

The Pennsylvania Abolition Society's Mission for Black Education

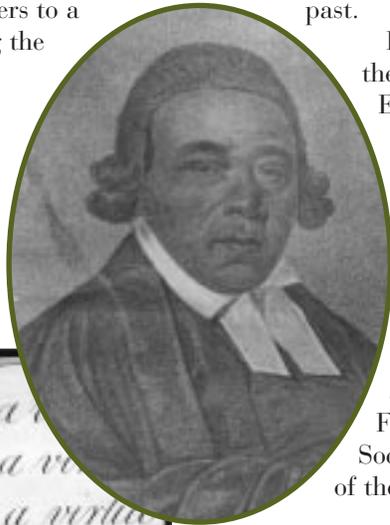
By Margaret Hope Bacon

Founded in 1775 to work for the “Abolition of Slavery” and to provide “Relief for Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage,” the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) reorganized itself in 1787 to include a third mission: “improving the Condition of the African Race.”

Left: Julia Bennet, educated at the Laing School, Mount Pleasant, SC. PAS Papers.

1870 Congress adopts 15th Amendment granting African American men the right to vote.
1872 PAS advocates equal rights clause for new PA state constitution.

For the founders, this primarily meant offering jobs and education to black youth, whether escaped slaves from the South or native Philadelphians. In order to further this part of its mission, in 1790 the PAS appointed 24 members to a Committee for Improving the Condition of the Free Blacks, which was subdivided into a Committee of Inspection, a Committee of Guardians, a Committee of Education, and a Committee of Employ.



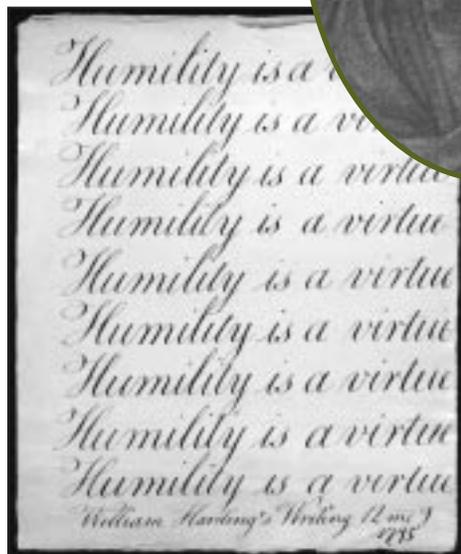
supporting educational and cultural programs aimed at enhancing black education. Today, one of its missions is to put its rich history on the Internet in order to give black youth a deeper appreciation of the past.

In its first years, the Committee of Education aided various African Americans who were running schools for black youth. Thus it supported Absalom Jones, a leader of the Free African Society and founder of the African

children on a property it owned on Cherry Street between Sixth and Seventh. In 1812, it erected a building 26 feet wide by 40 feet long with a capacity for 130 students and named it Clarkson Hall, in honor of the British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. The school, covering the equivalent of today's elementary grades, opened in 1813 with an enrollment of 94 boys. On the second story the committee allowed a female teacher, Elizabeth Clendenin, to operate her own school for approximately 50 girls, with some small assistance from the PAS.

Clarkson Hall was the pride and joy of the society. Not only was it used to house various schools—a boys' school, a girls' school, several night schools, a First Day school, and briefly, in 1831, a high school—but it also served as headquarters for the PAS for many years. Though it was finally sold in 1864, the Clarkson Hall property continued to provide the society with ground rents until 1908 when the land, too, was finally sold.

In addition to operating its own school, the PAS lobbied the Philadelphia Board of Education to open a school for "the education of children of both sexes of indigent persons of color." Although a former member of the PAS, Roberts Vaux, was president of the Philadelphia Board of Education, the city board remained very reluctant to open such a school. In 1820, the PAS offered the use of Clarkson Hall for this purpose. The Board of Education, however, turned the hall down, saying it had another site in mind. Eventually, in 1822, the board opened a public elementary school for black boys in the Old Presbyterian Meeting House on St. Mary's Street. Four years later, in 1826, the board established a public elementary school for black girls on Gaskill Street. In 1828, when the white pupils were transferred from a school on Lombard Street to a new building on Locust Street, the black



Above: Absalom Jones, from painting by Raphaelle Peale. Born a slave in Delaware, Jones purchased his freedom in 1784 and became a leader in Philadelphia's free black community. Leon Gardiner Collection.

Left: Writing sample by student William Harding, Sept. 12, 1795. On the back is written "The writer of the within is only allow'd to come to evening School being now an apprentice to a Cooper—." PAS Papers.

Of these four committees, the Committee of Education, reorganized as the Board of Education in 1813, became the strongest, and the longest lasting. Whether by supporting schools for black children, establishing its own schools, or lobbying for the admission of black students to the public schools, the board made education a primary concern of the PAS. Following the Civil War, the PAS supported numerous freedom schools in the South. By the turn of the 20th century the PAS had taken sole charge of a school in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. When this responsibility ended, the PAS redirected its efforts to providing scholarships for black youth and to

Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, in operating a school for black children on Willings Alley (now Walnut Street) in 1799. It also provided help to Cyrus Bustill, a black baker and Quaker, when he opened a school in 1797 in the Northern Liberties. The PAS supported a third school, opened by Eleanor Harris around 1795, and after her death in 1797 operated by Ann Williams, on Cherry Street for some years. In 1800, the Committee of Education evaluated these three schools and decided to charge a modest tuition and to solicit the black churches to provide scholarships. It also resolved to help to find employment for school graduates.

In 1809, the committee decided to build its own school for black

1887 PA legislature enacts law banning discrimination based on race in public places (not strictly enforced).

1892 Laing School property deeded to PAS.

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students were relocated to the Lombard Street site.

Two dedicated white teachers, James Bird and Maria C. Hutton, helped make the Lombard Street School a success. The school, however, was never properly funded, and after James Bird was transferred in 1833 to a white school it experienced a high turnover of students. In 1840, the Philadelphia school board decided to close the Lombard Street School down and limit black education to the first three grades. James Forten, a prominent black sailmaker, created a committee to oppose this move, and the PAS Board of Education supported him in a successful campaign to keep the Lombard Street School open.

The creation of public schools for black children resulted in lower enrollment in the Clarkson schools. The PAS Board of Education continued to operate the boys' school until 1825, in the face of dwindling enrollments. Then it decided to rent the schoolroom to the Philadelphia Association of Friends for the Instruction of Poor Children. The girls' elementary school,

however, continued to flourish and operated until 1841. In 1831, the board attempted to open a high school for boys but enrollment was low, and the school was soon closed.

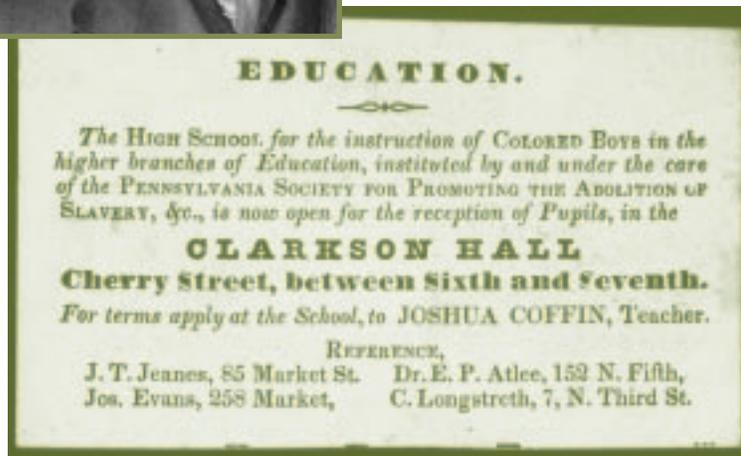
One final project of the Board of Education at this time was the erection of a three-story building on the back of the Cherry Street lot, to be used as a library and a meeting place for various groups interested in advancing the cause of African Americans. Sandiford Hall, which

faced onto Haines Street, operated successfully for many years.

Also, in addition to Clarkson Hall, in 1843 the PAS Board of Education founded the



Left: Thomas Clarkson, British abolitionist. Society Portrait Collection.



Advertisement for PAS's high school for boys in Clarkson Hall. Society Collection.

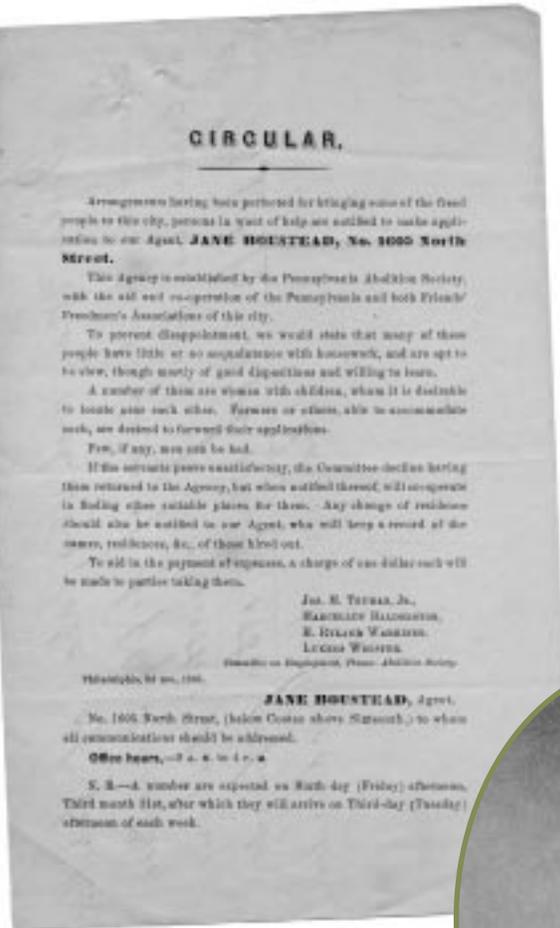
Lombard Infant School, as an aid to working parents. This school met first at South Street above Seventh, then moved to Elizabeth Street above Sixth, and then to the building of the Moral Reform Retreat on Lombard. It continued until 1850 and was a great help to the black community.

The Pennsylvania Abolition Society allowed several other groups closely associated with its mission to use Clarkson Hall. The Clarkson Institute of Pennsylvania, "an Association of Young Men Dedicated to Gratuitous Instruction of Male Colored Persons," met and conducted an evening school in the hall from 1832 to 1835. Members took turns as instructors and taught an average of 50 students per session. Much later, from 1859 to 1869, the Clarkson Evening Association, comprised of both men and women, ran an evening school at Clarkson Hall. This group hired a principal to run the school and arranged a series of lectures in conjunction with the lessons. The Clarkson Educational Association, 1861–1862, also with both male and female members, met at Clarkson Hall to establish a day school for colored children at 19th and Spring Garden streets. With some support from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the school hired Martha Schofield as a teacher. It offered reading, writing, and geography, as well as sewing for the girls. Each session began with Bible reading. It continued successfully for several years.

The number of African Americans in Philadelphia who had received an education was a source of pride for the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. At the 17th annual convention of abolition societies held in 1828, the

1909 NAACP founded.

1911 Coatesville lynching of Zachariah Walker prompts organization of NAACP branch in PA.



Above: Circular of the Committee on Employment soliciting positions for freed people coming to Philadelphia, Mar. 1865. PAS Papers.

Right: William Still. Engraving by John Sartain. Frontispiece of *William Still, The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia, 1872).



these figures to urge that black men be allowed to retain the vote in 1838, when a constitutional convention first disenfranchised them, and again in 1848, when black leaders made an unsuccessful appeal to have their voting rights restored.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, the need for schools for the newly freed slaves, first on the outer islands along the South Carolina coast, and later inland, became pressing. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society responded to this new situation by co-sponsoring a number of freedom schools, along with the Pennsylvania Freedmen Relief Association, the Port Royal Association, and two

Quaker groups, the Friends Freedmen Association (associated with the Orthodox Friends) and the Friends Association of Philadelphia for the Aid and Elevation of the Freedmen (Hicksite). The Board of Education and the Committee on Employment of the PAS also formed a committee to work with several of

serve as clerk of this committee. In 1867, Still was elected to membership in the PAS, along with other black Philadelphians: Octavius Catto, Ebenezer Bassett, Jacob White, Stephen Smith, and William Whipper. They were the first black members of the PAS, after Frederick Douglass and Robert Purvis

Among the teachers sent south to teach in freedom schools by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and others were graduates of the Philadelphia-based Institute for Colored Youth. While the board of the institute was independent of that of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, there were many overlaps in membership. The institute was founded in 1837 as the result of a bequest by Richard Humphreys, a Quaker silversmith and a founding member of the PAS. Originally located in the country, at Willow Grove, the institute moved to Philadelphia in 1852. With a distinguished faculty, including Sarah Mapps Douglass, granddaughter of early black educator Cyrus Bustill, it trained black students to become teachers themselves. Many taught in the freedom schools after the Civil War.

By 1875, at the time of its centennial, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was regularly contributing to 61 schools for black children in 12 states and the District of Columbia. It was also helping to

PAS boasted that its efforts to provide education had brought concrete results: "The Society is gratified by the reflection that these effects of their exertions are visible in the actual condition of the colored population of this district. Not withstanding the depressed situation of that class of fellow beings . . . there is a smaller proportion of their colour than of the white population chargeable as paupers to the community."

In 1794 and 1838 and again in 1847 the society undertook a census of the black population, which recorded the number of African Americans that were employed and able to read and write. The PAS used

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these groups to find jobs and housing for the many African Americans who poured into Philadelphia during and after the war. William Still, formerly the clerk and janitor of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, was hired by the PAS in 1864 to

support Howard University, Hampton Institute, Wilberforce College, and Oberlin College, as well as paying the tuition for several students at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. The society supported orphanages in Maryland, South

1931 PAS deposits its minute books at HSP.
1935 PA legislature passes Equal Rights Act.

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Carolina, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia for black students who had lost their parents. And it continued to support various freedmen's organizations.

Following the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, which was secured by a compromise that resulted in the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, many of the small freedom schools were closed. One that survived, however, was a school in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, across the harbor from Charleston, started by a young New Jersey Quaker, Cornelia Hancock, and supported by the Friends Association of Philadelphia for the Aid and Elevation of the Freedmen. Its treasurer, Henry Laing, also happened to be a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and became that organization's treasurer in 1876. As a natural result, the PAS directed more and more of its funds into the school, which was named the Laing School in honor of its benefactor. In 1894, the abolition society took over the title and property of the Laing School from its principal, Abby Munro, and upon her death in 1913 members of the Board of Education assumed management of the school. For a while Abby Munro's assistant, Antionette O'Neill, ran the school under their direction, but in 1920 the board hired Charlotte Ross, a graduate of the Institute for Colored Youth.

Management from a distance proved problematic for the society,

however, and in 1940 the PAS turned control of the Laing School over to the local public school board. Today, after the Laing High School closed in 1970 with the desegregation of the Charleston County schools, the Laing School, opened in 1974, has become an integrated middle school, with a student body that is 35 percent black and 63 percent white. Members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society have visited it and helped to build up its library, particularly with books pertaining to the abolition movement and black history.

According to its graduates, the Laing School helped the black population of Mount Pleasant develop a cohesive community. Although the school bus—for whites only—passed them by as they walked to Laing, splattering them with mud, Laing's students had a sense of pride in their school. Graduates had gone on from Laing to college and university and to achievements in the wider community. One Laing graduate, interviewed by a PAS board member

in 1975, related that his grandfather had graduated from Laing, his father had gone from Laing to graduate from Howard University and to teach, he himself had a master's degree and worked for the South Carolina Board of Education, and his daughter, another Laing graduate, was studying at the Sorbonne. One of the great leaders of the civil rights movement, Septima Clark, came out of this Laing School community.

In addition to the Laing School, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society maintained an interest in the William Penn Center in Beaufort, South Carolina, which served for a time as a school and later as a community and a retreat center. Martin Luther King Jr. frequently used the Penn Center for gatherings of leaders in the struggle for equal rights and, in 1963, worked on his "I have a dream" speech while at the Penn Center. Abolition society members have frequently visited the Penn Center and have supported its work with small sums for special purposes.

As the PAS's responsibility for the Laing School lessened, it began to find other outlets for its interest in black education, and for the modest trust funds it had otherwise devoted to the Laing School. One such outlet has been providing black students with scholarships to college. From 1940 to 1960 it offered stipends for college students, first to Laing graduates and then, if it had no

applicants, to graduates of Philadelphia high schools. In one case it assisted a Rhodes Scholar attending Oxford University. Another outlet has been support of programs that enrich the education of black youth in Philadelphia, such as the Freedom Program at the Friends Neighborhood Guild and the Venture Theatre Group. The PAS advocated the establishment of a

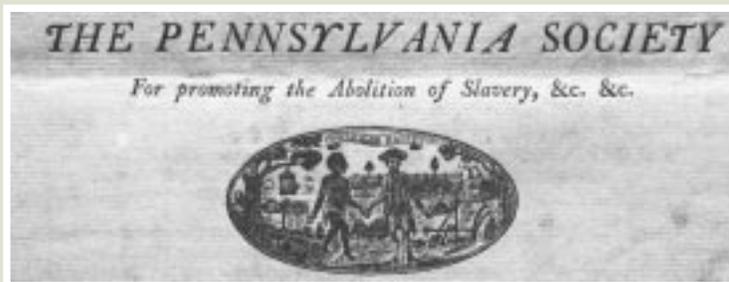


Laing School, Mount Pleasant, SC, n.d. PAS Papers.

1940 PAS relinquishes trusteeship of Laing School.

1965 PAS advocates teaching black history in Philadelphia schools and establishment of African American history museum.

“The Abolition Society?” “Why does it still exist?” “Isn’t slavery over?” These are questions people frequently ask when told that one is a member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS). The answer is



Masthead and logo of PAS, from list of officers, July 4, 1800. PAS Papers.

quite simple. The PAS was founded for the three reasons that are part of its official name: The Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and for the Relief of Free Negroes unlawfully held in Bondage, and for improving the Condition of the African Race. The society continues to work on the last goal. Today the PAS uses interest collected on monies raised before the Civil War to offer grants to organizations either fighting racism, poverty, and drugs or improving education. Recently, the PAS created The Pennsylvania Abolition Society Fund at the Philadelphia Foundation, and groups requesting grants should apply through them. In February 2005 the PAS supported the placement of new markers on the graves of Robert Purvis, its first black member, and his wife, Harriet, at the Fair Hill Burial Ground.

Membership is open to anyone who is at least 21 years old, believes in the aims of the society, is recommended by a board member, and is approved at the annual meeting. Currently there are 20 active members of diverse professional, racial, economic, political, and religious backgrounds. The PAS is governed by a Board of Managers, comprised of the officers and two other members, which meets in April,

October, and whenever necessary. The general membership convenes at the annual meeting, which is the last Thursday in April. These rules are stipulated in the charter and cannot be changed except by the

Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas. The last change, which allowed bylaws to be changed without court approval, was made in 1901. In 2001 the PAS modernized its bylaws to allow the use of e-mail and teleconferences for notices and meetings. Dues were left at one dollar a year, to be paid at the annual meeting.

Finally, the papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania are the property of the PAS. Rights to publish and borrow, therefore, must be obtained from the president of the society. Over the years the abolition society has, in cooperation with HSP, tried to preserve the collection. The PAS paid for microfilming the collection, the accompanying *Guide to the Microfilm*, and, most recently, placing documents and educational materials online.

The Pennsylvania Abolition Society does indeed still exist and, hopefully, with the infusion of new and younger members will be able to expand its activities in the future. ♦

Theo Fair has been president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society since 1989, is professor of history and former department chair at La Salle University, and was a founding board member of the African American Museum in Philadelphia.

museum for black culture and history in Philadelphia and has encouraged the teaching of black history in the Philadelphia schools. It aided the Library Company of Philadelphia in cataloging its African American collection. And it subsidized the microfilming of its own extensive records, in the care of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, so that they may now be used by scholars of black history and the abolition movement in many parts of the world. A current project is to work with The Historical Society of Pennsylvania to make these records available to scholars

and to school children through the Internet, thereby making these important documents accessible to an even wider audience.

“It is with peculiar satisfaction we assure the friends of humanity that, in prosecuting the design of our association, our endeavors have proved successful far beyond our most sanguine expectations,” Benjamin Franklin, president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, wrote in 1789, while also arguing that it was still necessary to finish the job. He might be surprised and pleased to know that the PAS continues his mandate today.

Although the membership of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society is now small, it still meets annually to distribute its funds, to discuss the status of African Americans in American society today, and to consider whether it should use its voice, as the world’s oldest abolition society, to protest fresh abuses to equal rights in its continuing quest for equality. ♦

Margaret Bacon is an author and lecturer, currently at work on a biography of Robert Purvis. Among her many books are *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* (1980), and, with Emma Lapsansky-Werner, the forthcoming edited volume of abolitionist papers of Benjamin Coates. She served as president of the PAS for over 30 years.

1970 PAS sponsors project to catalog African American history collections at the Library Company of Philadelphia and HSP.
2005 PAS sponsors project to have HSP develop online curriculum materials around its records, housed at HSP.