FORGOTTEN AMERICAN OBSERVANCE
REMEMBERING THE FIRST OF AUGUST

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Annually the first day of August passes without a second thought. It may be surprising, therefore, that this day once occasioned large celebrations throughout New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and even as far distant as San Francisco, attracting thousands of participants in a common performance of elaborate festive rituals. Perhaps equally surprising, these American celebrations commemorated an event with little apparent relevance to the United States: Britain's abolition of slavery in its West Indian colonies. Throughout the antebellum period, however, anti-slavery communities "set apart the First of August as a holiday—a day of relaxation and rejoicing as well as of festivity." Despite its importance and widespread observance in the nineteenth century, the First of August remains all but forgotten in the American memory, supplanted by the Emancipation Proclamation and its continuing commemorative jubilees such as Juneteenth. As a result, historians have never explored the First of August festivals in the detail accorded to other nineteenth-century Fourth of July, Emancipation, Negro Election Day, and Pinkster celebrations. Even Barbara Ekdolf, in For Every Season: The Complete Guide to African American Celebrations Traditional to Contemporary, devotes just a single paragraph, "The First Independence Celebration," to explain that "when word of [West Indian emancipation] reached the American Slave like an inebriating wind of hope, August 1 became the first exultation for independence." Ekdolf's brief discussion erroneously suggests a celebration exclusive to the African American slave, ignoring entirely the more significant public gatherings sponsored by anti-slavery communities, both black and white, in the North. In contrast to its neglect by historians, contemporary newspapers, particularly the anti-slavery press, printed annual accounts of multiple First of August gatherings that included detailed descriptions of their
settings, events, and orations.⁴ Examining the First of August festivals' activities, rituals, and symbolism illuminates both how abolitionists engaged the public discourse contesting definitions of American liberty and slavery and a historiographical debate concerning abolitionism.

This article attempts to restore to the American consciousness the human experience of the First of August with all its complexities and ambiguities. As a preliminary historical inquiry, this article addresses the basic questions of why and how anti-slavery advocates invented the First of August festival and what purposes it served. The answers to these questions appear in five sections. The first section introduces three themes: the social function of celebrations in shaping community identity and opinion, the interaction of cultural beliefs and public discourse, and the divisions within abolitionism. Applying these themes throughout the subsequent analysis reveals that all First of August celebrations, irrespective of the observed differences between white and African American gatherings, served similar social functions, articulated shared cultural beliefs, and employed West Indian Emancipation within the American public discourse context to promote and sustain the common abolitionist cause to abolish slavery and achieve racial equality in America. The second and third sections explore how the emancipation of West Indian slaves inspired an American public festival and how a set of ritual practices was elaborated for its annual commemoration. The following two sections examine the symbolism and meaning of these festive rituals in promoting abolitionists' commitments to emancipation and racial equality. The final section endeavors to resolve the paradoxical relationships encountered in analyzing the First of August.

**Common Forms, Functions, and Festive Rituals within Diverse Communities**

Understanding the First of August's function in the anti-slavery crusade begins with its form as annual public celebration at which participants performed festive rituals that incorporated a common system of cultural beliefs and symbols. In this way, gatherings as diverse as medieval religious processions and American suburban barbeques serve a similar social role in forming a community identity and shaping its collective values and behaviors. Anti-slavery advocates designed the elaborate commemorative traditions of the First of August to fulfill both these social functions. Celebrating the First of August defined community boundaries and reinforced social bonds both locally and within a national movement that fostered a spirit of community through these shared experiences.⁶ While this community spirit sustained anti-slavery activism, abolitionism's broader reform commitments extended beyond its own communities. In addition, the First of August provided a forum to articulate the abolitionist critique of America in an effort to influence the values and behaviors of American society. As an annual public festival, therefore, the First of August was an
event in the public sphere, an arena in which discursive processes contest and authenticate public culture definitions and relationships of power and authority in a society. Participation in this public discourse necessitated confronting and manipulating the cultural belief systems underlying that discourse.

How abolitionist discourse incorporated American cultural beliefs is evidenced in the specific character of this public festival. Anti-slavery advocates conceived the First of August as a celebration of universal human freedom in an international struggle for liberty that transcended the emancipation of West Indian slaves. Such a festival of human liberty, namely the Fourth of July, already existed in the United States. As John Adams had hoped, the Fourth of July was annually “solemnized with pomp and parade, . . . shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations” throughout antebellum America. To abolitionists, however, American slavery undermined the true spirit of the American Revolution. Accordingly, its commemoration, Frederick Douglass asserted, was “mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up . . . the gross injustice and cruelty to which [the slave] is the constant victim.” Abolitionists’ conscious efforts to fashion this rival freedom jubilee recall Eric Hobsbawm’s The Invention of Tradition, in which Hobsbawn defines such a tradition as “a set of practices, normally governed by . . . rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which . . . implies continuity with the past.” The governing beliefs and symbolism of the First of August derived from the repertoire of existing middle-class social values, particularly republicanism, of which the Fourth of July was its foremost public expression. This republican ideology, based on faith in the unique national destiny of the United States in its commitments to individual liberty, representative democracy, and an independent and virtuous citizenry, remained a pervasive and powerful cultural belief system that shaped antebellum political and social discourse. The Fourth of July and the republicanism it expressed, therefore, provided not just a celebratory model, both to emulate and to reject, but also a discursive language of cultural attitudes, values, and symbols that influenced interpretations of West Indian emancipation and its annual commemoration rituals among anti-slavery communities.

While employing a common belief system to celebrate a common event—West Indian emancipation—First of August festivals mirrored the diversity of race, gender, class, and locality of the abolitionists who attended them. The abolitionist press promulgated a common set of ritual practices and symbolism that produced important similarities between observances at diverse localities such as Abington Grove in Massachusetts and Ripley Grove in Kentucky and in Washington Square in Rochester and City Hall in New Bedford. Despite these regional similarities, white abolitionists and African American communities developed separate celebrations with distinguishable traditions, including differences in the setting, symbolism, and festive rituals performed.
Abolitionism's inconsistencies and complexities have long confounded historians, who offer many differing interpretations of the movement's composition, attempting to resolve these ambiguities within the framework of a unified movement. In his pioneering interpretation, *Black Abolitionists*, Benjamin Quarles highlights the existence and agency of a distinct African American movement, which was "not just another group of camp followers... [but] in essence, abolition's 'different drummer.'" Since its publication, many historians have concurred with Quarles's characterization, examining further differences in geography, gender, economic status, religious denomination, political affiliation, and persuasion tactics in order to understand abolitionism's internal dynamics. This additional research has initiated a new historical debate concerning abolitionism's relative unity and disunity. Presenting the predominant disunity argument, James Brewer Stewart, in *Holy Warriors*, contends that abolition comprised an inclusive coalition, occasionally transcending, but frequently divided by ideological, tactical, gender, and racial tensions and conflicts. In her recent exploration of abolitionist women, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism*, Julie Roy Jeffrey rejects emphasizing these divisions, instead asserting that common ideological values are crucial to understanding women's activism. As the First of August celebrations encompassed gatherings of whites, African Americans, and interracial groups, analyzing the similarities and differences in the day's commemorations provides additional source material to this continuing debate.

Although differences between white and African American gatherings suggest divergent purposes, functions, and meanings of the First of August celebrations for these communities, their mere separateness and distinguishing characteristics fail to sustain this interpretation. For anti-slavery advocates, regardless of race, gender, class, and regional differences, the First of August served to further their shared crusades for emancipation and human equality. In inventing the First of August tradition, abolitionists fashioned a public celebration of human freedom to contest definitions of American liberty in the public sphere. This public culture discourse operated through the common language of American cultural beliefs and employed Fourth of July conventions, traditions, and symbolism that emphasized the connection between the anti-slavery cause and the true spirit of the American Revolution. Cultural belief systems, however, represent neither a static nor rigid code, but a flexible set of shared values, symbols, and meanings, subject to varying interpretation and selective application. The First of August celebrations demonstrate how various components of the abolitionist movement emphasized different elements within this common belief system. Examining differences between the festive rituals of white and African American gatherings illuminates subtleties in strategies and tactics advanced by these communities.

In pursuit of their common goal, white anti-slavery advocates endeavored to recruit converts to the abolitionist cause and cultivate public support for emancipation, while African Americans sought to develop community cohesiveness and assert their participatory rights within American society. For both communities, however, the First of August served as a means to
strengthten social bonds and as a forum to influence public opinion.

Interpreting the American Revolution and West Indian Emancipation

Developing their rival festival of human freedom, abolitionists confronted America's national holiday. As a symbolic expression of republicanism, the Fourth of July reinforced American national identity and existing power relationships within society. By the antebellum period the Fourth of July celebrations followed established and standardized ritual practices, achieving a timeless quality. In accordance with John Adams's wishes, the grand, day-long celebration combined patriotism, military display, politics, and recreation. Morning church bells and cannonades, repeated in the afternoon and evening, announced the Fourth of July's arrival. During church services, prayers and sermons mingled patriotism with religious belief. A parade followed, with military regiments, veterans' organizations in uniform, political, fraternal, and trade associations in their regalia, and military bands processing through the streets to the public square. At the parade's conclusion, a prominent citizen gave a dramatic rendition of the Declaration of Independence, reading its first public reading. Next, an eloquent oration expounded the virtues of the founding generation, recounted the arduous and heroic struggles of the Revolutionary War, and extolled the glorious history of the unique national destiny of the United States. Pervasive banners, American flags, and bands performing appropriate martial and patriotic selections such as "Hail Columbia" and "America" enlivened the day's festivities. In the evenings, a series of formal dinners sponsored by political and fraternal organizations as well as in restaurants and private homes offered elaborate foods appropriate for this celebratory occasion. These dinners included speeches on contemporary political issues and concluded with a long toasting ritual, allowing participants to offer patriotic sentiments. The day of celebration concluded with bonfires and fireworks displays. This festival of liberty often occasioned a general breakdown of social restraints and conventions. Independence Day frequently became the scene of general inebriation, fires, accidents, and violence occasionally resulting in public riots. To curb this disorder, Boston instituted a curfew in 1851 from nine in the evening until sunrise. Throughout the antebellum period, the annual observance of the Fourth of July included similar military displays, parades, community festivities—both harmonious and riotous—and patriotic ritual readings, orations, and toasts.

Abolitionists expressed ambivalence toward the Fourth of July, simultaneously attracted by its professions of human liberty and repelled by the slaveholding republic's hypocritical contradiction of those principles, by its military displays that confronted abolitionism's non-resistance beliefs, and by its riotous celebrations that flouted their reform values, alcohol consumption in particular. In opposing government policy, if not the government itself, abolitionists debated continuously whether the United States Constitution sanctioned or
opposed slavery. Yet the Fourth of July commemorated neither the government nor its Constitution, but rather the Declaration of Independence and its “self-evident truths.” Slavery signified to abolitionists “a worm at the root of the tree of Liberty, [which] ... must be killed or the tree will die.” As a result, the Fourth of July embodied important symbolic significance to abolitionism. Perceiving the Fourth of July as “a most appropriate and fitting time for an anti-slavery meeting ... to declare our determination to ... finish peacefully the work [our forefathers] began,” many auxiliaries of the American Anti-Slavery Society originated on that day. The Plymouth County Anti-Slavery Society, for instance, held its inaugural meeting on July 4, 1834, and subsequent annual Fourth of July anti-slavery meetings attracted participants from throughout New England.

Most abolitionist rhetoric, however, focused on the hypocrisy and riotous celebrations of the Fourth of July. “On the anniversary of our Independence,” Cyrus Pierce explained, “the crack of the whip, the groan of the bondsmen and the yell of tortured humanity mingling with the roar of cannon ... and the lying laudations of sycophantic orators go up to heaven in one diabolical discord [of] hypocrisy and self deception.” Abolitionists attributed American hypocrisy not to the failure of the sentiments outlined in the Declaration of Independence, but rather to the degenerate spirit of the public culture and politics. As William Lloyd Garrison commented to abolitionists assembled at Abington Grove on July 4, 1851, “every banner we unfurled to the breeze today is the signal of our hypocrisy; every bonfire that is kindled reveals our degradation; every cannon that is fired proclaims in thunder tones how utterly lost we are in shame.” Cassius Clay lamented, “the Fourth of July 1776 saw us proclaiming liberty to all mankind—[on] the Fourth of July 1845 ... the American people [are] the sole propagandists of slavery among men.” Although the mainstream newspapers routinely reported Fourth of July fires, accidents, and violent acts, the July 14, 1848 Liberator contained two complete columns of such events, in a tone reminiscent of eighteenth-century Sabbath-breaking tales. These riotous festivities, which led abolitionists to characterize the Fourth of July as a “poor, old, prostituted, rum-soaked, powder-smoked anniversary,” provided further evidence that a glorious event had been corrupted and debauched.

While this rhetoric appears to reject American cultural values, abolitionist condemnation of mainstream celebrations, which focused on themes of degradation and betrayal of Revolutionary values, employed republican ideology’s inherent fears of corruption and privilege. Through this common belief in republicanism, abolitionists endeavored to engage and direct the public discourse concerning the meaning of slavery and liberty in America. After West Indian emancipation, abolitionists began to characterize their struggle as “not for the slave, merely or mainly ... [but for the] liberty of all people,” which redefined their perceptions of the Declaration of Independence and the Fourth of July. Portraying themselves as “the high priests of freedom” and the legitimate inheritors of the Revolutionary legacy, abolitionists invented the First of August jubilee to reinforce their commitment to American freedom. Moreover, abolitionists renewed American Independence celebrations in an at-
David Roberts

tempt to “rescue that anniversary from the ordinary popular desecration and to consecrate it to the cause of impartial and universal liberty.”25 At both abolitionist freedom festivals, the Declaration of Independence served “as the most powerful weapon to put down the great slave system of our country.”26 Abolitionists conducted their condemnation of mainstream Independence celebrations and their appropriation of America’s Revolutionary heritage within the context of republicanism, which provided the discursive language of all American public debates. This common cultural belief system would continue to inform the invention of the First of August tradition in both the abolitionist and African American communities.

Despite republicanism’s boasted American uniqueness, the United States was exceptional neither in the existence of slavery nor in efforts to eradicate it. In the 1830s the emancipation process accelerated, first in Spain’s former colonies and then in Britain’s colonial empire, effective August 1, 1834. On August 28, 1833, the British Parliament, after a decade of widespread abolitionist activism, issued a forty-six article act, ending slavery within its colonial possessions. The act’s provisions emancipated slaves younger than six years, while the remainder would serve a quasi-feudal “apprenticeship,” lasting four years for domestic and artisan workers and six years for unskilled and agricultural laborers; in addition, slaveholders received £20 million in compensation. Difficulties with the apprenticeship system caused its abandonment in 1838. Although the British example provided neither the immediate nor uncompensated emancipation championed by American abolitionists, the liberation of 800,000 slaves encouraged American abolitionists. Heralding the day, the Liberator reported “on Friday next, slavery virtually ceases throughout the British Colonies... it is a day not to be passed over coldly or silently by any man who has—we will not say an American heart, for that in these degenerate times is an equivocal term, but a soul of freedom.”27 In addition to providing inspiration, abolitionists perceived that West Indian emancipation’s favorable outcome bolstered their own efforts in America. The Dedham Patriot characterized British emancipation as “a strong argument against... slave labor and in favor of emancipation in our own country” and proposed that America “watch the progress of this experiment and profit thereby.”28 American anti-slavery organizations, eager to shape public perceptions of West Indian emancipation, collected and published substantial information concerning its process and beneficial results to strengthen the anti-slavery argument and direct public opinion.29

British emancipation offered lessons to abolitionists in their crusade against American slavery that both sustained their own activism and refuted their pro-slavery critics. Inspired by the West Indian example, abolitionist rhetoric stressed repeatedly the safety of immediate abolition, the perseverance and moral victory of British abolitionism, the superiority of free labor, and the freedmen’s improved moral and economic condition. According to American abolitionists, British colonial emancipation, effected by anti-slavery agitation and not by Parliamentary action, occurred without anarchy or violence and stimulated the colonial economy; moreover, subsequent increases in the former slaves’ material possessions and
proliferation of their churches and schools attested to emancipation's beneficial effects on both the freedmen and colonial society. In the 1860 pamphlet *The Right Way, The Safe Way Proved by Emancipation in the British West Indies and Elsewhere*, Lydia Maria Child codified these themes of abolitionist thought into a comprehensive and compelling argument. "History proves that emancipation has always been safe...[and] has always produced a feeling of security in the public mind," asserted Child, who contended further that once emancipation began "to stimulate laborers by wages, instead of driving them by the whip...education and religious teaching and agricultural improvement would soon follow." While grounded in the historical experience of the West Indies, abolitionists framed British emancipation's lessons within the context of American cultural beliefs system, reinforcing republican ideology's free labor and legal equality and evangelical Protestantism's moral and social reform values. Both white and African American abolitionists employed these West Indian lessons and American cultural values in developing their First of August festival.

Inventing and Publicizing the First of August Tradition

Despite its observance throughout the world, abolitionist communities in the United States organized the largest and most continuous commemorations on the annual anniversary of West Indian Emancipation. The American First of August jubilees engaged the public discourse regarding American liberty and slavery, and evidenced few similarities with the commemorated occasion. The single event performed on American soil that contained overt ritual reference to West Indian emancipation occurred on July 31, 1846 when a Boston African American congregation reenacted Antigua's last night of slavery, as chronicled by Thorne and Kemball, with church members kneeling in prayer as the steeple bells tolled midnight. The remaining First of August celebrations in the United States comprised distinctively American rituals, prayers, hymns, songs, speeches, processions, and foods. The 1855 First of August festival at Jamaica, Queens County, New York, for instance, shared only its place name with the West Indies. The event itself served merely as a reason for gathering and an embarkation point to confront American slavery. The representation of British emancipation as a symbolic beginning pervaded the banners displayed at Boston's 1845 First of August procession, whose first banner, "The Day We Celebrate 800,000 Slaves Emancipated," preceded banners proclaiming, "Liberty the Birthright of All" and "No Union with Slave Holders," slogans that engaged American themes. A similar origination ritual occurred at a 1842 First of August celebration, where after presenting an "I am free" banner to an African American child, who represented the West Indies, the orator exhorted "now that you are free yourself, let us both labor to extend the same blessing to others, till every child that is born in America shall draw its first breath in a land of freedom." In laboring to extend the blessings of liberty to America, abolitionists abandoned any ritual connection with West
Indian emancipation, and invented a new tradition that aided their own struggles within America.

The grand jubilees that characterized American commemorations of West Indian emancipation began humbly. In 1834 the Liberator reported four First of August gatherings. These small evening meetings resembled typical 1830s anti-slavery meetings, which interspersed prayers and hymns with speeches and resolutions. The size and form of these commemorations remained consistent until 1842. Between 1838 and 1841, Boston’s African American community observed the First of August almost exclusively. During this period, black Bostonians met annually at the Belknap Street Chapel followed by elaborate suppers that included speeches and toasts. After 1841 these celebrations expanded and began to include processions of school children and benevolent societies, who marched from the Sabbath schools to the meeting location.

The following year Boston’s white abolitionist First of August gatherings underwent a significant structural change. Endeavoring to bolster the abolitionist cause, John A. Collins, in a letter published in the Liberator, recommended that the day be generally commemorated. Collins’s The Anti-Slavery Pick Nick, a 144-page collection of anti-slavery speeches, dialogues, hymns, songs, and music published in 1842, established a pattern for subsequent First of August festivals. In that year the celebrations, particularly those of white abolitionists, abandoned the churches and meeting halls in favor of picnic groves outside the city, transforming evening meetings into day-long jubilees. For the next six years an average of four such First of August events occurred in various groves surrounding Boston, including Lynn, Lowell, Dedham, and Abington. A Committee of Arrangement organized processions from the nearest town center to the grove until 1846, after which published newspaper reports never mention white abolitionist processions, suggesting that this practice was abandoned. At the grove, the assembly elected the day’s officers and listened as prayers and scripture passages were read, hymns and songs were performed, and orations were delivered. Initially the Committee of Arrangement provided refreshments. As attendance ballooned to hundreds and even thousands of participants, a potluck and eventually a picnic format evolved to control costs. After 1849, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society consolidated these regional celebrations into a statewide affair in order to increase its audience and feature the best anti-slavery orators. Special excursion trains with discounted rates halted near the grove, eliminating the necessity of a procession. As the location of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society’s festival rotated and its number of participants fluctuated, reflecting changes in popular support and the weather, its distinct form and ritualized activities remained constant until the Civil War.

While white abolitionist celebrations attracted increasing numbers of African American speakers and participants, the New England African American communities retained their own distinctive festivities. African American observances of the First of August, however, followed a similar pattern of proliferation and consolidation. By 1844, separate black
Forgotten American Observance

festivals occurred annually in Boston, Providence, and New Bedford; after 1851 a single celebration included delegations from each city. The First of August commemorative activities of African Americans and whites differed in two ways. African Americans retained the procession ritual, congregating at a church or town hall before progressing to the grove. Unlike their white counterparts, who dispersed at the conclusion of the ceremonies at the grove, African Americans formed another procession for their return journey. In addition, African Americans typically held evening events, including additional meetings and frequently formal dinners, evening balls, and fundraising fairs.

While the Liberator contained some accounts of earlier jubilees from beyond New England, the First of August festivals proliferated on a nationwide scale around 1853. As the Fugitive Slave and Kansas-Nebraska Acts swelled the tide of northern anti-slavery sentiment, the First of August observances expanded throughout New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio; at least the Liberator’s coverage of the events expanded, but probably both. As a result of the Anti-Slavery Pick Nick and extensive accounts in the various movement newspapers, these new celebrations exhibited patterns and rituals created in New England, and served the same anti-slavery purposes.

Rituals of Liberty: Promoting the Anti-Slavery Crusade

Abolitionists sought to communicate to the public the sin of slavery and cultivate public sentiment for its eradication. More than a commemoration of West Indian Emancipation, First of August observances became a great annual forum for publicizing the abolitionist cause and forming public opinion. As an 1844 advertisement for the festival at Hingham implored, the First of August “should be a day for a memorial as well as a moral demonstration.” Initially the First of August celebrations, like earlier Fourth of July meetings, provided impetus to form and expand Anti-Slavery auxiliaries. For instance, Chelsea and New York City anti-slavery societies held inaugural meetings on August 1, 1838 and 1840, respectively. In addition, the correspondent of the 1836 Fall River observance reported that “a strong impulse was given to our cause ... by these meetings; many new members were added to the different Anti-Slavery Societies” and between four and five hundred dollars were collected. Such fundraising and recruiting efforts characterized most First of August festivals. Beyond sustaining their own organizations, however, abolitionists used this event to “attract many who have held themselves aloof from the vulgar Anti-Slavery lectures” and dispel the “ignorance which prevails in the community on the subject of slavery generally and West Indian Emancipation in particular,” evidencing its goal to broaden and shape public opinion. Attending a First of August meeting exposed the participant to the famous white and African American abolitionist personalities, including Wendell Phillips, Charles Burleigh, Edmund Quincy, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Charles Remond, and Will-
David Roberts

lau Lloyd Garrison, who offered annual orations to those assembled. These speeches became the main attraction at the celebrations. The 1848 Lynn festival advertised that “the most eloquent and able advocates of the anti-slavery cause will be present.... No effort will be spared to make... the occasion of the greatest advantage to the cause of Humanity and Freedom.”

Organizers sought to attract additional speakers with broad popular appeal, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. Especially prized, however, were speakers with knowledge of the West Indies, such as Joseph Robinson, a former slave from Bermuda, and the Reverend Mr. Bleby, an Anglican clergyman from Jamaica. The biracial composition of these anti-slavery advocates indicates the abolitionist intention to create a racially inclusive festival that promoted their commitment to racial equality. To bolster these anti-slavery and racial equality sentiments throughout the North, First of August celebrations expanded beyond the traditional centers of abolitionist activism. About one such 1853 jubilee in Frankfort, Ohio, J. Mercer Langston reported, “the people here have heard few anti-slavery speeches and their minds are comparatively dark on the slavery question.... I pounded the truth upon their hearts so as to make them think, feel, and... act.”

Resulting from the abolitionist emphases on organizational strength and anti-slavery oratory, the First of August celebrations resembled large anti-slavery conventions in the guise of a festival.

While the First of August commemorations and other abolitionist meetings shared the common purpose of promoting and publicizing the anti-slavery crusade, abolitionists designed these freedom jubilees to transcend this mundane function. As one advertisement proclaimed, the First of August “well deserves to be... joyfully commemorated... [as] an occasion for general thanksgiving... [by] a long and happy day in innocent festivity and joyful interchange of congratulations and of hopes.” To further this aim, abolitionists devised a unique set of festive symbols and ritual practices for these celebrations. The symbolic significance of its location and decoration, its use of food, and its rituals performed differentiated the First of August from other abolitionist gatherings.

After 1842, abolitionists conducted the First of August festivals in a natural setting: a grove defined the celebratory space. While practical considerations, such as space requirements and weather, contributed to its selection, the grove itself assumed symbolic significance. The correspondent at the Dedham gathering wrote that this straight close of pine trees signified “the erect position of true abolition and of the nearness of spirit of true abolitionists.” There may be another explanation for the selection of the grove: church authorities ceased to make their building available to abolitionist meetings in the 1840s. Continual references to groves as “God’s first temples” in First of August festival advertisements in conjunction with reported examples, as in 1844 Concord where no church would provide meeting facilities, suggests this conclusion. In another instance Frederick Douglass attacked the Geneva, New York, Presbyterian Church whose refusal to accommodate a First of August gathering offered an “insult to Dr. Cheever, a minister of the gospel... [and] against the cause of freedom and humanity.”

33
While the selection of setting has multiple explanations, the festival's decorations provide more consistent messages. Countless newspaper reports commented on the abundance of flowers decorating the grove and garnishing the meal tables. The presence of flowers again reflected religious symbolism. As the 1844 Concord meeting reported, there were "so many flowers, which said to us 'God is love, God is love.'" Evergreen boughs also recur in newspaper descriptions. While the evergreens' significance remains unclear, perhaps it represented abolitionists' efforts to keep the cause of the slave ever green in their hearts. The symbolic meaning of nature, flowers, and evergreens transcended the grove. The Committees of Arrangement of the Weymouth and Leicester celebrations decorated the respective meetinghouses with flowers and evergreen boughs. In addition, the African American procession in New Bedford contained banners adorned with evergreens and flowers. These symbolic images reinforced shared religious beliefs and the importance of the individual human heart inherent in abolitionism from its evangelical Protestant roots. White abolitionists, consistent with their come-out tradition, pursued the anti-slavery cause in the isolation and security of a grove. This natural setting, embraced by white abolitionists, contrasted with the essentially urban African American First of August festivals. While African Americans also met in groves, their accompanying processions and evening meetings asserted possession of urban space more consistent with American Independence celebrations.

Whether commemorated at a grove or in town, abundant food characterized First of August festivities. Food enhanced the pleasure of the occasion and demonstrated the sacred nature of the event. In American culture, food accompanies community celebrations. Throughout the antebellum period, abolitionists engaged in fasting to atone for the sin of slavery and to sympathize symbolically with the condition of the slave. Newspaper accounts, however, contain only two examples of ritual fasting on the First of August. The Philadelphia (African American) Female Literary Society's 1836 meeting offered only "bread and water;" the 1844 Concord celebration, attended primarily by white women, abstained from eating as "food was a trifling affair" while the great work of abolition continued. Occasionally accounts depict "simple" or "plain" food. For example, Frederick Douglass reported the New Bedford 1853 jubilee served "plenty of plain and substantial food, consisting of a "simple fare of bread, ham, and cold water." Nevertheless, the majority of accounts describe meals as "sumptuous," "abundant," "luxurious," and "in the best style." Fine foods were particularly prevalent at African American celebrations. At Springfield, Massachusetts in 1857, for instance, "the tables were garnished with flowers and loaded with delicate confectionary and substantial viands," while Boston's 1838 African American soirée offered "meats, nicely dressed, vegetables, pastry, and fruits were abundant." The jubilee's celebratory character, however, did not extend to alcohol consumption, which so often characterized the Fourth of July festivities and so repelled abolitionist reform values. Newspaper accounts make disparaging references to the few occasions in which toasts were not made
David Roberts

with "cold water" and celebrations had not conformed to temperance principles. Although a festive occasion, the First of August reinforced traditional reform values.

By 1842, First of August celebrations developed a consistent set of ritual practices that transcended their West Indian origin. Instead, abolitionists borrowed Fourth of July conventions and forms, substituting their own document of liberty, heroes, history, and music. In this transmutation process, the British Act of Emancipation received the same reverence as the Declaration of Independence. First of August advertisements and festival plenary remarks referred specifically to this "glorious Act of British philanthropy." In 1835, the Liberator stated, "the words of the Act are remarkable and deserve to be held in perpetual remembrance." Ritual readings of the British Act of Emancipation occurred intermittently, perhaps due to its legalistic ineloquence, but the ritual increased in the 1850s, especially at African American celebrations. However, a remembrance ritual recounting West Indian emancipation's history, its beneficial results, and its British abolitionist heroes did become an enduring feature that characterized First of August celebrations. Emulating the rhetorical conventions and eulogistic style of Independence Day addresses, these commemorative orations exchanged the emancipation struggle for the Revolutionary War, the British abolitionists Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and Elizabeth Heyrick for the American patriots George Washington, John Adams, and Patrick Henry, and emancipation's advantageous effects for America's glorious history. Similarly, "soul-stirring" anti-slavery songs and hymns, including "Holy Freedom," "The Day of Jubilee," "The Dawn of Liberty," and "Progress of the Cause," supplant the patriotic music of Fourth of July. Banners at First of August processions appropriated familiar patriotic imagery. The Liberty Bell, for example, was converted to the abolitionist cause through the addition of anti-slavery devices and slogans. While white abolitionists refused to adopt Independence Day's ubiquitous military displays, which contradicted their non-resistance values, African American festivals prominently featured African American militia companies. Such African American cadet units first appeared at New Bedford in 1851, and the Liberator reported similar military exercises there in 1856 and 1858, at New York in 1855, and at Pittsburgh in 1856.5 In addition, Frederick Douglass reported that Independence Day rituals of tolling church bells and cannon salutes punctuated the 1859 First of August in Geneva, New York, commenting, "the ringing of bells, firing of guns, and sounds of music... gave proof of the general joy, the great good nature and the boisterous merriment of the colored people." By performing this set of ritual practices patterned on contemporary Independence Day commemorations, the First of August experience yielded a collective abolitionist purpose and identity, just as Fourth of July rituals had advanced American nationalism during the early national period.

Through their common settings, festive foods, and recurring ritual performances, First of August celebrations helped forge a community spirit among abolitionists and bolstered their enthusiasm for the anti-slavery crusade. To further this collective identity, the lunch hour completed this day of festivity, dedicated to "the gratification of [abolitionists'] moral,
intellectual and social natures. The first explicit reference to recreation appeared in the announcements in 1845, a period of declining organizational strength of the abolitionist movement. The annual Massachusetts Anti-Slavery society's festival location moved from Worcester to Framingham, citing its better grove, new hall for refreshments, and its "numerous seats and swings ... [and] boats upon the pond ... for the hours of recreation and amusement." The jubilee's recreation function developed a community spirit and a mutual support network that encouraged its members to realize, in the words of one Concord celebration participant, "what a privilege it is to be an abolitionist." Through the inclusion of recreation in the First of August events, abolitionists endeavored to build a community of abolitionists and ensure that "every one return[ed] to his home with his faith increased, his hopes brightened and invigorated with renewed determination never to give up the struggle."

Rituals of Race: Promoting Racial Equality

The abolitionist community attempted to transcend racial divisions within America. While mainstream Fourth of July celebrations routinely barred African American participation, First of August jubilees encouraged their active involvement. To promote their commitment to racial equality, abolitionist newspapers publicized the inclusive, biracial character of First of August celebrations. In advertisements for the events, the Committees of Arrangement invited "the friends of impartial liberty without regard to creed, caste or complexion." Furthermore, newspaper coverage frequently described the number and composition of participants. For instance, two thousand people attended the 1843 Dedham festival, as the Liberator correspondent reported, "from every sect, class and condition of men without invidious distinction of sex and color, they came together as abolitionists, rejoicing over a triumph of freedom." Although the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society-sponsored jubilees remained predominantly white, African Americans occupied highly visible positions as musicians and orators. African American juvenile bands and choirs enlivened the annual celebrations, ever since Mrs. Paul's children's choir performed hymns at the first Boston observance in 1834. At the rostrum as well, prominent African Americans contributed to the festival's inclusive appearance. While African Americans seldom delivered keynote addresses, their orations, interspersed with their white counterparts, demonstrated their participatory, non-segregated role. African American speakers, however, often confined their remarks to depicting the conditions of the slave that followed slave narrative conventions. For instance, Lunsford Lane recounted his personal experiences in slavery at the 1843 Weymouth gathering. Joseph Robinson, a former slave from Bermuda, offered personal reflections to his 1848 Lynn audience on West Indian emancipation's effects. Prominent African Americans who attended white-sponsored celebrations, including Charles Remond, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown, regularly addressed political, religious, and racial prejudice top-
During the 1850s the First of August's biracial participation expanded beyond the rostrum. Encouraged by this trend, the Liberator publicized that "never... have so many of... our colored citizens and friends... come up to this commemorative meeting" as attended the 1856 festival at Abington grove. The same year at Salem, Ohio the local white antislavery society "cheerfully waived their own arrangements and participated" in the African American organized events. Despite the increased occurrence of biracial gatherings, the explicit efforts of abolitionists to include African Americans, and the presence of black orators, separate African American First of August jubilees persisted and flourished throughout the antebellum period.

White abolitionists, cognizant of these distinct African American celebrations that divided the abolitionist community, sought to eliminate them. Acknowledging the natural desire of African Americans "to signify by a distinct and separate exhibition, their appreciation of liberty, and their deep participation in the joy" of the First of August, an 1844 Liberator editorial appealed, "the time has fully come for them to cease...[this] isolated and exclusive form, especially on such a gladsome festival." Despite persistent white criticism, African Americans continued to organize competing observances. As a correspondent of one such exclusive First of August jubilee lamented in 1852, African Americans "do not intend to exclude anyone...[but] they extend no invitations to their anti-slavery friends;" therefore, whites who attend "must do it at the risk of seeming intrusion." Articulating the African American response to these white abolitionist appeals, Jehiel Beman stated that while "acknowledging the sympathies of our white friends, he considered that they could not, having never been placed in the same circumstances with the colored people, feel as they do in celebrating this great event." The persistence of these separate celebrations suggests that First of August festivals served purposes for the African American community that could not be satisfied by attendance at white-sponsored events.

Differences between white and black commemorative rituals and their relative emphases illuminate the purposes the First of August filled for African American communities. African American celebrations frequently included processions and evening events within public space, as well as participation by military units, ritual readings of the British Emancipation Act and Declaration of Independence, and occasional cannonades and church bell salutes. In inventing their own First of August jubilee, African Americans combined Fourth of July conventions with their own community traditions of New England Election Day and New York Pinkster festivals, which both contained processions and evening galas. Although the incorporation of previous African American traditions provides one explanation for these identified differences, the First of August differed markedly from these earlier festivals. Both Pinkster and Election Day events emphasized the community's connection with its African origins and traditions. In contrast to these earlier festivals, the First of August, while fostering a similar community spirit, emphasized American middle-class reform values and American republican beliefs. African American First of August gatherings, in addition to
providing a forum to agitate for an end to American slavery, a goal shared with broader abolitionism, endeavored to forge a cohesive African American community and promote the moral improvement and civil rights of that community within American society.72

Annual community festivals facilitate the development of a collective identity among their participants. For African Americans, the First of August celebrations defined the membership and location of the community, highlighted its institutions, and mobilized its members for the collective benefit. The African American community leadership initiated and supervised the extensive planning that such large-scale events require.73 Frederick Douglass described a typical Committee of Arrangement as “composed of energetic businessmen zealously devoted to the object.”74 Equally zealous religious and fraternal organization leaders also contributed organizational expertise to the preparations. While organized by community leaders, the celebrations included members from all social and economic status levels. As the 1848 invitation to Rochester’s First of August jubilee proclaimed, “let every colored man and woman within 200 miles” gather to “make the occasion memorable.”75 After defining participation to include the entire African American community, the Committee of Arrangement selected the festival’s location carefully, which, similar to white abolitionists’ use of a grove, conveyed symbolic meaning. The 1851 Long Island celebration’s organizers selected Weeksville; “the object in having it there,” they related, “was mainly to congregate on the grounds owned and occupied by our own people” and to aid the local economy.76 Fulfilling the identical function in urban centers, African American community institutions, principally its churches and Sabbath Schools, focused community spirit to the visible symbols of the African American community. These churches and schools, such as Boston’s Bellmap Street Chapel and Tremont Temple, provided the assembly point for First of August processions, as well as provided space for evening meetings.

The First of August processions further symbolized community cohesion, proudly displaying the community’s corporate institutions. An observer at the 1854 Providence cavalcade attested to its inclusiveness, describing the passing of many “carriages of all kinds from the aristocratic coach to the humble one-horse wagon.”77 The festival’s inclusiveness, however, did not eliminate class and status distinctions. African American processions featured middle-class benevolent and literary societies, fraternal organizations, and juvenile school groups and music ensembles. One New Bedford parade, for instance, included the Union Club, the Morning Star Beneficial Society, the Seamen’s Assistance Association, a juvenile society, and the International Organization of Odd Fellows chapter.78 The following year the National Era reported that the “United Colored Americans, Sons of Liberty and other organizations . . . in full regalia” comprised Dayton’s First of August cavalcade.79 While white abolitionists marched by town, African American processions of benevolent societies exhibited pride in these community symbols and reinforced a cohesive corporate identity. In addition, First of August orations repeatedly expounded the concept that securing civil rights depended on the prior emergence of African American unity. “Our deliverance . . .
David Roberts

must come from ourselves,” concluded one speaker at the 1858 Springfield celebration. “When we respect ourselves, and respect each other and stand by each other . . . white men will [acknowledge our rights].”86 William Watkins highlighted this theme more succinctly, proclaiming, “In Union there is strength.”87

The evening festivities also fostered this community spirit by providing a collective social experience and mobilizing community support. During the period between the afternoon and evening festivities, African Americans engaged in formalized social calls and serenades to prominent citizens, such as those reported at New Bedford in 1851.88 These activities as well as the soirees and balls reinforced and expanded social networks within the African American community, building enduring socio-economic connections. Furthermore, evening events included fundraising fairs, such as Cincinnati’s fair to raise support for its Colored Orphan Asylum, to support the community’s institutions and mutual benefit.89 As the annual festival that assembled all members of the African American community, the First of August created and bolstered a distinct community pledged to its own mutual support.

In addition to encouraging this collective identity, the organizers of African American festivals sought to both influence public opinion within their community and project a positive image to the broader society. Embracing and promoting middle-class reform values provided the means to cultivate public sentiment.90 Antebellum reform beliefs valued economic independence, supported by education; self-respect, evidenced by personal appearance; and self-control, evidenced by temperance. Accepting these values, the organizers of First of August celebrations emulated the goals and tactics of the broader antebellum reform movements and crafted their celebrations to exhibit these qualities. First of August speeches indicated the role of event organizers as reformers of African American community. In addition to the standard orations on West Indian emancipation and the American anti-slavery crusade, African American speakers addressed recurring themes of moral improvement. In 1845 a speaker at Boston’s African American First of August meeting encouraged “colored citizens to improve every opportunity to elevate among themselves the standards of morality.”91 African American leaders believed these standards of morality, synonymous with middle-class values, provided the key to political and social elevation. As a result, African American leaders both condemned and sought to reform, as Mr. Sketon at a Columbus, Ohio First of August meeting explained, “those persons who by their servility, degrade the race” and encouraged the “proper exhibition of self-respect” among African Americans.92 “[We must] rid ourselves of ignorance and intemperance and show that we respect ourselves,” William Wells Brown proclaimed, defining the specific qualities of moral improvement, and must “educate our children, give them professions or trades and let them have capital within themselves that shall gain them wealth and influence . . . and make themselves independent.”93 While assembled to commemorate West Indian emancipation, the First of August jubilees proved an excellent forum for those who sought to reform the African Ameri-
can community. Delivering speeches engaging moral elevation themes, which promoted middle-class values of morality, independence, and respectability, African Americans employed American cultural beliefs in their public discourse.

Through the First of August celebrations, especially the processions, African Americans sought to demonstrate their adoption of American cultural values. The benevolent societies' prominent participation in the parades, in addition to fostering corporate spirit, revealed their existence to the broader community. All participants in the cavalcade donned their best attire, which heightened the festive atmosphere and displayed the African American community's prosperity. The benevolent society members often dressed identically "in full regalia" that included white pantaloons with clark coats, while women wore white dresses with flowers and wreaths; children, too, "were not only neatly, but elegantly attired" and well behaved. This selection of clothing communicated important symbolic messages regarding the participants' respectability and domestic acumen. In the period's allegorical language, appearance denoted personal qualities. "Neat and tidy" clothing conveyed self-respect; wearing white clothing, which shows stains readily, demonstrated the "spotless" physical appearance as well as moral character of the participants. White clothing, moreover, signified simplicity and good taste, which evidenced respectability. Newspaper accounts described African American First of August attire sometimes as "holiday attire" or "aristocratic finery," but more frequently as "neat and tidy," "in good order and taste," or "simple and becoming." The participation of women, the locus of antebellum gentility and domesticity imagery, in the processions enhanced African American assertions of respectability. A Poughkeepsie Eagle correspondent clearly understood this symbolism when he depicted the apparel, commenting that there "prevailed a staid dignity and genteel bearing and manner which proved that they duly appreciated ... the occasion." While clothing and women's participation signified respectability, children's participation represented future moral and social elevation. In addition to marching as members of schools, bands, and juvenile societies, children rode in carriages infused with symbolic significance, such as those depicting the conditions of slavery and freedom at the Cincinnati's 1855 parade, or the beehive-shaped "Car of Industry" at New Bedford the following year. Furthermore, children carried banners with morally uplifting themes. For instance, schoolchildren bore a banner inscribed, "Knowledge is Power" at Rochester's 1848 celebration. Subsequent banners in that procession declared "Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands to God," and below a Christian cross "With This We Overcome," advertising the African American community's religious piety. Since its symbolic meaning exemplified piety, moral improvement, and respectability, the procession ritual's retention in African American First of August festivities suggests efforts to cultivate positive sentiments within the local white community in order to counter the negative images of African Americans as lazy, stupid, disorderly, and musical perpetuated by the minstrel performances of the contemporary American theater.
David Roberts

Projecting a positive collective image to the broader community depended on the decorous commemoration of the First of August. African American organizers sought to conduct their First of August jubilees without the violence and tumult that accompanied contemporary Independence Day celebrations. In the period’s public discourse, drunkenness connoted disorder; therefore, African Americans employed middle-class temperance values to ensure the perceived propriety of these festivals. Corresponding to the white abolitionist promotion of a vision of racial equality and harmony in America through encouraging and publicizing biracial gatherings, African Americans asserted their proper inclusion in American public life by ensuring and disseminating newspaper accounts attesting to their orderly First of August festivals. While “to many of us the First of August is...a day freed from ordinary restraints,” reported the North Star, “the masses conducted themselves with propriety as well as freedom.”

Recalling the 1848 Rochester jubilee, Frederick Douglass related, the “day passed harmoniously, soberly, and pleasantly without any of those riotous manifestations which are too apt to disgrace the rejoicing days both of blacks and the whites.” That same year the National Reformer, expressing the hope that “our Fourth of July might...be as orderly and appropriately celebrated...as was the first of August by our colored citizens,” indicated the reception of this symbolic message by the white reform community. Through their adherence to temperance principles as in their emulation of other middle-class values, African Americans enacted a strategy to prove their “worthiness” for American civil and political rights. The First of August provided the forum in which this “worthiness” could be demonstrated to the community.

In enlisting First of August celebrations to execute this strategy, African Americans used the processions, which occupied public space, to assert their inclusion into American public culture. As the 1850s progressed, African American possession of public space increasingly included locations with political significance, such as public squares and town halls. For instance, the New Bedford celebrations convened annual evening meetings at its City Hall after 1851. First of August festivals’ ritual performances correlating to Independence Day activities, including renditions of the British Emancipation Act and the Declaration of Independence, salutes of cannon and bells, bonfires, marching bands, and military displays, communicated the community’s “Americanness” and emphasized its commonalities with the white community. Appealing to shared traditions and a common heritage reinforced African American claims for political and social equality. The participation of military units, which recalled African American participation in the Revolutionary War, bolstered demands for the blessings of the Revolution, especially those inalienable rights of citizenship embodied in the Declaration of Independence.

The Revolutionary theme and natural rights rhetoric, animated by republican ideology, recurred throughout First of August ritual and oratory. At the 1858 New Bedford gathering, William Wells Brown reminded his audience that they assembled “not only [to] celebrate the anniversary of West Indian emancipation, but...[to] announce to the world our own
Illustrative of our natural rights, which are recognized in the Declaration of Independence.” Addressing New Bedford’s festival five years earlier, William Watkins demanded their “rights as men, as freemen, as citizens of the United States ... those absolute inalienable rights, for which our fathers died.” In addition, performance rituals emphasized their Revolutionary heritage. During the 1844 evening soirée in Boston, for example, the unfurling of an African American regimental standard commissioned during the War by John Hancock highlighted that America represented their native land. Reiterating this theme at Philadelphia’s 1836 collation, a participant proposed a “cold water” toast to the “Colored Citizens of the United States—We love the country of our nativity; we have defended it against foreign invasion and will veto ... colonization.” In fact, the First of August served frequently to mobilize the African American community politically against colonization proposals, as well as to select representatives to national conventions. For example, the 1849 Cincinnati First of August gathering elected delegates to the national “Convention of Colored People,” while an 1851 Indianapolis jubilee assembled to discuss “the propriety of emigration and to elect delegates to the National Convention.” The culmination of the First of August’s function as a political platform occurred with the “Colored Citizens Conventions,” convoked in New Bedford and Boston in 1858 and 1859, respectively. The First of August festivities provided the symbolic invocation of the conventions, whose object was “to take into consideration the best means of promoting [African American’s] moral, social and political elevation.” Similar to previous First of August celebrations, republican rhetoric pervaded this discourse. For instance, William Wells Brown opened the Boston convention, appealing to African Americans, “let us ... vindicate our right to citizenship and pledge ourselves to aid in completing the Revolution for human freedom commenced by the patriots of 1776 and see our country ... free.” For the African American community, the First of August provided a political forum to express their collective identity, articulate their public agenda, and cultivate public opinion in favor of civil and political equality through appeals to American cultural beliefs.

Conclusion: Resolving the Paradoxes

American First of August festivals offer historians a wealth of research opportunities, while presenting many ambiguous and paradoxical relationships: an American holiday commemorating a foreign event; a rival celebration of American liberty employing Independence Day rituals; and separate and distinct white and African American festivals pursuing many common goals. As a result of these paradoxes, initial impressions often obscure the celebrations’ significance and meaning.

During the thirty-year history of the First of August jubilee, abolitionists invented a repertoire of ritual practices that bore only a cursory resemblance to West Indian emancipation. Abolitionists instead understood and attributed meaning to the event in terms of the
David Roberts

American cultural belief systems of republicanism and evangelical Protestantism's middle-class reform values, thereby translating and mediating British emancipation into contemporary discourse concerning American liberty and slavery. To engage in this public discourse, abolitionists, both black and white, viewed First of August celebrations as the foremost forum to influence public opinion for the eradication of American slavery and for the redefinition of American liberty to encompass racial equality and harmony. Observing this rival freedom jubilee that opposed the American Independence festival's hypocrisy and debauchery, abolitionists appropriated slightly modified Fourth of July conventions, ritual forms, and aspirations of human liberty. As a result, First of August celebrations resembled more than diverged from Independence Day commemorations. Each event's ritual performance reinforced collective purposes and identities. Similarly, white and black First of August jubilees, while often convened in separate locations and comprised distinct rituals, served a common opinion-making function that promoted a shared commitment to emancipation and racial equality, expressed in the same discursive language. Moreover, First of August celebrations forged collective identities and mobilized mutual benefit networks that both white and black abolitionists considered crucial to sustaining and furthering the cause. The apparent divisions between white and African American festivals represented different emphases and tactics to pursue common strategies and goals. Ultimately, both sides of the historiographical debate contribute to understanding abolitionism's multifaceted character. While identifying divisions highlights abolitionism's complexity, these commonalities convey how it confronted and interacted with the contested political and public culture of antebellum America.

American commemoration of West Indian emancipation provides one final paradox. Abolitionists vowed repeatedly to celebrate this event "until the great day of the deliverance of the American slave shall furnish us with a true birth-day of American Liberty."104 However, First of August festivals continued after the issuance of Emancipation Proclamation and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, proving the importance of this annual event independent of its original commemorative significance. Through its continuation, abolitionists and African American communities sought to perpetuate their collective unity and their influence within the public debate regarding African American civil and political rights. At the 1865 Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society sponsored festival at Abington Grove, Samuel May contended that the time has "not quite come yet for us to discontinue its observance," because the failures of the apprenticeship system offered lessons for Reconstruction.105 As the Liberator, the principal source of First of August celebration reports, ceased publication in 1865, the existence of subsequent white abolitionist festivals remains unexamined. Other sources document African American First of August jubilees continuing into the 1870s. Nevertheless, its annual observance discontinued with the passing of the antebellum African American community leaders. One newspaper report commented, "there have been no celebrations of Emancipation Day since the death (circa 1875) of Abe Trower, a colored man..."
FORGOTTEN AMERICAN OBSERVANCE

through whose efforts the event was commemorated each August by a grand picnic. As Reconstruction ended, abolitionists dispersed, and the African American antebellum generation passed away, the glorious First of August faded into obscurity, becoming a forgotten American holiday.

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NOTES

1 Liberatot, 16 August 1839.
2 Juneteenth Day commemorates the day when African Americans in Texas learned of their emancipation on June 19, 1865. The annual celebration of this day continues among African American communities.
3 The historiography of nineteenth-century public festivity aids in examining the First of August. Serving as a model to emulate and reject, the Fourth of July was particularly significant. Three recent historical accounts, Simon Newman, Parades and Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), Len Travers, Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), and David Waldstreicher, In the Midst of Perpetual Frets: The Making of American Nationalism 1776-1820 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), assess the role of the Fourth of July's public rituals in forging a national identity and an arena where its definition was contested. In addition, African American celebrations—New England's Negro Election Day and New York's Easter festival Pinkster—were another source on which to pattern the First of August. Perhaps the best discussion of the rituals associated with these celebrations is the article by Shane White, "It Was a Proud Day": African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834" Journal of American History 81 (June 1994): 133-50, which describes the importance of these festivals to African American communities.
5 A note on source methodology and limitations. This analysis relies primarily on articles in the Liberatot—which covered the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's and the Boston African American community's celebrations, with occasional references to other gatherings throughout the North—and the newspapers edited by Frederick Douglass: the North Star, Frederick Douglass' Paper, and the Douglass Monthly, which includes Douglass's descriptions of the celebrations he attended. These sources were reviewed as follows: Liberatot 26 July 1834 to 1 October 1855; every year was scanned from the second week of July through the first issue in October. The same approach was
David Roberts

applied to the Douglass-edited papers for the following years: 1848-1849, 1852-1855, 1859-1863. Due to gaps in the collection, the following individual issues were scanned for incomplete years: 1850, 5 September, 3 October, 1851, 21 August, 4 and 26 September, 1858, 17 September. Although mainstream newspapers ignored the celebrations prior 1850 and include limited notices thereafter, the New York Times was scanned for five issues following 4 July and 1 August between 1852 and 1859 to obtain a mainstream perspective. This source material, however, contains methodological limitations, including authors' biased efforts to promote abolitionism and incomplete accounts that fail to convey participant motives and perceptions explicitly as well as inconsistent coverage of celebrations beyond New England. Despite these limitations, the many detailed reports reveal consistent activity patterns, illustrating how various anti-slavery communities observed the First of August.

6 The inspiration for the community-building function of the First of August was provided by Abner Cohen, Masquerade Politics: Exploration in the Structure of Urban Cultural Movements (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 5. He demonstrates how the Notting Hill Carnival in London became an “all-West Indian institution” that came “to symbolise as well as enhance and demonstrate their corporeality and cohesion” that overcame “divisions between island of origin, age, and neighborhood” to create their “identity here in Britain.”


10 Waldstreicher, H. Waldstreicher identifies the importance of newspapers and other printed media in creating the meaning of Fourth of July celebrations beyond the events themselves and analyzes this integral component of the public discourse.

11 Benjamin Quarles, Black Abolitionists (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), viii.


15 The source information for this discussion of a typical Fourth of July was drawn of newspaper accounts of celebrations in New York and reports from other cities that appeared in the New York Times, 3 July 1852 and 5 July 1855.

16 Liberator, 18 July 1851.

17 Ibid., 21 August 1840.

18 Ibid., 14 July 1843.

19 Ibid., 11 August 1843.

20 Ibid., 11 July 1851.

21 Ibid., 22 August 1843.

22 Ibid., 7 August 1863

23 Ibid., 27 July 1861. Abolitionist appropriation of the Fourth of July symbolism is consistent with David Waldstreicher's argument that Americans resolved their abhorrence of factionalism in the Early National Period by depicting themselves as the legitimate inheritors of Revolutionary ideals. See Waldstreicher, 9.
FORGOTTEN AMERICAN OBSERVANCE

25 Liberatore, 27 June 1856.
26 Ibid., 13 July 1855.
27 Ibid., 13 July 1854.
28 Ibid., 10 August 1838.
29 Ibid., 10 July 1847.
31 Similar to the First of August festivals in the United States, historians have not explored the rituals or even existence of ongoing commemorative traditions in Britain or the West Indies. As a result, insufficient source information precludes detailed comparison of American and West Indian traditions. Limited glimpses provided by the abolitionist press in the United States suggests that West Indian celebrations used British cultural forms, such as singing “God Save the King” in 1834, distinct from American festive traditions. In Britain, the First of August was observed only intermittently after 1834; their renewed commemoration after 1850 coincided with rising British public opinion concerning the issue of slavery in the United States. The international aspects of the First of August warrants further attention, but is beyond this article’s limited scope and purposes.
32 This process of the translation of foreign events into existing discourse is similar to Audrey Fisch’s examination of the British response to American slave literature and lectures in 1850s Britain. See Audrey A. Fisch, American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10.
33 Liberatore, 8 August 1845.
34 Ibid., 9 September 1842.
35 Ibid., 26 July 1844.
36 Ibid., 27 July 1838 and 14 August 1840.
37 Ibid., 13 August 1836.
38 Ibid., 21 July 1843.
39 Ibid., 14 July 1848.
40 Ibid., 2 September 1853.
41 Ibid., 21 July 1843.
42 Ibid., 5 August 1842.
43 Ibid., 9 August 1844.
44 Douglas Monthly, August 1859.
45 Liberatore, 23 August 1844.
46 This expression may be an antebellum commonplace: An observer at a contemporary meeting of non-abolitionists to honor the Pilgrims encouraged people to always “keep their memory green in our hearts.” Liberatore, 5 August 1833. In addition, green has traditionally represented hope in western folklore.
47 Liberatore, 11 August 1843; 8 August 1845; and 15 August 1851.
48 The come-out tradition was a theme in antebellum reform movements. The term originated to describe how individuals, energized by the evangelical fervor of the Second Great Awakening, left existing congregations to form new evangelical religious denominations. These people were referred to as “come-outers.” The term became applicable to additional groups who “come-out” from religious and political institutions to pursue a reform agenda, such as various communitarian movements and the Garrisonian abolitionists.
50 Fasting may indicate gender divisions between male and female conceptions and participation in abolitionism, since both these examples were gatherings organized and attended by women (one gathering white women and the second African American women) and no corresponding male examples are documented.
David Roberts

141. Liberator, 17 September 1836, and 23 August 1844.
142 Frederick Douglass' Paper, 12 August 1853.
143 Liberator, 14 August 1857, and 10 August 1838.
144 Ibid., 25 July 1835.
145 Ibid., 15 August 1851; 19 August 1855; 15 August 1856; and 20 August 1858.
146 Douglass' Monthly, August 1839.
147 Liberator, 8 August 1845.
148 Ibid., 30 July 1852.
149 Ibid., 7 August 1846.
150 Frederick Douglass' Paper, 27 July 1855.
151 Liberator, 28 June 1850.
152 Ibid., 4 August 1843.
153 Ibid., 9 August 1834.
154 Ibid., 11 August 1843, and 25 August 1848.
155 During the 1850s Douglass and Brown attended African American celebrations with increasing frequency.
156 Liberator, 8 August 1856.
157 Ibid., 15 August 1856.
158 Ibid., 9 August 1844.
159 Ibid., 20 August 1852.
160 Ibid., 11 August 1843.
162 African American First of August celebrations' dual and concurrent purposes to form a distinct African American collective identity and to argue for incorporation into American society recalls W.E.B. DuBois's identification of the African American "double-consciousness" in The Souls of Black Folk. The First of August festivals may provide the origins or early expressions of this current of African American thought that warrants further investigation. For further discussion, see William B. Gravely, "The Dialectic of Double Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808-1863," Journal of Negro History 67 (Winter 1982): 302-17.
163 This role and the aspirations of the African American community leadership evidences the existence of class and status divisions within the African American community that are unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.
164 North Star, 21 July 1848.
165 Ibid.
166 Frederick Douglass' Paper, 4 September 1851.
167 Liberator, 4 August 1854.
168 Ibid., 19 August 1853.
169 Ibid., 25 August 1854.
170 Ibid., 20 August 1858.
171 Frederick Douglass' Paper, 18 August 1854.
172 Liberator, 15 August 1851.
173 Ibid., 19 August 1853.
174 Terrye Baton Yizar, "Afro-American Music in North America before 1865: A Study of 'The First of August Celebrations' in the United States," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1984), 201. Yizar argues unconvincingly that although African Americans adopted Euro-American fashion, music, and conventions, the underlying structure of First of August festivals, especially its music, remained African. Rejecting this argument,
I contend that African Americans adopted Euro-American forms and middle-class values to project a positive image to the white community; this interpretation is consistent with Shane White's analysis of African American festivals during the Early National era in his article, "It Was a Proud Day: African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994): 13-50.

85 *Liberator*, 8 August 1845.
86 *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 18 August 1854.
87 *Liberator*, 19 August 1859.
88 *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 10 August 1855.
89 The participation of women in the processions and their non-participation in afternoon orations and soirée speeches indicates an interesting gender dynamic within the African American community that, while beyond the scope of this article, warrants further investigation.
90 *Liberator*, 26 August 1859.
91 Ibid., 27 July 1855 and 15 August 1856.
92 Ibid., 1 September 1848.
93 Ibid.
94 *Douglass' Monthly*, August 1859.
95 *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 4 August 1848.
96 *North Star*, 11 August 1848.
97 *Liberator*, 19 August 1859.
98 Ibid., 19 August 1853.
99 Ibid., 9 August 1844.
100 Ibid., 17 September 1836.
101 Ibid., 20 August 1849 and 1 August 1851.
102 Ibid., 19 August 1859.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 5 August 1842.
105 Ibid., 11 August 1865.
106 *Yizra*, 138.