



MORE THAN FREEDOM

*Fighting for Black Citizenship
in a White Republic, 1829–1889*

STEPHEN KANTROWITZ

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THE PENGUIN PRESS

New York

2012

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in 2012 by The Penguin Press,
a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kantrowitz, Stephen David, 1965–

More than freedom : fighting for black citizenship in a white republic, 1829–1889 / Stephen Kantrowitz.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59420-342-8

1. African Americans—Massachusetts—Boston Region—History—19th century.
2. African Americans—Civil rights—Massachusetts—Boston Region—History—19th century.
3. Free African Americans—Massachusetts—Boston Region—History—19th century.
4. Free African Americans—Civil rights—Massachusetts—Boston Region—History—19th century.
5. Citizenship—United States—History—19th century.
6. Boston Region (Mass.)—Race relations—History—19th century.
7. Boston Region (Mass.)—History—19th century. I. Title.

F73.9.N4K36 2012

323.1196'073074461—dc23

2011044724

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed by Meghan Cavanaugh

Maps by Jeffrey L. Ward

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MORE THAN FREEDOM

ALSO BY STEPHEN KANTROWITZ

Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy

For Pernille

Throw away your fears and prejudices then, and enlighten us and treat us like men, and we will like you more than we do now hate you, and tell us no more about colonization, for America is as much our country, as it is yours.—Treat us like men, and there is no danger but we will all live in peace and happiness together. For we are not like you, hard hearted, unmerciful, and unforgiving. What a happy country this will be, if the whites will listen.

—DAVID WALKER, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*

I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.

—WILLIAM MORRIS, *A Dream of John Ball*

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Introduction

As he prepared to watch the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment march through Boston in May 1863, the black activist and historian William Cooper Nell chose his place with care. The intersection of State Street and Devonshire, by the Old State House, was the perfect site from which to cheer the first Civil War regiment recruited from among the free blacks of the North. On that very ground, Nell reminded the readers of the *New York Weekly Anglo-African*, the former slave Crispus Attucks had become the first to fall in the cause of American independence, killed while confronting British soldiers in the Boston Massacre of 1770. But Nell also noted the less noble chapters of local history written on that same spot. In the 1850s, soldiers and policemen had marched fugitive slaves across the massacre site on their way from the Boston courthouse to the wharf, where ships waited to return them to slavery. The passage down State Street of the men of the 54th—many of them born enslaved, all of them until recently excluded not only from military service

but from American citizenship itself—symbolized a renewal of the American Revolution's promise of liberty, and of African Americans' forceful claim to that heritage.¹

The spectacle of black men as armed, disciplined citizens may have been something new under the sun to most of the day's white observers, but it represented the triumph of decades of political and ideological work by thousands of people. Since the 1820s, the nation's small and scattered free black communities had been mobilizing, developing institutions, debating issues, and searching out allies to help weave their yearnings into political victories and a place to belong.² Afro-America's revolutionary hopes for emancipation and citizenship, expressed in countless meetings, conventions, petitions, protests, and publications, revolts large and small, and innumerable small acts of courage and conscience had cast doubt on the common white perspective that free African Americans were a hindrance or a hazard to the nation's peace and prosperity. Moreover, that long campaign had helped bring the war in which these men's service was now required. The result was stirring: a crowd of black and white Bostonians together loudly cheering as black soldiers in U.S. uniforms marched off to win the nation's war and complete the work of emancipation. No wonder William Nell, his entire life devoted to this struggle, indulged in a moment of rapture, imagining "the free, the happy future, as within a seeming hailing distance."³

But the story of African Americans forging a new place for themselves in the nation cannot be compressed into this moment of triumph. Their road to that place of honor in the May sunshine had often seemed like little more than a succession of dead ends, washouts, and tollgates for which they had no coin. Most whites, North and South, regarded African Americans with scorn and suspicion, gleefully or sadly noting their failings and incapacities, and imagining a future for them as slaves, subordinates, or deportees. Fighting those ideas, and the laws and customs that perpetuated them, was an uphill battle for a small minority; along with organiza-

tions and debates came disagreements, some of them profound, that set black Americans against one another. Even in this moment of triumph, as the 54th paraded, Nell sadly noted that the unequal terms on which black soldiers fought—in separate units, under white officers—had sparked a campaign against enlistment.⁴ Nell did not quite admit it, but that campaign had been remarkably effective: most of the men of the 54th were not from Boston, and most eligible Boston men were not in it. Such debates and divides were as consistent a feature of free black life as the desire to forge unity and to heal the wounds left by old disputes.

Those hard histories of white hostility and black division might have been intolerable without a vision of how African Americans could transcend them and become fully vested American citizens, equal not only before the law but also in the hearts and minds of their neighbors. Over decades of struggle, black activists developed a vision of belonging—of their place in the nation—that allowed them to imagine Nell's "free, happy future" even when the status of free black Northerners as Americans was at its most precarious. In 1857, to choose the most bitter example, the Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that African Americans had not been and could not be citizens of the nation. Within a few years Northern states and territories voted to exclude black migrants, and Southern legislatures debated reenslaving their free black residents. A resurgent emigration movement among African Americans depicted African and Caribbean destinations as more promising than the American republic. But even in these dark days, Nell's friend George Downing told a convention of the "Colored Citizens of New England" that the future held something very different: God intended the United States to provide a model for "a great principle, *the fraternal unity of man*." In preparation for that coming age of "universal brotherhood," African Americans must prepare themselves for "confident manly contact" in the wider world, nurturing a "consciousness of equality" and insisting that their white neighbors do the same. In the face of exclusion, segregation, and derision, embattled

“colored citizens” like Nell and Downing envisioned a world in which white Americans not only recognized African Americans’ equal rights but also embraced them as brothers and equals in every arena of life.⁵

Because they hoped for so much, black activists did not consider their battle won with the end of slavery in 1865, nor even with the revolutions of Reconstruction. Instead, they worked to shape and extend these victories. They threw themselves into the remaking of the postemancipation South, pressed for broader and more capacious laws of equal citizenship, and insisted that whites who continued to exclude them by law or custom stood in opposition to the victorious Union and the egalitarian “spirit of the age.” The African American activists of the nineteenth-century North have long been dubbed “black abolitionists,” but that term both understates the dimensions of their efforts prior to the war and neglects their decades of work after emancipation. “Abolition,” essential but insufficient, was too small a box to contain their aspirations. Figures who spent the antebellum and war years building associations and demanding their rights hardly paused, even to celebrate, as they confronted the altered but still vexing challenges of the postwar world.⁶

In the postbellum decades Boston’s black citizens demanded and won both civil rights legislation and seats in the state legislature, even before Reconstruction enabled black Southerners to do so. From a narrow foothold on Beacon Hill, they used numbers and moral force to establish themselves as a group to be reckoned with. They also came to grips with the frailty and the limits of what they had achieved, and in the decades after William Nell’s reverie they constantly confronted the disappointments of citizenship. In Boston and throughout the United States, the people who called themselves “colored citizens” carried on with their fundamental project—the transformation of the American nation into a place where they finally, fully, belonged. That postwar part of the story—both its successes and its failures—is every bit as central to the meanings of emancipation, equality, and citizenship in American life as the struggles of the antebellum era and the victories of the 1860s. Black activists’ experi-

ences in the decades before the war explain a great deal about what they thought and did in the period that followed; the often grim realities of the postwar era help us understand both the dazzling scope of their hopes and triumphs, and the powerful constraints within which they were imagined and enacted. Neither the prewar nor the postwar story can be well understood without the other. This work explores both.⁷

This is the story of a vision of a republic in which African Americans could fully belong, a vision Northern free blacks developed and promoted during the six decades when the expansion, destruction, and aftermath of slavery preoccupied the nation. It begins in the era of David Walker, whose 1829 pamphlet *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* represented the anger, yearning, and solidarity of free black Northerners; it ends sixty years later, as the inheritors of Walker's legacy passed from the scene. During this era, no group focused more sharply on shaping events than those blacks who were free before the war. Through persistent efforts, they sought to write themselves into the national narratives of democracy and fraternity. They wielded the weapons of petition, protest, and insurgency; forged associations to amplify their scattered voices; denounced white Americans for betraying their own stated principles; and banded together to take part in the rituals and celebrations of political and associational life. Throughout a critical phase of the nation's history they waged an unceasing political campaign to establish African Americans as citizens, and to give that word a fullness of meaning. Their campaign began long before reliable white allies were anywhere in evidence, and it lasted long after the guns of the Civil War had fallen silent.

To call oneself a "colored citizen," as David Walker's admirers began to do during the 1830s, was to claim a role in at least two simultaneous efforts. On the one hand, African American activists created networks and institutions to bind their scattered communities together, investing themselves in projects as various as newspapers, Protestant denominations, and Masonic lodges.⁸ Excluded from public life in many of its forms, they created what some scholars have dubbed a "black counter-public," in

which they looked to one another for support and affirmation.⁹ They practiced citizenship as a matter of survival. But although what they built was for many purposes a world apart, it did not represent a full-scale or principled withdrawal from the wider world. Even if they had wished to forge such an enclave, they could not create walls that slavery and prejudice were bound to respect.

Rather, most of the leading voices in that black world of speech and action sought a rapprochement of hearts and minds with white Americans. They understood that a future in the United States required them to establish their place among their white countrymen. "Citizenship" meant being legally and politically vested, but it also meant something more: bonds of trust and even love across the color line. It meant knowing and being known; it meant a warm welcome to the full duties, rights, privileges, and pleasures of American life, whether understood in George Downing's grand language of "universal brotherhood" or in William Nell's disarmingly candid vision of "the free, the happy future." It meant a citizenship of the heart.¹⁰

That they sought a sense of belonging in no way meant that they relied on moral and emotional appeals. Far from it. As inheritors of the ideological legacy of the American Revolution, they believed that freedom belonged only to those willing to seize it. Even as they described themselves as law abiding and "respectable," they issued strident and even violent challenges to proslavery and inegalitarian laws. They were a people militant, and often armed, long before the United States government authorized them to march in its ranks. Citizenship, they understood, was something one demonstrated to oneself and to others. It had to be asserted. It had to be won.¹¹

This book explores that expansive vision of citizenship through the struggles of Boston's black leadership to give that vision life. It focuses in particular on a group of men and women who came of age in the generation before the Civil War, and who, over careers lasting as much as fifty years, worked for inclusion, equality, recognition, and the end of the

American system of racial caste. They were freeborn sons and daughters of Massachusetts, and freeborn Southerners who migrated north. They were ex-slaves who had gained their freedom, as well as fugitive slaves who had snatched it from slave owners and whose claim to it remained precarious. Some knew one another intimately, others by acquaintance or simply by reputation. On most questions they did not speak with one voice. But they shared the common experience of working together to end slavery and create a world in which “colored citizen” was not a contradiction in terms.

Greater Boston is not the only place about which such a story could be told, but it played an important and often singular role during the era.¹² Massachusetts’s egalitarian revolutionary constitution, which began with the words “All men are born free and equal,” encouraged some of the state’s enslaved people to sue for their freedom during the early 1780s; state court rulings soon made it plain that slaveholders had no legal recourse, and slavery collapsed as people asserted their freedom.¹³ By the nineteenth century African American residents of Massachusetts faced comparatively few formal disabilities, and black men could vote on the same basis as white. Though their community was small compared to those of New York or Philadelphia, Boston’s African Americans were intimately involved in, and often at the forefront of, regional and national movements. They spearheaded the first substantial alliances with antislavery whites, and undertook the first sustained engagement in antislavery party politics. They helped shape the terms under which black men served in the Union army, and they became the first postbellum black elected officials. Finally, a substantial fragment of what they wrote made its way into archives: enmeshed in the city’s world of politicized intellectuals and historical self-consciousness, Boston’s black activists left unusually rich records of their thoughts, activities, and relationships with one another. The community was certainly not “representative” or “typical,” because no community was, but it was highly significant and sometimes clearly pivotal in shaping broader events.