

Submission for conference, Dance, Song, Music and Sociability 1750 -1832

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Title: “Social Aspiration in Early Nineteenth-Century Black Philadelphia”

Proposal narrative, expanded - Feb. 2021:

In early nineteenth-century Philadelphia—a city famed for its liberal abolitionist sentiment and sizable free-black population—institutions of learning, intellectual exchange, and refined sociability proliferated for both white and black residents. Led by prominent members of the African American community, the drive toward self-improvement and racial uplift was epitomized in the “moral reform” movement, which contributed to formation of such all-black organizations as the Colored Reading Society, the Female Literary Association, the Banneker Institute, the Philadelphia Library Company for Colored Persons, and the Minerva Literary Society. Intertwined with these African American learned societies was the society of respectable elegance detailed in Joseph Willson’s *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (1841). In this remarkable and unusual book, Willson guardedly published his experience as a member of that circle of African American refinement—a circle otherwise circumspect and protected from the white gaze.

The “colored” high-society achievement and aspiration about which Willson wrote garnered ridicule and resentment from some white Philadelphians. For example, the focus of my proposal, a “Coloured Fancy Ball” held in the City of Brotherly Love in February 1828, became a site not only of social aspiration and political allegiance for its black attendees, but also of cross-class white violence and satire aimed against the ball guests. Newspaper reports about the event, and supportive documentation including satirical cartoons, allow the researcher to conjure this story and perceive it from different social perspectives. This material reveals the nature, reportage, and ramifications of that social-dance gathering for its elite black attendees, for U.S. African Americans more broadly, and for the racial tensions then flaring in Philadelphia. Study of the ball’s contexts—social, racial, political, economic, and aesthetic (dance, music, décor)—reveals the varied meanings it held for different parties concerned with the event directly through participation, or indirectly through commentary.

The 1828 “black ball” can be compared usefully to a white high-society event in the same period, the 1824 reception of the Marquis de Lafayette in Philadelphia, a visit that was part of his national celebratory tour, decades after the beloved Frenchman’s service to the U.S. during the War of Independence. A source of pride to the nation’s white community, Lafayette’s highly orchestrated and publicized visit included a ball in Philadelphia, featuring well-documented elements that help to contextualize the reported design of the 1828 African American gathering. White Philadelphians were well prepared to celebrate the Marquis in style: they had established one of the earliest Dancing Assemblies in what would become the United States, and the city’s numerous dancing masters hailed from both Europe and the U.S., all bringing elegant behavior and the latest dances to their patrons.

At these and other high-society white balls, African Americans were present as musicians, caterers, and servants, allowing the black community full knowledge of properly-run assemblies. In fact, renowned free-black Philadelphia composer and bandleader Francis Johnson participated in both the Lafayette reception and the 1828 African ball. Johnson, hailed by one biographer as

“the single most important musician in any history of the Republic before 1845,”¹ performed for white high-society balls and elite white militia companies, saw his own compositions (many supporting the latest dance crazes) extensively published, toured his band to Europe, supported black causes in his home city, and taught numerous white and black students on a range of instruments. He offers the most outstanding, although not the only, example of the interpenetration of white and black societies and cultures in antebellum Philadelphia. In this light, this investigation further illuminates how sociality, behavior, and aspiration were subjects of national contest as the new United States—exemplified here by its leading revolutionary city, Philadelphia—struggled to determine who and what could be called “American.”

Brief biographical statement:

Dr. Lynn Matluck Brooks, Shadek Humanities Professor-Emerita at Franklin & Marshall College, received the Dewey Award for Scholarship at F&M and the Lindback Award for Teaching. A Certified Movement Analyst and dance historian, she has held grants from the Fulbright/Hayes Commission, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Brooks has authored books and scholarly articles and regularly presents work at international conferences. Having served as editor of *Dance Research Journal* and *Dance Chronicle*, she now writes and serves as editor-in-chief for thINKingDANCE.net. Her current research focuses on early Philadelphia dance history.

¹ Charles K. Jones, *Francis Johnson (1792-1844): Chronicle of a Black Musician in Early Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Lehigh University Press, 2006), 14.