



Epistle of the African Union Society (1789)

The African Union Society (AUS, also known as the Free African Union Society) was organized in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1780. It was the first mutual aid society founded by black people in the United States. Separately, another mutual aid society, the Free African Society (FAS), was founded in Philadelphia in 1787. The founders of the FAS, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, would go on to be pioneering figures in US religious history, Allen as organizer of the first independent black denomination in the United States, and Jones as the first black person ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church.

In 1789, a member of Philadelphia's FAS visited the AUS in Newport. That contact led the AUS to send to the FAS the letter presented here. The letter was signed by twelve individuals, who identified themselves as all of Newport's black property owners; two of them were women. The AUS urged the FAS to join them in endorsing efforts to relocate free blacks from the United States to colonies in Africa. Also presented below are selections from the FAS's reply to the AUS's letter, showing that the FAS, while courteous, did not share the AUS's enthusiasm for colonization.

Dear friends and brethren:

We, the members of the Union Society, being forty in number, in the town of Newport, consisting of free Africans, have lately had the pleasure of being informed of the formation of your Society in Philadelphia, for the good purposes therein mentioned, by one of your members, Mr. Henry Stewart, who comes recommended by your committee.

We, taking into consideration the calamitous state into which we are brought by the righteous hand of God, being strangers and outcasts in a strange land, attended with many disadvantages and evils which are likely to continue on us and our children while we and they live in this country; and [taking into consideration the] yet more wretched state of thousands of our brethren who are in the most abject state of slavery in the West Indies and in the American states, many of whom are treated in the most inhuman and cruel manner and are sunk down in ignorance, stupidity, and vice—

And considering the unhappy state and circumstances of our brethren, the nations in Africa from whom we sprung, being in heathenish darkness and barbarity; and [considering] that it hath pleased God of late to raise up many to compassionate and befriend the Africans, not only in promoting their freedom and using means for their instruction, but by proposing and endeavoring to effect their return to their own country and their settlement there, where they may be more happy than they can be here and promote the best good of our brethren in that country—

We, taking all this into view, think there is a special and loud call to us, and all the blacks in America, to seek God by extraordinary fasting and prayer, and do therefore request all who are disposed to join in fasting and prayer to Almighty God by meeting together for that purpose, privately or in public, as shall be most convenient, on the first Tuesday in July and on the first day of every year, humbly to confess the sins of our fathers and our own sins; and to acknowledge the righteousness of God in bringing all these evils on us and on our children and

brethren; and earnestly to cry to God for the pardon of our sins and that he would, of his great mercy, deliver us, and our brethren, and the nations in Africa from the sins and miseries in which we and they are now involved, and pour down his Holy Spirit upon us, and cause us and them to become a wise, virtuous, and Christian people—

And that he would, in his wise and good providence, prosper the way for our returning to Africa and direct, assist, and prosper all our friends who are engaged in this cause; that he would give us favor in the eyes of our brethren in Africa and raise up friends and benefactors in this land who shall be willing and able to promote this important affair; and that God would, in his great mercy, succeed them and us in all endeavors for this end; that the Father of mercies would bless all the nations who enjoy the gospel and cause them to conduct themselves agreeable to it, by doing to all men as they would others should do unto them, that the light of it may spread over all the world.

* * *

[*The Free African Society replies:*]

Respected friends:

We read your epistle dated the 1st of the 9th month (called September), 1789, which claimed our serious attention, and we are apprehensive that a lively and religious correspondence would be conducive to our religious improvement. With regard to the emigration to Africa you mention, we have at present but little to communicate on that head, apprehending every pious man is a good citizen of the whole world. [...] Howbeit, if any apprehend a divine injunction is laid upon them to undertake such a long and perilous journey in order to promote piety and virtue, that such may meet with encouragement is the sincere desire of a remnant, and that the arm of divine protection may continually hover over them.

Source: African Union Society (Newport, RI) to Free African Society (Philadelphia, PA), September 9, 1789; and Standing Committee, Free African Society (Philadelphia, PA) to African Union Society (Newport, RI), c. October 17, 1789; both as reproduced in William Douglass, *Annals of the First African Church in the United States of America* [...] (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1862), 25-29, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044019271261>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks inserted. An abbreviation spelled out. Punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. Small caps omitted. The terms *states* and *providence* (the latter a divine attribute, not a divine epithet) are capitalized in the source publication but have been converted here to lowercase for the sake of modernization. The use of lowercase for the racial label *blacks* reproduces the usage of the source; the capitalizing of *Society*, in reference to the Free African Society, likewise replicates the source.

These edited excerpts from the correspondence between the two societies is for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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