



Newport Historical Society

Guide to the Free African Union Society and African Benevolent Society records, 1787 – 1824

Newport Historical Society
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Descriptive Summary

<i>Collection Identifier</i>	MS.095
<i>Title</i>	Free African Union Society and African Benevolent Society records
<i>Creator</i>	Free African Union Society African Benevolent Society
<i>Date</i>	1787 – 1824
<i>Extent</i>	4 volumes of records
<i>Language</i>	Materials are in English.

Historical Note

African Union Society/African Humane Society

The African Union Society, also known as the Free African Union Society (FAUS), began in the Newport home of Abraham Casey on Levin Street (nonextant) ca. November 10, 1780 as an all-male benevolent organization for free persons of color. Each member of the group was required to pay dues at specified times. This money went directly into the treasury to be used for Society expenses and in assisting members in times of need or illness. Organizations similar to the African Union Society later formed in Philadelphia (1787) and Boston (1796), making the one in Newport one of, if not the earliest organization of this type in the United States.

The main goal of the members of the FAUS was to support one another. They were concerned with making sure there was money in the treasury for members to have a proper burial, even later extending this action to the wives and/or widows of members. A special committee would be appointed when a member was sick to look after them and offer any assistance. If a member had fallen on hard times, they could apply for funds from the treasury to help sustain them. The organization, through its actions and conduct of its members, was attempting to break down stereotypes that had been perpetuated by slavery. These stereotypes included the belief that blacks were underdeveloped, childlike, and dependent on whites.

Plagued by low meeting attendance and failure to pay dues, the FAUS struggled to operate. This led to members either being removed from the Society or choosing to leave of their own accord. The Society's troubles did not end there. In November of 1794, Dinah Sisson asked for a record of the account of her late husband, Neptune Sisson, as was customary of all widows of members. The Society found that no money was owed Mr. Sisson, in fact, "It [was] voted that Mr. Sisson is overpaid and therefore has no more right in this Society." Dinah Sisson did not take this well and apparently made a series of disparaging comments about the Society that were so inflammatory, member Prince Amy moved for the breaking up of the Society and starting it anew. On March 4, 1795, the first African Union Society ended.

Just six months later in September of 1795, the African Union Society reformed under the same name and voted to follow the same structure and rules as the first iteration of the Society. For unspecified reasons, the Society voted to change its name to the African Humane Society in 1802. Records for the African Humane Society held at the Newport Historical Society end in 1824, and it is possible that the Society continued after that, but it is uncertain.

African Benevolent Society

The African Benevolent Society (ABS) began in December of 1807 at a general meeting of the Africans of

Newport. This group was made up of blacks and whites, males and females. Their two main goals were to establish a free school for anyone of color who wished to learn and to help the colored poor. A number of the members of the African Union Society and later the African Humane Society were also members of the African Benevolent Society. Newport Gardener, for example, served as the first school teacher for the African Free School and would later go on to serve as the President of the ABS from 1811-1820 while simultaneously serving as the Secretary of the African Union/Humane Society.

The ABS was a Christian organization. Every year members would invite a local reverend to give an address to the group, and they required any teacher who worked at the school be a Christian in good standing with their church and mandated that scripture be read in the school every day. Members of the ABS were also required to pay dues that went into the treasury. These funds were usually only used for the upkeep of the school and any other organizational needs. In time, members began to default on their dues, similar to problems experienced in the African Union Society. This meant that some years the school could not be opened as evidenced by a Director's Report from February 21, 1814 which stated that the ABS had been unable to open the school "last summer or the present winter." This also forced the ABS to ask parents of students attending the school for donations beginning in 1810. Despite these struggles, the ABS persisted, and even formed a female branch known as the African Female Benevolent Society. The records housed at the Newport Historical Society end in 1824, but the ABS was in operation until 1844 when it chose to disband and give its records to the Colored Union Congregational Church for safekeeping.

Scope and Content

This collection contains four volumes of meeting minutes: three belonging to the African Union Society, later renamed the African Humane Society (AHS), and one belonging to the African Benevolent Society (ABS). These meeting minutes date from 1787 to 1824 and they offer insight into the members of these societies, their social status within the African American community of Newport and how the African American community organized and supported each other prior to the Civil War.

The minutes of both societies are fairly straightforward descriptions of meeting proceedings. They also include disputes between members and the society, accounts of the treasury, deaths of members and correspondence between the Societies and partnering organizations from places like Providence, Boston and Philadelphia. Both groups were well organized and would often send delegates to visit other groups in different cities as well as accept delegates from other areas. Their relationship with the African Humane Society in Philadelphia is perhaps what inspired the members of the African Union Society to change their name to the African Humane Society in 1802.

Other highlights include details of Newport Gardener's involvement with both the African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society. While he was not a founding member of the African Union Society, nor its first president, he was an integral member of the organization and served as its secretary for many years.

He was the first school teacher of the African Benevolent Society's African Free School and would later go on to serve as President of the ABS for almost ten years.

Another prominent member of both the African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society is Arthur Tikey Flagg. A rope maker, Flagg was one of the founding members of the Free African Union Society ca. 1780. At some point, most likely around the time of the dissolution of the first African Union Society in 1795, Flagg left the Society. He would go on to be a founding member and first president of the African Benevolent Society in 1808. He and his son, Arthur Flagg, Jr. played an important part in the instruction at the ABS' African Free School. Flagg, Jr. served as secretary of the ABS under his father, and later under the presidency of Newport Gardner.

Also included within these volumes is correspondence from William Thornton, a man with a variety of occupations including physician and architect, who was supportive of those who wished to return to Africa and strived to assist them in any way he could. There are a handful of his letters that were copied into the minute book (1674B), but there are no copies of the responses to his letters. His letters show that he had ties to French abolitionist organizations as well as prominent Newport abolitionist Rev. Samuel Hopkins, minister of the First Congregational Church of Newport. His association with the African Union Societies dates back to ca. 1787, but members did not make the trip to Africa until 1826. It is unknown if Thornton assisted with that trip at all.

Subject Access

<i>People</i>	Flagg, Arthur Tikey, 1739-1810 Gardner, Newport, ca. 1746-1826
<i>Organizations</i>	African Benevolent Society Female African Benevolent Society Free African Union Society
<i>Form/Genre</i>	minutes (administrative records) correspondence

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