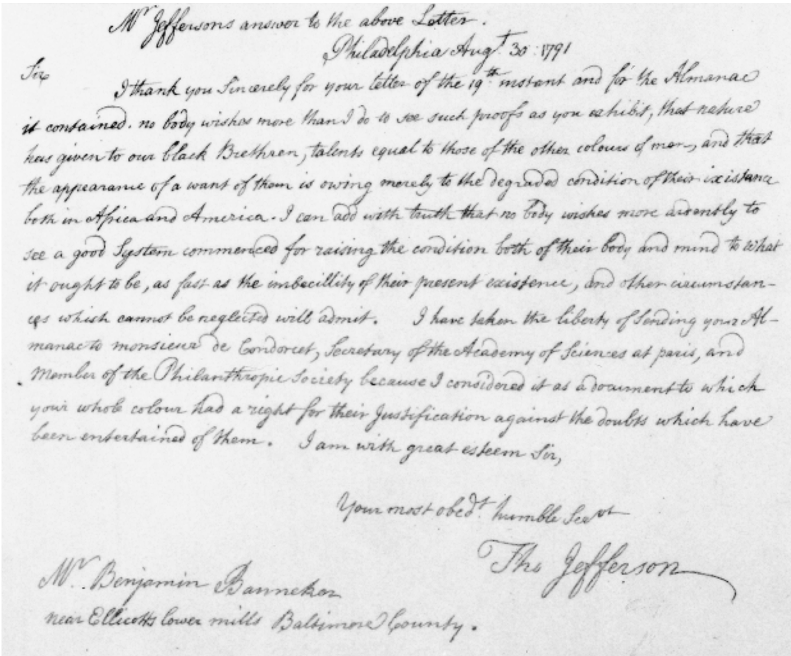
Paul Jennings is born a slave on James Madison's plantation in Montpelier, Virginia. Madison will later become president of the United States and bring Jennings to Washington, D.C. Jennings's father is said to be Benjamin Jennings, an English trader at Montpelier; his mother is a slave on the Madison plantation. Jennings, as an adult, said this of his owner: "Mr. Madison, I think, was one of the best men that ever lived. I never saw him in a passion, and never knew him to strike a slave, although he had over one hundred; neither would he allow an overseer to do it."

Alethia Browning Tanner. She purchases the freedom of her family in the 1820s.

October 2. The Navy Yard is established along the banks of the Anacostia River. It remains one of the most important sources of employment for black men until the 1870s, when it begins to refuse them employment.

1800

Sometime after the turn of the century, Alethia Browning Tanner, sister to Sophia Browning Bell, obtains the use of a small garden plot near the Capitol, where she starts to raise vegetables to sell in the market. She becomes a popular vendor and begins saving whatever money she can, with the goal of purchasing her and her family's freedom. Tradition claims that Thomas Jefferson was one of the customers for her market produce and that later Tanner


Mr Jeffersons answer to the above Letter.
Philadelphia Augt. 30: 1791

Sir

I thank you sincerely for your letter of the 19th instant and for the Almanac it contained. no body wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black Brethren, talents equal to those of the other colours of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existance both in Africa and America. I can add with truth that no body wishes more ardently to see a good System commenced for raising the condition both of their body and mind to what it ought to be, as fast as the imbecillity of their present existence, and other circumstances which cannot be neglected will admit. I have taken the liberty of sending your Almanac to monsieur de Condorcet, Secretary of the Academy of Sciences at paris, and Member of the Philanthropic Society because I considered it as a document to which your whole colour had a right for their Justification against the doubts which have been entertained of them. I am with great esteem Sir,

Your most obedt. humble Servt
Ths Jefferson

Mr. Benjamin Banneker
near Ellicotts lower mills Baltimore County.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Banneker, August 1791.

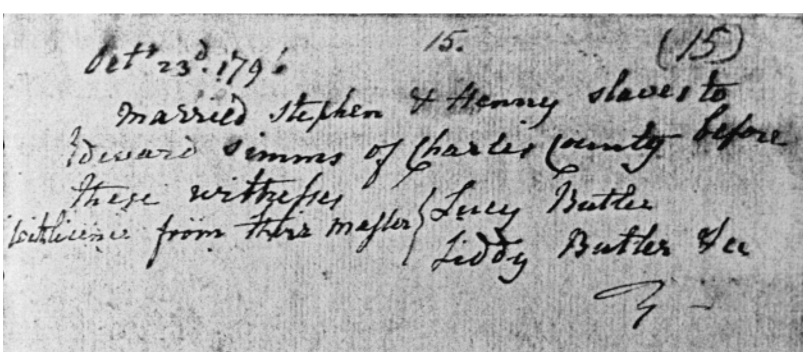
I suppose it is a truth too well attested to you, to need a proof here, that we are a race of Beings who have long laboured under the abuse and censure of the world, that we have long been looked upon with an eye of contempt, and that we have long been considered rather as brutish than human, and Scarcely capable of mental endowments.

—Benjamin Banneker,
letter to Thomas Jefferson,
August 19, 1791

served as a housemaid for him during part of his residence in the capital.

August 30. The Gabriel Prosser slave rebellion in Richmond, Virginia, ignites fear and suspicion of slaves in Virginia and beyond—including in the District of Columbia. Prosser, a blacksmith inspired by the French and the Haitian revolutions, organized rural

The second census of the U.S. population takes place. The population of free blacks in the District of Columbia is 783; there are 3,244 slaves. Almost a quarter of Washington City's population is black; about 25 percent of them are free. The free black population continues to grow, the increase stemming from many sources. The District is a final or interim destination for many escaped slaves from Maryland and Virginia; they form a thriving underground part of the city's population.


Octr 23d. 1796 15. (15)
married Stephen & Henny slaves to
Edward Simms of Charles County before
these witnesses { Lucy Butler
with licence from their master { Liddy Butler &c

Certificate of the October 23, 1796, marriage of two slaves at Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown.

Between Prosser's Tavern and the Brook Bridge, in the woods, was the rallying point, at which on the Saturday night of the storm . . . about 5 or 600 Negroes from Hanover and the adjacent country as far as Ground Squirrel Bridge were on that night to have assembled, armed in the best manner they could, with scythes, swords, and such guns as could be procured, and the work of death was to commence on Prosser the first victim; a few others were to share the same fate, and the party were then to march into town and massacre the male white inhabitants, FRENCHMEN alone excepted.

—The *Washington Federalist,* on Gabriel Prosser's slave revolt, September 25, 1800

field laborers and other artisans like himself to free the slaves of Richmond.

1801

March 4. Thomas Jefferson is inaugurated as president.

December 4. In the pages of the *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser,* Toussaint L'Ouverture, "governour of St. Domingo," advertises a new department in St. Domingo, to be named L'Ouverture, whose capital city will be Gonaives. In the ad, he announces the availability of land lots and encourages readers to acquire them. He warns that new landowners must not allow their land to stand vacant without buildings, or their land will be confiscated: "The inhabitants of this new department in general and of the city of Gonaives in particular, ought to endeavor to show themselves worthy of this favor. They ought to redouble their zeal and emulation to render the capitol of this new department as flourishing as the principal towns of the city."

December. Mayor Robert Brent organizes a public market at 7th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. It is called "Marsh Market" because of its low, swampy location. This is the precursor to the great Center Market, which rises on the same spot. Slave boatmen and wagoners bring vegetables and other produce from their masters' farms and plantations in Virginia and Maryland, to this and other markets in the District. Free blacks also fill the markets with their goods for sale.

A Negro Man

To be hired by the year, half yearly or quarterly A SOBER well disposed man about 26 years of age, cleanly, and has been many years employed as a coach driver, stable boy, and occasionally waiting at table, and working in the garden. His master wishes to hire him out in or about the city of Washington, he having a wife living near the District. He has never been accused or suspected of dishonesty. For further information apply to the printer.

—Advertisement in the *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser,* November 27, 1801

Sophia Browning Bell, a slave belonging to Mrs. Rachel Bell Pratt (mother of Thomas G. Pratt, governor of Maryland), finally saves enough money to buy her husband his freedom from Anthony Addison, a prominent Maryland landowner. They have achieved this long-sought and hard-won goal by selling produce and dinners and taking advantage of any opportunity to earn a few coins. They had no bank account but secretly hoarded their money and entrusted it, bit by bit, to a black minister. George Bell, at forty years of age, is freed for the sum of $400. Sophia is one of three sisters owned by Rachel Bell Pratt. When Sophia falls deathly ill soon

after this, George is able to buy her from her sickbed for £5. They later buy both of their surviving sons from Mrs. Pratt—both of them purchased "running" (as runaways)—but Mrs. Pratt refused to sell their daughter and held her as a slave until Mrs. Pratt's death.

1802

Congress grants a limited home rule charter to District residents. Some of its components change over the years, but it stands until 1871, when Congress revokes the city's home rule charter.

1804

March 13. James H. Fleet is purchased from slavery by his father, Henry Fleet. James establishes a popular school for free blacks in 1836.

1805

A resolution for the emancipation of all slaves in the District of Columbia is defeated in Congress.

1806

October 9. Benjamin Banneker dies in his Maryland home at age seventy-four. Shortly after his death, his small cabin burns down. Nearly everything in it is destroyed, including the wooden clock that first brought him to the attention of his neighbors.

1807

Three free black men, George Bell (Sophia Browning Bell's husband), Nicholas Franklin, and Moses Liverpool, build the first schoolhouse for black children in the District of Columbia. The men had all just recently been slaves and were themselves illiterate. Franklin and Liverpool—from the Chesapeake region of Virginia—worked as caulkers in the Navy Yard. George Bell was a carpenter. The school was a great step forward for the city's black community, but the building itself was a modest one-story wooden building. To prevent the school being shut down by hostile city authorities, Bell, Franklin, and Liverpool had to publicly ensure that no teacher would write anything for a slave. They could not risk being caught writing passes or forging manumissions and certificates of freedom

As two white persons were returning from the horse races, a few miles north of the city of Washington . . . they met on the road a free man of colour, who resided in the vicinity. They seized him, and bound him with ropes. His protestations that he was free, and his entreaties that they would accompany him to the house (but about half a mile distant), where his wife resided, and where he could satisfy them of his freedom, were in vain. Having fastened him by a rope to the tail of one of their horses, they were seen, by a citizen, who met them on the road dragging him in this manner, and beating him to make him keep pace with the horses. . . . On the following morning, this poor African was found by the side of the road, dreadfully bruised, and his eyes bloodshotten,—dead! . . . I was assured, that one of them had long been accustomed, in company with his own father, to the business of apprehending runaway slaves, and such free Africans as they could catch without certificates.

—Jesse Torrey, *American Slave Trade*, 1822

for slaves. George Bell had been the primary proponent of the school, and in his honor it was called Bell School. A white man, Mr. Lowe, was the first instructor.

1808

January 1. The international trade in slaves is outlawed in the United States, causing the domestic slave trade to expand exponentially. Washington, D.C., becomes a major slave market, where traders congregate to purchase slaves from Virginia and Maryland for sale farther south. Most of the deals between buyer and seller take place in private taverns in the District. Coffles of slaves on their way to the slave markets are common sights in the nation's capital. Once in the District, they are incarcerated in one of the city's private jails and either shipped down the Potomac or organized into overland coffles.

Washington's first black codes are passed into law by the city council, providing for a 10 P.M. curfew for black people and a $5 fine on those found in violation.

1809

March 4. James Madison is inaugurated as president.

If any slave shall be seen running any horses in any street or avenues of the city, within three hundred yards of any house or building, it shall be the duty of any constable to take such slave before a magistrate, and on his being convicted of such offence, he shall be publicly whipped, any number of lashes, not exceeding thirty-nine.

—Ordinance of the District of Columbia

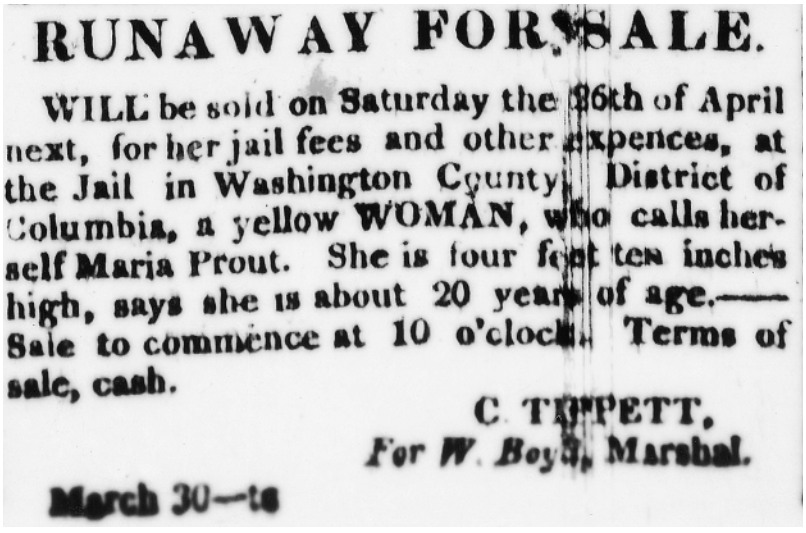
Henry Potter, an Englishman, establishes a school for blacks on F and 7th Streets, opposite the old Post Office Building. His school is quite successful and expands to a building on 13th Street.

October 3. Anthony Bowen is born in Prince George's County, Maryland, on the estate of William A. Bradley. Recognizing his outstanding intelligence and determination, Bradley's daughter-in-law teaches young Anthony to read and write. In 1830 Bowen buys his own freedom.

1810

The population of free blacks in the District grows to 2,549; there are 5,505 slaves.

Mary Billings (1776–1826), a widow who had arrived with her husband from England only ten years earlier, opens a school for blacks in Georgetown on Dumbarton Street. She begins by teaching white and black children, but when the opposition grows to integrated



RUNAWAY FOR SALE.

WILL be sold on Saturday the 26th of April next, for her jail fees and other expences, at the Jail in Washington County, District of Columbia, a yellow WOMAN, who calls herself Maria Prout. She is four feet ten inches high, says she is about 20 years of age.—— Sale to commence at 10 o'clock. Terms of sale, cash.

C. TIPPETT,
For W. Boyd, Marshal.

March 30—ts

Notice of a sale of a runaway slave at a jail in the District of Columbia in the Daily National Intelligencer, *April 2, 1814.*

classrooms, she decides to devote herself exclusively to educating black children. Children of the leading black families in the District attend the school. Billings continues teaching until 1822–1823; after her retirement, Henry Potter takes over her school. He is succeeded by another Englishman, Mr. Shay, who teaches at the school until his conviction and imprisonment in 1830 for assisting a slave to escape.

Anne Maria Hall becomes the first African American teacher in the District, when she opens a school on 1st Street on Capitol Hill. Despite having to secure several different sites for her school over the years, she teaches until 1835.

July 6. Alethia (Lethe) Browning Tanner, Sophia Browning Bell's sister, makes the final payment on her freedom and receives her manumission papers. She gives the last $275 of the $1,400 it cost to buy her freedom to Joseph Daugherty, who, at her request, had purchased her four days earlier from Rachel Bell Pratt.

The Washington Corporation Council passes an act that requires all free blacks residing in the city to register with city authorities.

Two white men kidnapping a black man outside Washington, D.C.

Thomas Tabbs' school was an institution peculiar to itself. Mr. Tabbs belonged to a prominent Maryland family, and was bred in affluence and received a thorough and polished education. He came to Washington before the war of 1812, and resided here until his death, which occurred ten years ago [1861]. He at once commenced teaching the colored people, and persistently continued to do so as long as he lived. He was called insane by some, but there was certainly a method in his madness. When he could find a school-room, he would gather a school, but when less fortunate he would go from house to house, stopping where he could find a group of poor colored children to instruct. At one period he had the shadow of a large tree near the Masonic Lodge at the Navy Yard for his school, and it was there that Alexander Hays, afterwards a teacher in Washington, but then a slave, learned his alphabet. Mr. Tabbs must have spent nearly fifty years in this mode of life.

—Moses Goodwin,
History of Schools for the Colored Population in the District of Columbia, 1871

1812

The city council requires all free blacks to register and to carry a pass proving that they are not slaves. It also increases fines for those involved in "nightly and disorderly meetings" to $20. Free blacks

The Colored Quarter of Washington, D.C.

unable to pay their fine will be held six months in the city jail; slaves are given forty lashes.

Christ Church in the Navy Yard establishes a Sabbath school for blacks, teaching the alphabet and the Bible.

June. The United States declares war on Great Britain, beginning the War of 1812. British troops, under the command of General Robert Ross, begin to make incursions along the Potomac.

1813

March 4. James Madison is inaugurated for his second term as president.

Summer. As the British plan to attack Washington, D.C., enslaved blacks in the city become restive.

Tobias Henson, a slave in Anacostia, purchases his freedom and begins making payments on twenty-four acres of farmland in Anacostia known as the "Ridge." By the 1830s he has saved enough money to purchase his children from their owner. Henson subdivides his land into lots for his family, which occupies the land until the 1940s. The Henson family land later becomes a part of the Stantontown community, centered on Stanton Road and Alabama Avenue SE.

I expect to patrole more frequently, and this is very necessary, for the blacks in some places refuse to work, and say they shall soon be free, and then the white people must look out. One Negro woman went so far as to steal her mistress's keys, and refused to return them, saying she soon pay her for old and new. This was in the city, and the Negro was confined. Should we be attacked, there will be great danger of the blacks rising, and to prevent this, patroles are very necessary, to keep them in awe. One other preventative at present is, the want of a leader.

—Vice President Elbridge Gerry, d. 1814, on the openly hostile attitude of some slaves, *The Diary of Elbridge Gerry, Jr.*

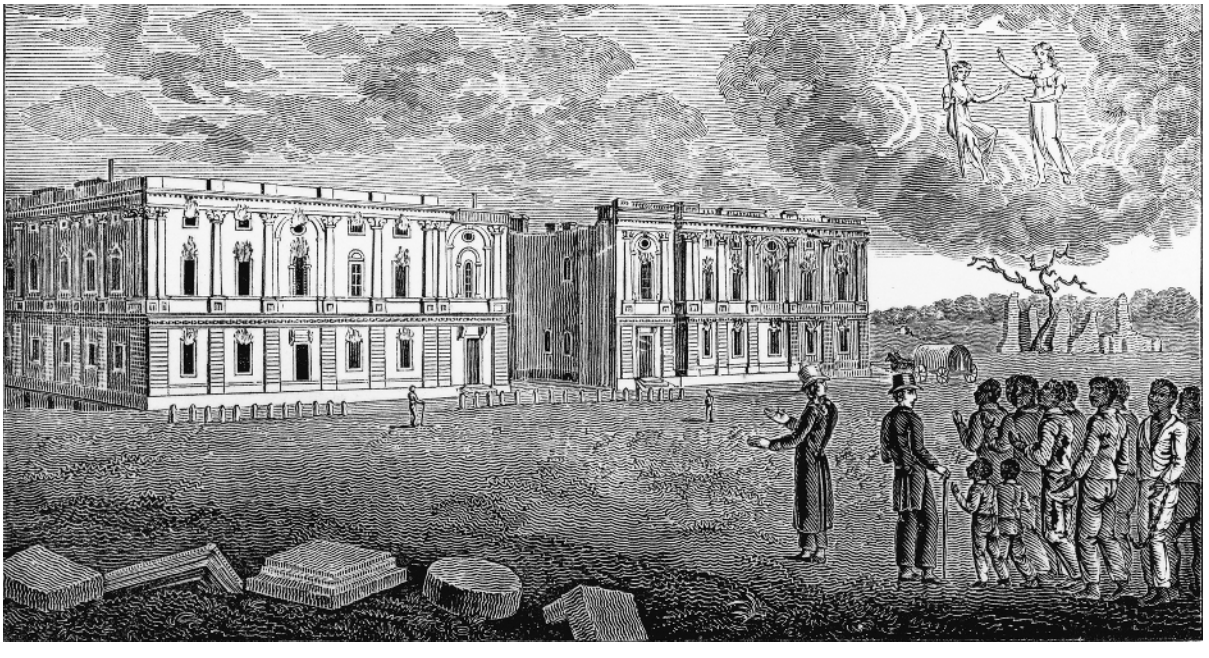
[I]n August, 1814, the enemy had got so near, there could be no doubt of their intentions. Great alarm existed, and some feeble preparations for defence [sic] were made. Com. Barney's flotilla was stripped of men, who were placed in battery, at Bladensburg, where they fought splendidly. A large part of his men were tall, strapping negroes, [sic] mixed with white sailors and marines. Mr. Madison reviewed them just before the fight, and asked Com. Barney if his "negroes would not run on the approach of the British?" "No sir," said Barney, "they don't know how to run; they will die by their guns first." They fought till a large part of them were killed or wounded and taken prisoner.

—Paul Jennings,
A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison, 1865

1814

June 3. One hundred twenty-five black members of Montgomery Street Methodist Church—almost half of whose membership is African American—withdraw to form a separate church for themselves. It takes them two years to raise enough money for a new church, the Little Ark. This church remains under the jurisdiction of the Montgomery Street Church, which continues a policy of racial segregation within its congregation. Leaders in this effort to build a separate black church include Lucy Neal, Polly Hill, William Crusor, William Trumwell, Shadrack Nugent, Thomas Mason, and Tamar Green.

August. Over 4,000 British troops land thirty-five miles southeast of the city, preparing to march on the capital. Mayor James Black calls on the militia to take up positions east of the city. He also sets them to digging earthworks in Bladensburg, Maryland. Many free black men respond to his call. When British troops reach Bladensburg on August 24, they force the militia to retreat.



Engraving of slave coffle in front of the Capitol, showing the damage to the Capitol by British troops in 1814.