On Borrowed Ground: Free African-American life in Charleston, South Carolina 1810-61

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I. Introduction

In 1848 Michael J. Eggart spoke to the Friendly Moralist Society, an exclusive group of free, light-skinned African-American Charlestonians, about their position in Charleston society. He claimed that free mulattoes lived on "a middle ground" defined on one side by "the prejudice of the white man" and on the other by "the deeper hate of our more sable brethren [slaves and free black Charlestonians]."[1] Eggart understood that in 1848 all free mulatto privileges depended on slavery. In distinguishing themselves from other African Americans free mulattoes could temper white prejudice against them and hold a more privileged social position.

Although in 1848 most free mulatto Charlestonians also held Eggart's desire for separation, they had not always defined the goal with such clarity. Strong foundations of solidarity, challenging the notion of separation, existed in Charleston before 1822. This solidarity cut across all existing lines of separation: status (slave versus free), class and color (mulatto versus black).

White oppression and clear moves against solidarity increased in 1822, after the discovery of Denmark Vesey's slave conspiracy to burn Charleston and kill all whites in the city. White reaction to the
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conspiracy destroyed any hope for continuing African-American solidarity in Charleston. The nuances of the oppression forced a split along status, class and color lines among Charleston's African Americans.

To establish such a split affluent free mulattoes used not only legal freedom, but also symbols of wealth and color to differentiate themselves from other Charleston African Americans. Such a move diluted white prejudice against the city's free mulatto population, creating the "middle ground" Eggart spoke of in 1848. This ground depended not only on a distinction from the degraded position of slaves in Charleston, but also from lawmaking and administering white aristocrats who held political power to acknowledge and protect the "middle ground" of affluent free mulattoes. Thus, the social position which free mulatto elites established was not only a middle ground; it was ground borrowed from those Charlestonians above (white aristocrats) and below (slaves).

Mulatto elites, possessing the greatest number of tools to create borrowed ground, led the way in its formation. Their actions and manipulations of symbols also provided new social space for other groups of African Americans, however. Their actions invited other African-American Charlestonians to move away from solidarity and onto borrowed ground. Affluent free blacks, poor free mulattoes, poor free blacks and slaves who lived or worked out (away from their masters) all took up space on borrowed ground.

This peculiar social development produced a complex society in Charleston which on the surface may have appeared to be a three tiered system of white, free African-American and slave, but was in fact much more intricate. Borrowed ground expanded and strengthened in the forty years after the Vesey conspiracy and before the Civil War, but in the late 1850s changes in Charleston's social structure and growing political
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tensions related to the coming war eroded this social space, exposing its instability.

II. African-American Charleston: 1810

In 1810 Charleston was an African-American city -- 11,568 slaves and 1,472 free African Americans made up 53.2 percent of the city's population.[2] This population displayed a variety of characteristics which were so intricate that they are difficult to categorize. Social groups flowed into one another without clear divisions between them.

The clearest distinctions between Charleston social groups were those distinguishing free African Americans from whites. Whites possessed far more legal and civil rights than free African Americans. Unlike free African Americans, they could vote, testify in court, bring legal charges against any person in the city, and serve on South Carolina juries. Furthermore, whites frequently assaulted free African Americans with no fear of punishment, and some whites even kidnapped free people and sold them into slavery. In short free African Americans could not depend on legal protection, as whites could. Nor could free African Americans enter the world of Charleston political power.[3]

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Table 1. Charleston's Population 1810-1860(A href="poole2.html#4">4

	Whites	African American slaves	Free African Americans	Total

1810	11568	11671	1472	24711
	(46.8%)	(47.2%)	(6.0%)	(100%)
1820	10653	12652	1475	24780
	(43.0%)	(51.0%)	(6.0)	(100%)
1830	12828	15354	2107	30289
	(42.4%)	(50.7%)	(7.0%)	(100%)
1840	13030	14673	1558	29261
	(44.5%)	(50.1%)	(5.3%)	(100%)
1850	20011	19532	3441	42984
*	(46.4%)	(45.4%)	(8.0%)	(100%)
1860	23210	13441	3219	39870
	(58.2%)	(33.7%)	(8.1%)	(100%)

* The former neck enters the statistics for the city of Charleston.

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Although great disparity existed between white and free African-American positions in Charleston society, it is incorrect to assume, as Ira Berlin does in *Slaves Without Masters*, that free African

Americans had few privileges at all and were barely distinguishable from slaves. Berlin observes:

Throughout the South, free Negroes found their mobility curbed, their economic opportunities limited, and their civil rights all but obliterated. The separation and discrimination inherent in slavery continued into freedom; those free Negroes who measured their liberty against that of whites everywhere found it wanting.5

Free African Americans could not challenge whites politically and had to establish separate social structures, but to a great extent they could economically challenge the dividing lines between themselves and whites. Many free African Americans obtained substantial wealth as artisans and entrepreneurs. By 1820, many had become richer than most Charleston whites. Some owned real estate and even slaves. Despite facing political, social and economic limits in Charleston's white dominated society, free African Americans were not "slaves without masters," but masters of their own lives.6

In 1810 mulatto elites, largely because of moves to establish borrowed ground, had already developed into the most clearly defined social ground in Charleston's African-American community. In the years following discovery of Vesey's conspiracy these elites strengthened their already well established social space.

In borrowing social ground for protection and privilege mulatto elites not only needed to push against Charleston slaves but also to gain the social
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recognition from lawmaking white aristocrats. They attempted to present themselves to whites as necessary in Charleston society as a buffer between slaves and whites.

The free mulatto elite had the most tools to court such an attitude from white aristocrats. The source of these tools lay in the development of Charleston's free African-American community. Free African Americans had grown mainly from selective manumissions, interracial sexual relations in which the mother was white, and immigration. Those slaves whom masters manumitted were typically past their usefulness or in special favor with the master. Masters commonly manumitted their mulatto children and mistresses in their last will and testament. Immigrants from Santo-Domingo in the 1790s were also a source of Charleston's free African-American population. In each case most African Americans who gained freedom were mulatto. Thus, while the slave population of Charleston's district was less than one-quarter mulatto, Charleston's free African-American community developed and maintained a mulatto majority (73% in 1860) and were even known in the city as free people of color.7 Lighter skin color served as a noticeable difference between most free African Americans and their slave counterparts, a difference white Charlestonians recognized and free mulattoes exploited. In addition, the mulattoes from Santo-Domingo and those who gained freedom because of blood or sexual relationship with an ex-master tended to be educated and have some skill with which to make a living. Many also inherited money or property from an ex-master. Thus, not only did free mulattoes have light skin color to differentiate themselves from Charleston slaves, they also had money and/or property.

Mulatto elites most clearly employed the symbols of freedom through establishment of exclusive societies. Free mulattoes established the Brown Fellowship Society, the first of its kind, in 1790. It later became the most exclusive of many mulatto benevolent societies in Charleston. It accepted only elite (wealthy and respected) mulattoes into its ranks, excluding blacks, slaves, and the poor. The society worked hard to
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improve the lives of its members. It operated as a credit union for its constituents, pooled money to

buy expensive property in the city, and educated the society's children.8 The members of the society made a conscious effort to push themselves away from what they considered to he the lesser elements of Charleston's African- American community, and they did so to raise themselves up in their own eyes and in the eyes of white aristocrats -- for with white respect came privilege and safety. These mulatto elites took full advantage of their lighter skin color and affluence to gain this respect.

With the Brown Fellowship society free African Americans began to borrow the social ground which distinguished them from Charleston slaves. But these rich mulattoes did not create space for themselves alone. Other free African Americans and slaves who worked out, giving the appearance of freedom, gained space as well.

Free black elites followed the lead of free mulatto elites, establishing their own space on borrowed ground -- space which mulatto elites had made available. Free blacks reacted quickly to the formation of the Brown Fellowship Society, forming the Free Dark Men of Color in 1791.9 The society served a similar purpose for the free dark elite as the Brown Fellowship Society did for the mulatto elite. It gave free black men an organized social outlet, allowing them to embrace their darkness. It gave them an identity, just as the Brown society gave to mulattoes. These dark men were defining themselves as different from both slaves and free mulattoes. The dark elite lacked the numbers and thus the resources to form a status group comparable to that of the mulatto elite, but in the face of both white and mulatto discrimination, free black elites had little choice but to close ranks and defend their portion of borrowed ground.

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Both the mulatto and black elite defined themselves in opposition to slaves, the single largest social group in Charleston. This slavery was much different from the slavery of cotton, rice and indigo plantations of rural South Carolina. Urban slavery provided much more mobility and many more work opportunities than rural slavery. Many slaves worked as skilled or semiskilled artisans, as did free African Americans. Often these artisans had as much independence and autonomy as their free African-American counterparts. A full 15 percent of the slave population lived away from their masters. These slaves hired themselves out in the city and only saw their masters once a week to collect their earnings. They had the opportunity to live away from the eye of whites and develop their own social groups with other slaves and free African Americans.1O Another group of slaves served free African-American family members and lived as de facto free. Thus, Charleston slaves were far from being a homogeneous social group. Both slaves who worked out and those owned by free African-American family members helped to blur the line between slave and free in Charleston. It was precisely this blurring that required free African-American elites to use class and color as well as status to create their social space.

Poor free African Americans and slaves had regular contact, further obscuring social distinctions between the two. These African Americans, slave and free, went to the same churches, which "served as educational forums, involved slaves [and free African Americans] in leadership roles and provided the basis for a modest organizational life."11 Slaves and free African Americans married amongst themselves and across the lines of social status, color and sometimes class. Slaves and free blacks also met at the race tracks, drank and gambled together.

In addition, slaves and free blacks faced similar discrimination form whites. Night patrols harassed both groups, and neither slaves nor free
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African Americans could stay at white hotels, go to white restaurants or to the theater.12 The push of

white oppression economically and socially limited most free blacks and slaves who worked out. Thus, pieces of each African-American status group merged to create a new social group.

Ironically, the blurring of the lower levels of the free African-American community with privileged slaves gave free African-American elites the opportunity to establish a distinctive place in Charleston society. White aristocrats recognized and protected free African-American elite social space as a buffer between whites and slaves who passed for lower class free African Americans.

III. African-American Solidarity: Religion and Rebellion

Free African-American elite actions in the early nineteenth century suggest a lack of African-American solidarity which cut across status, class, and color lines. Establishment of an African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1815, however, clearly challenged African-American elite moves for separation. The move to form a new church came in direct reaction to whites revoking certain privileges for African Americans in white Methodist Churches. Free and slave African Americans of the congregations sent two free members, Morris Brown and Henry Drayton, to Philadelphia to be ordained as ministers in the new AME Church. They returned to establish a branch in Charleston. By 1818, four-fifths (4367) of the African-American members had left the white Methodist Churches to join Charleston's three new AME branches. This mass movement included most of the African-American deacons and represented at least 31 percent of Charleston's African-American population. Morris Brown, co-founder and religious leader, fought against African-American elitism and for solidarity of the entire
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congregation. Brown, a wealthy shoemaker and part of the African-American elite, identified and struggled against divisions of status, class and color that free African-American elites exploited. The majority of Brown's congregation were slaves, but he and some other prominent elite members of the AME church were strong proponents of African-American solidarity.13 This solidarity, however, was both limited and atypical. Elite moves for borrowed ground already had deep roots, and association with the AME congregations' illegal move for religious autonomy would have jeopardized elite's already substantial gains.14

Fear of potential black organization and violence developing from the AME church led Charleston whites to act against the congregation through brutality and massive arrests of AME members. Whites seized 469 church members in 1817 and 140 in 1818, demonstrating their intense fears of African-American solidarity. In 1822, with the uncovering of Denmark Vesey's slave conspiracy, their fears proved to be well founded.

Vesey, born in either the Caribbean or Africa around 1767, was a slave of Captain Joseph Vesey (except for a brief period in 1782) until 1800, when he won $1500 in Charleston's East Bay Lottery and purchased his freedom. He then worked as a carpenter until his death in 1822.15

Organizing through the AME church, Vesey planned a large scale rebellion to free Charleston's slaves, including his children, from bondage. He and the conspiracy's spiritual leader, Gullah Jack, began to prepare for the rebellion in 1820, recruiting hundreds, maybe even thousands of African Americans to

participate. Vesey and Gullah Jack, however, confined their recruiting to African-born slaves almost exclusively.[16] They trusted no one else. This evidence suggests that many Charleston slaves expressed solidarity on the basis of African ethnicity. Thus, signs of a growing split in Charleston's African-American community came

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from slave as well as free actions.

Vesey drew strength and hope from his knowledge of the successful slave revolts in Santo-Domingo in 1791 and Haiti in 1804. He wrote to Santo-Domingo twice to secure help with his rebellion. Vesey and Gullah Jack based their ideologies on a uniquely Ba-Kango and Angolan-based interpretation of the Bible. They used the AME Church as a place for recruiting, emphasizing the strength and spiritual protection these African religions provided. They stressed the right of slaves to break out of bondage. Rolla, a Charleston slave, stated in the conspiracy trials that Vesey "read to us from the Bible, how the Children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt from bondage." [17] Vesey and Gullah Jack clearly felt Charleston's African-born slaves could do the same.

Vesey planned the slave rebellion to take place in July of 1822. Vesey and his leaders had allegedly been forging and gathering weapons (mostly knives and pikes) and securing horses and supplies as part of an intricate plan to attack Charleston. According to various testimony, Vesey had a list of 6000 to 9000 blacks who would participate in his revolt. Many of these alleged participants were members of the AME Church. William Paul, a slave, testified in the conspiracy trials: "He [Edwin Paul, a slave] knew the parties and that the thing [Vesey's plot] was going on, and all the African Church were engaged in it.[18]

In the end, the conspiracy, real or imaginary, never got off the ground. Vesey and his leaders were caught, tried and executed or exiled by the end of the summer. All told, thirty-five blacks lost their lives at the gallows -- thirty-four slaves and Denmark Vesey.[20] A severe split along legal status, color and class lines was already well under way by 1822.

The split deepened as whites burned Charleston's AME churches to the ground in late 1822. Never again would there be a Charleston church run and attended exclusively by free African Americans and slaves. The AME Church's short stint from 1815-1822 was the only antebellum Charleston church to give blacks total religious freedom, and the only institution to bridge status, class, and color in Charleston's African-American community. [21] The AME Church had been more like a last bastion of African-American solidarity than a representation of complete African-American interaction in the city. The church, born from white denial of African-American religious rights, had allowed some free elites to resist through religious solidarity with slaves. Increased oppression, however, destroyed this resistance, leaving the split between free African-American elites and other Charleston African Americans greater than ever before.

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IV. White Reaction to Vesey

Some historians of Vesey's conspiracy have argued that there was no master plan; there was no list of names, and there was no cache of arms. Richard C. Wade argues that the rebellion trial's transcript is unreliable, as is the testimony of the three main witnesses.[22] The shape of the abortive rebellion remains unknown. What is clear, however, is that white Charlestonians believed what they heard from the trial. Unfortunately for African-American solidarity this white belief in the plan and growing displeasure among whites with the AME Church brought on a barrage of new laws which further limited the rights of slaves and required free African Americans to meet greater legal conditions of freedom.

Whites believed a large scale slave revolt could really happen and that the independence of urban slaves and free African-American threatened the well-being of all white Charlestonians. They feared slave unity and the organizing influence Morris Brown and other free African-American elites brought to Charleston slaves. Whites believed that what happened in Santo Domingo and Haiti could happen in their own city. In a letter to her cousin Anna Hayes Johnson, a member of Charleston's white aristocracy wrote in horror of the uncovering of the planned rebellion:

Their plans were simply these -- they were to have set fire to the town and while the whites were endeavoring to out it they were to have commenced their horrid depredations -- It seems that the Governour Intendant and my poor father were to be the three first victims -- the men & Black [sic] Women were to have been indiscriminately murdered -- & we poor devils were to have been reserved to fill their Harams -- horrible -- I have a very beautiful cousin who was set apart for the wife or more properly the "light of the Haram" of one of their Chiefts. [23]

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In the wake of Vesey's conspiracy Charleston whites wished to establish a clearer line between slave and free. They moved to restrict the ease with which slaves could pass into free African- American society and to prevent any organization between the two groups. White South Carolinians continued a trend they started in 1820 of strengthening old laws regarding African Americans while implementing new ones as well. In 1820, the South Carolina state legislature passed a law which made manumission of slaves illegal except through legislative action. In the same year, the legislature banned immigration of free blacks into the state and placed a fifty-dollar-a-year tax on any free black over fifteen and under fifty who had not resided in the state for at least five years. A new law forbade free African Americans to return after leaving South Carolina. This law was, among other things, to prevent free African Americans from going north for religious training as they had in 1815. [24] After the completion of the rebellion trials, the state legislature reiterated the 1820 laws and placed new restrictions on slaves and free blacks. South Carolina outlawed African-American churches. Slaves could no longer hire themselves out, forcing Charleston masters to keep closer tabs on the whereabouts of their slaves. In addition, any free African-American male over fifteen had to obtain a white guardian who would attest to his good character in writing at the district court.[25]

V. The Split: Strengthening of the Mulatto Elite

As white Charlestonians struggled to maintain status quo after discovery of the Vesey plot, the cost of African-American solidarity increased. Maintaining borrowed ground thus necessitated separation for free African-American elites. With the destruction of Charleston's AME churches and heightened white awareness of and displeasure with possible allegiances between members of the free elite and slaves, the Morris Browns of Charleston could no longer maintain their privileges as

elites and engage in solidarity with slaves. Space for active solidarity had vanished. Thus, mulatto elites could and did reassert and strengthen borrowed ground with greater unity than ever before. Through separation they moved to reestablish security for the things they most valued -- freedom and economic stability for themselves and for their children.

Mulatto elites more aggressively used preexisting fault lines of legal status, class and color to further isolate themselves from others in the African-American community. As before, they separated themselves not only from slaves but also from lower class and dark free African Americans. 26

Legally, African-American elites complied with the new laws that threatened their social position. They paid their capitation taxes; they remained within the state, and free males obtained legal white guardians.

Free mulattoes continued to use color and class symbols of freedom to secure their social space. They ceased to associate with free blacks, socializing, marrying and making business transactions almost exclusively among themselves. They wore expensive clothes in order to highlight their light skin and wealth and present themselves with self-respect and what they believed whites would perceive as dignity. 27 In the face of increasing oppression, freedom through separation was far more important to the mulatto elite than racial solidarity.

At the same time, however, elites continued to maintain their distinctions from white Charlestonians. They refrained from confronting whites directly or from moving into the white social spheres. Charleston's

whites would consider such action "uppity" and lash out violently against it as they had against the AME church in 1822 and, indeed, several more times between 1823 and 1860. 28

As white fear surrounding Vesey's conspiracy faded, the new South Carolina laws restricting African-American status and independence became dead letters. In fact, many of these laws were never strictly enforced until the late 1850s. According to Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark in Black Masters, through the 1850s "tax receipts, listing in the Charleston Free Negro Tax Books, and common knowledge had always been sufficient proof of their freedom, on the few occasions when proof was demanded." Thus, the actions of the mulatto elite to establish borrowed ground continued to benefit free lower class and dark African Americans as well as slaves who continued to work out.

Many free African Americans, however, knew the laws could rise again and envelope their social ground. Consequently, the elite took steps to defend their space. Even when these laws were in remission, African-American elites continued to comply with or selectively break the laws. For example, they maintained white guardians, paid their capitation taxes and often left the state on business or pleasure and returned with no problems when Charleston's racial tension was low. 29

Although mulatto elite actions provided ample space on borrowed ground for other African Americans, mulatto elite space was far more secure in times of increased white oppression. In most cases only elites could secure white guardians.[30] Elites also made friendships with influential white aristocrats, which could often result in the gaining of special privileges or protection from legal prosecution. Such friendships were possible because free elites

accepted the ideals of slavery. Many in fact owned slaves. Only elites who catered to Charleston's white aristocracy as artisans or entrepreneurs could establish such friendships or control ample capital to own slaves. [31]

In no other place did free elite social standing and the strength of the symbol of skin color shine through more clearly than in church. Every Sunday mulatto elites sat behind the whites they depended on for social recognition but in front of the dark and slave churchgoers. Most Methodist Episcopal church congregations looked like a slow blending of color from white in front to dark black against the back wall.[32]

For most of the 1820-1860 period differing levels in security of free African-American social space remained hidden. But, at times of increased legal action differences became obvious. Poor free African-American and slaves who worked out held positions in Charleston society that were much more tenuous than those of free elites.

Charleston whites stepped up enforcement of old laws on what seemed to be whims. Such periods of increased oppression tended to coincide with new state legislation which made new attacks on the rights of African Americans and often reiterated old discriminatory laws. Security was a factor for brief periods until the new laws, like those which came before them, also drifted into a dead letter phase, waiting for whites to enforce them again at some later date.

In 1834, in response to white fears of educated African Americans,

South Carolina's legislature outlawed African Americans' schooling of one another. The mulatto elite, however, effectively schooled its children in this period in spite of the law. Whites found open African-American schooling offensive, but as long as they kept their schools out of public view, Charleston whites would not take action against the mulatto elite. When free people of color lost a school, they simply moved it to another obscure place, away from white eyes.[33]

In 1841, South Carolina's legislature passed an "Act to Prevent the Emancipation of Slaves." This law was to root out slaves who were owned by family members or white guardians and lived as if free. It was also to prevent slaves from inheriting property. But, as before, partially by free African-American legal ingenuity and partially by white tolerance, free African Americans circumvented the law.[34]

The schooling law and the act against emancipation were reactions to what whites considered "uppity" African-American behavior. Whites believed that African Americans educating their children and gaining freedom and wealth from whites was conduct which too closely approximated privileged white behavior.

Although these laws applied equally to both free blacks and mulattoes, such white discrimination did not push free African Americans closer together, but farther apart. Every time white oppression surfaced the mulatto elite took action to further distance itself from slaves and free blacks and to strengthen its security. The elite would not abandon its obvious color advantage by banding together with free blacks in the face of white discrimination. Such action, they were convinced, would push elite borrowed ground toward slavery.

Finally, in 1846, the legislature passed a badge law, requiring all Charleston slaves to wear metal badges signifying their status. With this law whites again attempted to deny Charleston slaves the ability to pass for free African Americans. The badge law along with increased use of old laws attacked those African Americans with less security. African Americans who could not establish color and class symbols of freedom came under the greatest scrutiny. But, after periods of increased oppression, white attempts to better define the lines between slave and free; black and white failed to have lasting effects.

VI. Free Black Naming Patterns

Using names found in South Carolina's free Negro capitation tax records, one traces over time the patterns of free African-American names. This source does not distinguish between black and mulatto, so one can not compare the two groups, but the naming patterns show a move away from typical slave names.

Table 2. Charleston African-American Naming Patterns 1811-186036

	diminutive	formal	classical whimsical unusual Biblical	Afro-phonetic	Total
1811	80	228	55	9	372
	(21.5%)	(61.3%)	(14.8%)	(2.4%)	(100%)
1841	139	842	76	18	1075

	(12.9%)	(78.3%)	(7.1%)	(1.7%)	(100%)

1860	141	914	89	26	1170
	(12.1%)	(78.1%)	(7.6%)	(2.2%)	(100%)

In 1811, formal names, such as Thomas, William, Mary and Catherine were already the most common (61.3 percent). Such names suggest an identification with freedom. Other names which appeared on the same tax records held ties with slavery or identification with African roots. Diminutives of formal names, such as Kate, Tom and Pete (21.5 percent), old testament, classical and whimsical names, such as Moses, March, Phoebe and London (14.8 percent) and names which have possible African roots (Afro-phonetic names), such as Selena, Elitra and Charinda (2.4 percent) were all typical slave names which would identify these free African Americans with bondage or African roots.

By 1841, however, formal names had increased to 78.3 percent of all listed names, while the frequency of names in all other categories dropped. The naming patterns in the 1860 tax records show patterns very closely resembling those of 1841 (78.1 percent for formal names and 12.1 percent for diminutives). The only change was a slight increase in Afro-phonetic names from 1.7 to 2.2 percent.37 This slight change may have come from talk of emigration to Africa among free African Americans. The substantial increase in formal names among free African Americans demonstrated an increasingly conscious effort among free African Americans to distance themselves from slavery and live on borrowed ground.

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VII. African-American Charleston in 1860

A close examination of Charleston's 1860 population schedules gives a clear picture of race, class, color and gender roles in the city in the twilight of American slavery.

By this time Charleston had developed what can be loosely described as six social categories: white aristocrats who controlled most of Charleston's wealth and political power; free mulatto elites who had worked to establish borrowed ground; free black elites who, though few in number and thus short on resources, worked to establish social space similar to mulatto elites; poor free African Americans and slaves who worked out; slaves and white laborers. Though these social groups can be loosely defined at best, they provide a good view of 1860 Charleston society and how people within it viewed themselves and those around them.

White and African-American societies in Charleston mirrored one another in many ways. Both African-American and white elites maintained their status largely through ancestry-dependent symbols of wealth and social interaction. In 1860 the richest ten percent of Charleston's whites owned close to 80 percent of the city's wealth and real estate value and almost 70 percent of Charleston

slaves. They maintained this wealth and political power through extensive kinship networks and defined their elite status through social club membership. White elites also segregated themselves demographically. Most often they lived south of Calhoun Street on Charleston's peninsula and were even more concentrated in the area south of Broad Street. 38 As previously described Charleston's mulatto elite similarly utilized symbols of wealth, membership in exclusive benevolent societies and social disassociation to distinguish themselves form other African Americans. Analysis of the 1860 census demonstrates demographic segregation along

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class and color lines as well as disparities between black and mulatto in wealth and occupation molded after self-segregation of white aristocrats.

While the free African-American population of most of Charleston's eight wards showed a percentage breakdown among African Americans roughly equal to the city wide three to one ratio of free mulattoes to free blacks, wards five and six did not. Both of these wards lay in the northern half of the city. Ward five was home to more free mulattoes -- over 25 percent of the city's total -- than any other section of Charleston. All told 598 of Charleston's 2308 mulattoes lived there, but the same ward was home to only thirty-two free blacks. On the other hand, over 41 percent of Charleston's free black adults lived in Ward six. 39

Even more telling are the records of each individual household in Charleston. Of the 819 addresses which housed free African Americans only eighty-one contained representatives from both color distinctions. Because these addresses include boarding houses, the inter-color marriage rate was most certainly even lower.40

The split along color lines also extended to serious class differences among free African Americans. While free blacks accounted for 26.6 percent of Charleston's free African-American population, they held only 13 percent of the personal and real estate of free African Americans. In addition, while 64.7 percent of all working mulatto males were artisans entrepreneurs or professionals, only 40.5 percent of all working free black males held similar jobs. The difference between the women's groups is equally telling: 45.0 percent of female mulattoes were entrepreneurs or professionals versus 30.1 percent for free black

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females.

Table 3. Charleston African-American Occupations in 18604

	unskilled	transporter	artisan	total
	servant	food service	entrepreneur	
		skilled	professional	
		servant		
		semi-skilled		
mulatto	33	109	261	403

males	(11.1%)	(27.0%)	(64.7%)	(100%)
mulatto females	110	127	194	431
	(25.5%)	(29.5%)	(45.0%)	(100%)
black males	42	46	60	148
	(28.4%)	(31.1%)	(40.5%)	(100%)
black females	90	45	58	193
	(46.6%)	(23.3%)	(30.1%)	(100%)

Successful free African Americans also tended to live in close proximity to each other. A special census of Charleston in 1861 reveals 160 free African Americans who owned their own homes. Of these 160 members of Charleston's African-American elite, fifty-two lived in a small section of northern Charleston partly in ward six and partly in ward eight. The area surrounds a section of Coming Street, bordered to the west by Rutledge Street, to the north by Line Street, to the East by King Street and to the South by Calhoun Street. 42

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Though these elites had segregated themselves using similar techniques to the white aristocracy, the two groups lived separately. South of Calhoun Street 35.4 percent of Charleston's African Americans owned 26.1 percent of the community's wealth, and south of Broad Street 5.5 percent owned 0.3 percent of the wealth. 43

Free black elites followed the lead of wealthy free mulattoes, also mobilizing mechanisms of wealth and socialization along the white aristocratic model to create independent social space in Charleston. Most dark people of color, however, had to live with little economic or social power. They accepted the benefits of being free which mulatto and black elites had forged, but continued to socialize with slaves. In 1860 only 547 free dark African Americans over the age of fifteen lived in Charleston. Most of these people had little or no wealth in the form of real and personal estate. Poor free blacks along with poor free mulattoes and slaves who worked out lived and worked in the labor section of Charleston. Many members of the larger social group still gambled, drank and went to the tracks together. They continued to attend the same churches and free African-American women often married slave men.44 For the majority of poor African Americans, free and de facto free, little changed with the discovery of Vesey's conspiracy and the destruction of Charleston's AME churches. Free African-American elites had re-secured borrowed ground in one form or another for all free African Americans (actual and de facto).

Unity of the above-described group of poor African Americans is questionable. The census schedules give some evidence this group may have divided along color lines but tell little beyond living patterns. Mulattoes and blacks within the group may very well have socialized with one another without living together or marrying in great numbers. Most likely some segment of the poor free mulatto population desired to keep open an avenue to mulatto elite society but with few resources
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their moves for segregation would have been weak.

In addition to similar geographic, economic and social realities for poor autonomous African Americans gender ratios of the legally free also solidified poor free and de facto free into one social group. Almost twice as many adult free African-American females as males lived in Charleston in 1860. This characteristic had developed from early growth patterns of the class and perpetuated itself because of uneven mortality rates between free African-American men and women. This surplus of free African-American women encouraged sex and marriage across legal status lines. Furthermore, throughout the South as in Charleston, the status of a person's mother, not that of his or her father, determined the legal status of the child. Thus, if the mother was free African-American, white or Indian, her child would be free. Free male African Americans did not want to doom their children to slavery by marrying slave women. Free African-American women, on the other hand, would secure freedom for their offspring no matter who or if they married. For this same reason marrying a free African-American female was a very attractive prospect to slave males.

While poor free African-American women could easily marry across status and color lines without jeopardizing their social position, elite women could not. Not only did elite women refrain from marrying slaves, when marrying free African Americans, free females usually stayed within color lines. About half of Charleston's free mulatto females lived with at least one adult male mulatto, while about 35 percent of the free black females lived with at least one adult free black male.[45]

Gender disparities had further implications for African-American women's abilities to secure social ground. As women in the 1860s they were disadvantaged but their vast majority further depleted their social opportunities. Because free African-American women could secure their
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children's freedom with either a slave or free African American, they could borrow social ground from either group directly. Thus, free female African Americans had much more sexual flexibility than males of the same group in terms of their mates' status, but much less flexibility in availability of mates who could help establish social space as part of the elite. Free African-American females could use their free status to lure slave mates, but status alone was not leverage enough to allow free African-American women to enter the elite through marriage. To make such a move against the social forces in Charleston free women had to empower themselves economically and socially. They had to be assertive to enter the elite from a poor economic position.

Free African-American men, on the other hand, had far more power than women to forge and protect borrowed and elite ground in Charleston. Men controlled African-American benevolent societies and had economic positions superior to free African-American women. In addition to these advantages free African-American men could also be choosy when looking for a free African-American spouse. Free mulatto adult women outnumbered adult men 897 to 483, while free black adult women outnumbered men 358 to 189. Free African-American men took advantage of their numerical scarcity, usually marrying or living with free females of the same class and color. In 1860, less than 20 percent of all adult free mulatto males lived with no adult free female mulatto and over ten percent of those lived alone. In the same year 25 percent of free black males fell in the same category.[46] They were obviously marrying within and perpetuating the social ground they helped create.

As for true slaves in Charleston most worked for and lived with white
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aristocrats in the southern part of the city. Almost two-thirds of slaves -- essentially all residing with their masters -- lived south of Calhoun street. Furthermore, with over four-fifths of Charleston's slaves living with their masters, it is clear that most African-American Charlestonians, free and slave, who had autonomy over their own lives, lived away from the white aristocratic southern section of town.[47] This pattern removed independent African Americans from the eyes of Charleston's aristocratic law makers and into the view of the white labor force.

VIII. The Tenuous Nature of Freedom

From 1858-1862, heightened racial tensions, brought on by hostile white laborers, first threatened the free position on which free African Americans lived, then squeezed the space they had manufactured for themselves, and finally destroyed it altogether. What had taken decades for elite African Americans to build and maintain, hostile whites dismantled in less than five years.

From 1810 to 1850 Charleston had been an African-American city. Slaves made up around 50 percent, while free African Americans encompassed between 5 and 8 percent of the population during those forty years. Such large numbers of African Americans and the aristocratic nature of Charleston's white population had assured African Americans a major role in the economics of the city. They filled the labor shortage left by whites, claiming a prominent role in the life of the Charleston.[48]
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Between 1850 and 1860, however, increasing slave prices forced over 6000 slaves out of Charleston. Even though the free African- American population remained stable during the decade, Charleston's total African-American population in the city fell to only 42 percent. African Americans were losing their strong position in the labor force, while white Charleston laborers gained more and more economic and social leverage with every departing slave.[49]

Toward the end of the decade political tensions surrounding the place of slaves and free African Americans in Charleston rose between the city's increasingly powerful white laborers and the old aristocracy. Laborers and aristocrats had vastly different associations with and views of Charleston African Americans largely because of each group's particular social, economic and geographic positions in the city. From these differences tensions escalated.

White laborers had several reasons to feel threatened by autonomous African Americans, with whom they lived in close proximity. Slaves who worked out and poor free African Americans competed for work with whites, challenging the privileges of whiteness in the antebellum south. In addition, the symbols of wealth and education African-American elites used to distinguish themselves from slaves and poor African Americans were the same as those used by white aristocrats to separate themselves from white laborers. Such moves to segregate from poor African Americans could also be interpreted as moves to distinguish themselves as better than white laborers. Thus, African-American elite mirroring of aristocratic behavior also threatened laborer's privileges of whiteness -- this time socially instead of economically.

White aristocrats, on the other hand, lived away from Charleston's

autonomous African Americans. Their interactions with African Americans were most often either with their own slaves or elite free African Americans, to whom they were patrons. The symbols of freedom which free elites had long mobilized distinguished them from the slaves who served white aristocrats. Free elite emulations of white aristocratic society gave free African Americans worth in the eyes of white aristocrats.

Thus, while white laborers loathed the existence of autonomous African Americans, white aristocrats valued their position in society as a buffer between white and slave. A shift in Charleston political power from aristocrat to laborer would threaten borrowed ground as never before. Such a shift became reality in the last two years of the 1850s.

In 1858, Charleston's white mechanics, unhappy at having to compete with slave and free African-American labor, pressured Charleston authorities into reinforcing the 1822 law prohibiting slaves from hiring themselves out for labor. White laborers also wanted to end free African-American rights and push them toward slavery, but white aristocrats came to the aid of free African Americans. They held that free African Americans were of no threat to whites and occupied a valuable spot in Charleston's economy. 50 The white aristocracy understood the borrowed ground free African Americans occupied and valued its existence.

Again in 1859, Charleston's aristocracy came to the aid of free African Americans. A bill that proposping to enslave all South Carolina free African Americans appeared before the state legislature, with much support from up-country delegates. Using the same defense for the existence of free African Americans as they had the year before, Charleston's political aristocracy prevented the bill's passage.51

In 1860, after more pressure from white laborers, Charleston police began enforcing the slave badge law and the free African- American capitation tax laws. As police activity increased, only the mulatto elite could steer clear of legal harassment. Space on free African-American borrowed ground was dwindling rapidly. By mid-1860, Charleston police were enforcing all of the old African-American restrictive laws. They were enslaving free African Americans who had been illegally manumitted after 1820, free African Americans without guardians, African Americans who could not document their freedom, and punishing slaves who had been living without a master or trusty. Only those African Americans who had foreseen the use of these laws and guarded against them were safe. White Charlestonians were taking back the solid ground free African Americans had occupied for decades. Many poor free African Americans, knowing they could not prove their right to freedom, ran to slavery for protection. Rather than be auctioned off into slavery, they went to their old masters to be re-enslaved and purchased slave badges. Seven hundred African Americans bought slave badges in two months in mid-1860. By late 1860, a badge had become the only source of protection for many formerly free African Americans.52

In November of 1860, James Eason, a white Charleston mechanic, won a spot in the state legislature on a ticket to enslave all South Carolina free African Americans. Finally, mulatto elites were in danger. Lowland South Carolina aristocrats, the former legal protectors of free African-American rights, were losing their power to Charleston laborers. "The higher class [white aristocrats] is quite incensed [by the crackdown on African Americans] but it is too late. the power is into other hands & when they have got rid of the cold. [colored] population they will try to make them [white aristocrats]

subordinate," wrote James M. Johnson, one of Charleston's mulatto elite. For free African Americans, emigration from South Carolina became their only hope. Between 1860
Page 31
and 1862 over 1000 free African Americans, almost one-third of Charleston's 1860 free African-American population, left the city. Certainly hundreds more would have left had they had the money or the means to do so. Those members of the mulatto and free African-American elite who did not leave had been bound by money. Unwilling to part with their accumulated wealth in real estate and slaves, many stayed behind, attempting to sell their property, until it was too late. The Union blockade off South Carolina's Confederate coast made escape finally impossible.[53] The upper echelon of the mulatto elite had worked meticulously for almost a lifetime to secure steady ground on which to stand, only to see it crumble away beneath them. They and the free black elite were left standing on shattered earth they once had cherished, while the rest of Charleston's free African Americans had either been run out of the state or into slavery.

IX. Conclusion

As a small segment of Charleston's population, the free mulatto elite forged and maintained social ground for themselves and other free African Americans to live on. They did so by defining themselves in contrast to the upper and lower extremes of Charleston society. Elite mulattoes defined themselves as being socially as far above slaves as possible on one hand and definitely below Charleston's white aristocracy on the other. Following the white aristocratic model they refused to socialize with any African Americans not of the mulatto elite; they accepted slavery as a social necessity; they owned slaves, and they dressed and acted in as sophisticated and educated a manner as possible. But Charleston mulatto elites made sure to kowtow in the face of white discrimination. They accepted racial discrimination for themselves as a necessary evil to maintain their social status. Elites obeyed South Carolina's discriminatory laws when enforced and often when not. They
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befriended white aristocrats, courting them as free African-American protectors but dared not enter or appear to enter the social world of white aristocracy.

Mulatto elites needed both aristocrats and slaves to secure their borrowed ground. When the slave population dropped significantly, neither free mulattoes nor blacks could effectively define their own social territory against that of slaves. They grew more visible and came in direct opposition to white laborers, who became angry at having to struggle for jobs with African Americans, free and slave, and offended at the aristocratic characteristics of the free elite. White laborers wanted their own social ground and to reclaim their privileges of whiteness. When Charleston's old aristocracy lost its power in the state legislature and its ability to guide Charleston public opinion, the mulatto elite and all other free African Americans lost their final ability to define their social status. The two groups which mulatto elites and consequently other free African Americans had defined themselves against had each undergone irreversible metamorphoses. The borrowed ground free African Americans had occupied for so long had lost its credibility and consequently vanished. Free African Americans' place in Charleston society was only as strong as the forces which defined it. On December 19, 1860 James D. Johnson, once a member of Charleston's mulatto elite, wrote:

As it regards Emigration your humble Servt [sic] is on the alert with the whole of our people who are debating where to go. The majority are in favor of Hayti [sic]. Some few are leaving here by each Steamer. Dont [sic] suppose I will be the last because I have replaced a missing tree [to beautify his house for sale]. I only want to beautify the exterior so as to attract Capitalists.54

James D. Johnson knew he had to leave Charleston, but the place had
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been his home all his life. He, like the rest of Charleston's African-American elite, could have left years before and gone to Africa, the Caribbean or the northern US but chose not to go. He chose to stay in Charleston because he had social ground to live on -- borrowed ground. In 1861 that ground was gone, and James D. Johnson was trapped in Charleston by the Civil War. He no longer had a place in Charleston society.

Acknowledgment

Notes to "On Borrowed Ground: Free African-American life in Charleston, South Carolina 1810-61."

Jason Poole

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