

CHAPTER FIVE

“It Was Our Duty”

The Lord was pleased to strengthen us, and remove all fear from us, and disposed our hearts to be as useful as possible.

—ABSALOM JONES AND RICHARD ALLEN, JANUARY 1794

Thursday, September 5. It was clear that the fever was winning. People were still streaming from the city in droves; houses, businesses, and shops were closed and dark; the sick, dying, and dead were everywhere to be seen. Amid all this a remarkable meeting took place at the Free African Society on Fifth Street, just south of Walnut.

The Free African Society was founded in 1787, the first organization in America created by blacks for blacks. Its purpose was to help members who were destitute and to provide care for widows and fatherless children. On that Thursday the elders of the society assembled to consider something extraordinary: Would they use their association members and their skills to help their struggling white neighbors?

A few days before, a letter had arrived from Benjamin Rush urging the society to help nurse the sick and attend to the dead. One reason they should come forward, Rush contended, was that God had seen fit to grant blacks a special resistance to the dreaded disease.

In reality, this wasn't true. A small number of blacks who had grown up in either Africa or the West Indies had had the disease as children and survived. Through this encounter with the fever their blood automatically produced antibodies that either fought off the yellow fever virus entirely or reduced its impact on the individual significantly. Most blacks in Philadelphia didn't have this natural immunity and would suffer the ravages of the fever along with whites. But early in September the vast majority of sufferers Rush saw and heard about were white. Rush truly believed what he told the elders.

Most of those gathered at the meeting had been slaves at one time and knew how oppressive some of the whites around them could be. And while Philadelphia had approximately 3,000 free blacks, there were still over 200 blacks being kept as slaves. They were also well aware that the opportunities routinely granted to white citizens—to rise in business and politics—were still being denied them. In 1793 over 50 percent of Philadelphia's blacks were live-in domestic workers, doing the cooking, cleaning, laundering, and child caring for better-off whites.

This August advertisement for a runaway slave was just one of many reminders to free blacks in Philadelphia that their status in the United States was still quite precarious.

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Six Dollars Reward.
RAN AWAY, on the 12th instant, a
 Sambo Boy, called **ALEXANDER**,
 comonly pronounced **Ellick**, a native of Ja-
 maica, about 20 years old, pock-marked, 5
 feet 3 or 4 inches high, firm made, stamped
 on the breast with the letters **I F C** speaks
 very good French, and lately arrived from
 Cape Francois, where he lived several years,
 had on when he ran away a pair of new shoes
 with plated buckles, a new pair of nankeen
 trowsers, a striped blue, red and white jacket,
 looks smart and active. Whoever appre-
 hends said boy, or secures him in gaol, so
 that his master may get him again, shall have
 the above reward, by applying to the Printer
 herof.
 Aug. 17. d41