

# **True But Brief History of the Friendly Societies and Development of Black Bermudian Communities after Emancipation: Black People Seek Pride and Power in a Post-Slavery and Post-Emancipation World, the Bermuda Experience**

by

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## **Abstract**

A new tool ('friendly society participation'), and a new laboratory (nineteenth-century Bermuda), are used to study the post-Emancipation response on a community level that the formerly enslaved organized and employed as their own self-help and mutual aid efforts to compensate for the non-support by government and societal institutions. The response sought to ensure that all persons would now enjoy the same/equal rights and privileges. A parade of friendly society vehicles provided a trove of illustrations of very successful interventions in social themes like education, labor, pride and self-respect. This fundamental group adaptation/strategy enabled the 'powerless' — i.e., the Black/working class/ newly freed sector — 'to lift itself up by its own bootstraps'. As the slavery era and post-Emancipation scenario was fairly standard throughout North to Central America and The Caribbean with friendly societies being present widely, we are invited to consider how studying the friendly society story elsewhere may be informative and enlightening about many social history themes of that period and even later. Details of the history and roles and impacts of the Bermuda friendly societies suggest rewarding opportunities for comparative analyses of response strategies elsewhere.

**Keywords:** Bermuda/ social history/ post-emancipation history/ societal resistance/ freed person studies/ friendly societies/ Odd Fellows lodges/ Good Samaritans lodges/ self-help/ mutual assistance

## Introduction

This study shows how formerly enslaved persons developed and harnessed their own efforts (individually and mutually) to improve their station in life. People from ‘different groups’ - - - be this gender or religion or ethnic origin, etc- - - must learn to live together in a stable and agreeable relationship without overt or subliminal conflict. Unmanaged contact has brought us wars, enslavement, colonization, apartheid, and genocide at each time that the dominant party has responded with ‘fear of the other’. When enslavement of Blacks ended during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Whites ran the show — the politics; the economy; the religion; the language; the culture, etc. In this tenuous and stressful calm, the new ‘allowances’ to Blacks could be rescinded at a stroke. Most had been ‘given freedom’ by Emancipation from slavery or the Abolition of slavery rather than by such self-actualization ~~such~~ as armed revolt or maroonage. Blacks and Whites both share/assume/hear the worldview that Whites have fought for their rights to freedom and respect (which they then celebrate in national flags and symbols and patriotic songs that proclaim they ‘always will be free’), while Blacks are passive recipients of freedom and status according to the generosity and liberalism of powerful Whites at the expense of ‘average Whites’.

The fact that the victor ‘writes the history books’ is more than a cliché. It yields an ‘incomplete history’. In the post-Abolition/post-Emancipation world the shallow recording of great events by great men ignores the study of the ‘friendly society role and impact’ in the interactions of Black and White sectors of the community. Throughout the region, the formerly enslaved populations had to choose a path forward. They could continue as the docile and repressed participants while ‘the Apprenticeship process’ or ‘the Reconstruction period’ would be used to prepare these ‘childlike and naive dependents’ for eventual full and equal membership in society. They could justifiably and vehemently and forcefully oppose limitations imposed on their proclaimed ‘equality’ with a consequent bloodbath and savagery on all sides. They could take a rejectionist and isolationist stance that would lead to an abdication of/isolation from social contact with Whites and a flight ‘back to Africa’ or to ‘a reserve or similar Bantusan’.

All paths were followed to varying extents in various guises. But the story is not ‘known’ or shared or taught broadly of those self-governing and self-organizing bodies with a dedication to self-help and mutual help (the friendly societies) that arose everywhere among the Black masses. In the racist and demeaning social environment of the times any attempts by the formerly enslaved to assert competencies or claim promised rights were readily seen as presumptuous at least or even a threat to the social stability. The extreme privacy that was therefore necessary for the Black friendly societies to operate was confused with ‘secrecy’. ‘Friendly societies’ have been confused with the Free Masons (a ‘secret society movement’ that advanced a White male elitist worldview). Masons did not have the very open public presence which was common among the friendly societies.

Friendly societies were gregarious. Masons have always been very secretive with secret meetings of powerful men, and they have long been feared. The Bermuda situation of 'freemasonry' is peculiar in that several White lodges have existed locally for generations but Blacks and the enslaved and the majority of Whites were not able to join. Bermuda had near equivalence of Black and White populations at Emancipation. The Caribbean jurisdictions typically had only minor percentages of Whites and large excesses of Blacks. Hence after Emancipation it would be natural for Blacks to gain access to all social organizations and to eventually come to dominate them. This inevitability was not so clear in Bermuda because the significant size of the White population would enable them to remain as a distinct and separate and powerful presence. Freemasonry therefore did not impact the Black Bermudian population as the friendly societies could. A deeper dive into the complexity of comparison between Freemasons and friendly societies in Bermuda is to be analysed at another time.

Friendly societies throughout the region are in serious numerical decline. They arose as early as the pre-Emancipation 1830's wherever sufficiently large concentrations of 'free' Blacks were found. Others appeared in the pre-Abolition 1860's with rapid growth in both the number of Orders and of the size of lodges. The lodge is the basic unit of the friendly society and refers to a support group of persons who met regularly in a specific location and agreed to follow certain procedures. The Order describes an aggregation of lodges which have shared beliefs and procedures which are, however, distinct from those identifying beliefs and procedures of another Order. Friendly societies trumpeted fraternity – the philosophy of the primacy of brotherhood/sisterhood as a basic tenet. Thus, friendly societies improve the lives of the members and promote harmonious interaction between all sectors of humanity by codified and managed 'individual and mass behaviour'.

The friendly society story in Bermuda is part of the 'oral history' passed from seniors to selected 'junior members' in some families and some communities that needs to be uncovered and recovered and studied and analysed to the great benefit of Black and White alike. The achievements of Black communities have often been built on the foundation/bulwark provided as a consequence of the unseen and unacknowledged contribution from the friendly societies. The stability and general absence of cataclysmic violence in the individual and mass interactions between Whites and Blacks was partly a consequence of the impacts of the friendly societies.

The story of the Bermuda friendly society movement is a case study of the friendly society movement and the benefits due to its operation in a post-emancipation and post-abolition world. Persons are invited to carry out pertinent research in other jurisdictions to further analyse the comparison that is suggested in the work. The relevance to understanding the social history of Bermuda is obviously explored, but there is extrapolation to a plausible importance of such study to other jurisdictions.

## **The Contextual World and the Bermuda Setting**

Interactions of human groups as noted in European history have been primarily around power struggles and conflict within different sectors of a group identified by common occupation of a geographical space where the differences may be based on gender or religion or type of work or language or place of birth, etc. Management of these interactions has ranged from the strictly hierarchial manifestation of the 'Divine Rights of Kings' through to the idealistic equality and equality of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Communism. Failure of management has yielded revolt and rebellion and purges within the group. Power struggles between different groups has given us the cross-border military exploitations; the distant adventures overseas to secure trade advantages and territorial conquests; and the anthropologically despicable events of chattel slavery and apartheid and genocide.

Acknowledging the common origin of human populations from the 'African cradle', the seemingly different populations of the world arose from successive migrations and then isolation/separation from the parental gene pool/populations. Internal European conflicts caused flight to new lands (the New World) and eventual occupation and colonization. Superior technology in the military-industrial-transport complex by White populations enabled subjugation then exploitation and enslavement of African populations with transport to the colonized lands of the Western Atlantic and the Caribbean basin. Whites fleeing 'homelands' for various reasons and Africans (Blacks) forcibly removed from their 'homelands' and shipped elsewhere both ended up as interacting groups in the New World.

This New World interaction began about 5 centuries ago and persisted for three hundred and fifty years. Racism was created by the European/White power wielders as a falsified validation for the exploitation of persons of colour (especially of Africans displaying 'darker features') in chattel slavery. This denied the right of an enslaved person or their progeny to be 'free'. The 'enslaved' were owned and used like tools or livestock or other soulless possessions in the world of chattel slavery. The theme was racist exploitation based on demonization of 'Blackness': elevation of Whiteness.

Enslaved Africans and their progeny had very dark skin colour with wooly hair texture and big lips and other supposed race identifiers along a continuum to sufficient similarity to blue eyed and blonde-haired Whites as to 'pass' for being 'White'. All who were not recognized as White are here termed as "Blacks". A small fraction of Blacks in the New World were 'free'. They were not owned by slave masters, but the extent to which these 'free Blacks' enjoyed similar rights and status as did Whites varied widely with locales. Generally any rights/privileges were revocable by the local authorities without any hope of successful appeal to legal or religious advocacy. Such 'free Blacks' typically showed a non-contentious, low profile in the community. The enslaved succeeded in the unequal interaction and conflict by surviving.

Eventually a small cadre of enlightened persons seeking a more wholesome and progressive interaction between Whites and Blacks persuaded the social authorities and the public-at-large to emancipate formerly enslaved persons in the British jurisdictions (beginning in 1834) and in the USA to immediately abolish enslavement by the Lincoln proclamation (1865).

Our post-Emancipation British part of the New World ranged from Guyana in the south to Bermuda in the north as colonies with significant and widespread Black populations (Canada is excluded due of its generally insignificant fraction of Blacks in the population). These were catalogued together as ‘the Bermudas and the British West Indies’. Population size and ratios shown in Table 1 varied broadly. All had many more Blacks than Whites but everywhere the Whites had superiority in all spheres and interactions. Whites were advantaged and Blacks disadvantaged at every turn. ‘Freedom for the enslaved’ did not bring the equality and fullness of rights and privileges accorded to Whites.

**Table 1 Population numbers for Bermuda and select islands in 1834**

	Number of Black enslaved	Number of Whites	Number of free Blacks	Total population
Bermuda	4600	3900	740	9240
Jamaica	323,000	37,000	3700	363,700
Guyana	70,000	3,000	6,400	79,400
Barbados	82,000	15,000	5,100	102,100

Bermuda and the West Indies have Black (African descent) populations and White populations (British and European descent). The Blacks were systematically denuded of their cultural self-identifiers like language and religion which were then replaced by force with the enslavers’ cultural identifiers. The White populations retained most of their ‘remembered’ cultural identifiers and exaggerated these with the advantageous ‘learned’ identifiers of an artificially created racist philosophy and society supported by enslavement. Thus, Blacks were described as ‘primitive and uncivilized’ despite general knowledge of the grandeur and splendour of the antiquities of Africa like Egypt and Timbuctu, etc. After 1834, interaction between Blacks and Whites locally was seen through the lens of the White view of shouldering the burden of a large, demanding Black mass which made only weak contributions to local communal success. Blacks expected the equality and fullness of promised citizenship with proportionate participation in all spheres.

Positioned at 32<sup>0</sup> N; 64<sup>0</sup> W Bermuda is 665 miles from Cape Hatteras in North Carolina in the USA; 917 miles from the Bahamas; 1250 miles from Jamaica; and 1936 miles from Guyana. Bermuda’s isolated set of islands with fertile soil and a temperate sub-tropical climate and year-round rainfall will support most vegetation found in the region. Limited flat acreage, however, and only small pockets of deep soil meant the absence of large plantations so common elsewhere. Instead, an extensive coastline of about 104 miles with many landing sites resulted in an unusually strong sea faring theme.

## Origins of the Friendly Society Philosophy and Bermuda

Principles/practices of self-help must exist in any individual or group that expects to achieve success. Principles/practices of mutual-help are more nuanced and complex because some say that communal action discourages the vigour and dynamism of individuality. Others cite the sharp inequities and injustices that arise within self-centred human systems that lead to disharmony and conflicts. Surely friendly society philosophy — self-help and mutual-help to secure desirable objectives — existed in African societies independently of the ‘recognized friendly society history’ in Britain. As Britain transitioned from the agricultural world of serfs and rural life to the new era of changing interactions and urban population centers that was driven by the Industrial Revolution, there was abrupt and extreme social fragmentation and disorganization. Villagers who formerly enjoyed the security of communal life were now powerless in residences far from their birthplace and support systems. As a response they developed their own new self-help and mutual-help organizations which they called friendly societies. These friendly societies empowered the former village groups who were now otherwise powerless in their ‘foreign’ urban settings.

Bermuda in the 1800’s held about equal numbers of Blacks and Whites in a slavery dominated society of White enslavers and racist supremacy. The smaller Black slaveholdings were more similar to the New England States than the typically much larger plantation holdings of the southern USA and of the West Indies. Bermudians put more emphasis on seafaring than farming. Land-based enslaved African persons gave greater value as skilled journeymen who increased the earnings of their enslavers more than as less skilled farm labour. Seafaring Blacks worked in limited but greater collegiality than was common on land. Such Blacks might act with greater autonomy and encountered more new ideas in their travels to distant parts. These enlightening experiences and general ‘eccentricities’ of enslaved Blacks in Bermuda were compounded by the ‘free Blacks’ of Bermuda. The world of Free Blacks in Bermuda was broadly less stringently repressive and less stridently racist than in plantation driven jurisdictions. Hence, the Ratteray clan founders in Bermuda migrated from the Bahamas as ‘free Blacks’ to escape the greater restrictions. The Ratterays of Bermuda acquired land and ships and became overtly successful. Free Blacks had above average education and showed leadership and as thorough a participation in the society as circumstances would allow.

Bermuda’s enslaved Blacks were more skilled and with stronger attitudes of some self-respect and self-confidence than was typical in plantation locales. Bermuda had a comparatively larger number of free Blacks than was common in other enslavement-based lands with these free Blacks showing great achievements in wide areas. Together these Blacks made up a fraction of the Bermuda population that was larger than the Black proportion found elsewhere. Bermuda was also the origin of the ‘famously infamous’ Mary Prince story, which became the autobiography of an ex-enslaved African that undergirded the successful Emancipation Act campaign in the British Parliament and among the British people.

As Bermuda's people anticipated the ending of Black enslavement the free Blacks recognized the need for a vehicle and a strategy to prepare and empower the Black community. Friendly societies in Bermuda already could not be accessed by enslaved Blacks and were off limits for free Blacks due to overt racist restrictions. Free Blacks in Bermuda started a friendly society as early as 1832 to show that Blacks could attain the heights and attributes of so-called superiorly civilized Whites if these Blacks had the appropriate tutelage and experiences. Local friendly societies arose in a stream in ensuing years to meet specific identified needs and responses to particular social requirements.

**Table 2 Local friendly societies and their interests**

Young Men's Christian Institution	1834	Promoting literacy and Bible knowledge
Young Men's Friendly Institution	1832	Self help and mutual help
Pembroke Beneficent Society	1832?	
Female Charitable Union	1832	Supported girls and women
Bermuda Loyal Union Society	1834	Focused on citizenship and loyalty to the Crown
Friendly Union Society	1839	
Sandy's Beneficent Society	1844	Typically providing financial support to members esp. via loans and savings
Warwick Beneficent Society	1844	
Paget Beneficent Society	1844	
St. George's Beneficent Society	1846	
Industrious Man's Library	1848	Sharing books
Library for Disseminating Useful Knowledge	1848	
Ladies Society for Promoting Industry	1848	Developing life skills and work skills for females
Hamilton Parish Temperance Friendly Society	1852	General community needs e.g. school etc.
Southampton Beneficent Society	1854	
St. George's Pride Beneficent Society	1860	
Bermuda Total Abstinence Society	1873?	Supporting total abstinence from alcoholic drink
Bermuda Mutual Assurance Society	1879	Group insurance esp. for burial and death benefit
Working Men's Aid Helping Society and Ladies of Industry	1885	Focused on needs of working men and women

Friendly societies of British origins existed in Bermuda for Whites only but seldom lasted for long periods. Orders such as the Odd Fellows; and the Ancient Foresters often arrived via the usual crew — soldiers, sailors, merchants and missionaries from the motherland. The Masonic Order came via the colonial elites and those of the usual crew who held exceptional status. But Bermuda did not perpetuate the class structure in England which sustained the friendly societies there. There was no large White underclass in Bermuda that was severely deprived. Even lesser Whites would hardly be poor class by England's standards as they might have a bit of land and a few major assets (such as a house or livestock or a sea worthy boat or even a few slaves); they had the primacy before the law and in all social interactions which Whites enjoyed. No one records a permanent friendly society of an international order before 1848 or of a stable local friendly society before 1832.

Black Bermudians after 1834 busily created various local friendly societies to meet for socialization and camaraderie; for collaboration in work projects; for leadership in matters of the representation of the Black community to civic authorities; and for mentoring and role modeling for individuals and other admirable behaviours. The objectives were stoically non-antagonistic to the status quo. There was often a strong education focus aligned with being able to 'read the Bible' and shows of loyalty to the Crown. Also, social engagement and entertainment and networking were key interests.

A particularly active and progressive group of men that had been meeting 'under a Pride-of-India tree in St. George's town' had learned of a friendly society Order in the USA. This was the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. Odd Fellowship was common in the British armed forces and various friendly society lodges would be set up in Bermuda temporarily by visiting troops. These 'travelling lodges' were for Whites only. Black Bermudians instead sent a small delegation to Philomathean Lodge #646 in New York to appear before the Sub-Committee of Management. After much exploration and investigation the application of the Bermudian cadre succeeded. Thus, in Bermuda in 1848 a charter was received by the Somers Pride-of-India Lodge # 899 of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows.



**Table 3 International Orders of Friendly Societies associated with Bermuda**

Name of International Order	Place of Origin	Arrival date	Distinct feature	Number of lodges in Bermuda
Grand United Oder of Odd Fellows (GUOOF)	USA	1848	Imported directly from USA	3 male only
Household of Ruth (GUOOF)	USA		Females only	4 female only
Independent Order of Odd Fellows – Manchester Unity	Great Britain	1879	Arrived via military and naval forces	4 male only 3 female only 4 juvenile units
Ancient Order of Foresters	Great Britain	1879	Found widely around Caribbean	3 male only 2 female only 1 juvenile unit
Ancient Order of Free Gardeners	Scotland	1893	Very similar to Free Masons	4 adult 1 juvenile
Loyal and Ancient Order of Shepherds	Great Britain	1893	Often shared sites with Samaritans	7 adult 3 juvenile
Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria	USA	1858	Allowed free and the enslaved; male and female as equals	13 adult 3 juvenile units
Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks and Elks of the World	USA	1928??	centred on sites of USA military interest	3 adult 1 juvenile
Independent Order of Good Templars	Great Britain/ Canada	1867	Tied to multiple ships and visits	About 25 adult* (many ship or regiment)

The Odd Fellows had several groupings with different centres of governance and guidance which were established at different locales in England. Whites in the USA had a branch that did not allow even free Blacks to join. Fraternity is however a primary tenet of the philosophy of friendly societies. Thus, free Blacks in the USA formed their own branch of Odd Fellows and distinguished themselves from the segregated White group of Odd Fellows.

The non-segregated Odd Fellows were known as the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. Ironically, the charter for the first lodge of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows was brought to the USA by a West Indian free Black (Peter Ogden) who was a seaman emigrant from Barbados. The taking of knowledge about Odd Fellowship to Bermuda by Black seamen was followed by a Black delegation similarly importing their lodge charter to Bermuda.

### *Roles and impacts of 'fs'*

Friendly societies were 'invented' in Britain by the poor as a vehicle to assist the most disadvantaged and poorest of the English nation who had lost all the supports of the lord of the manor and the village community when these displaced farm labourers/villagers had to live in deprived communities in the towns during the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, friendly societies were started among the formerly enslaved Black individuals who were turned out into the capitalist world with no resources or compensation from the British government. It must be remembered that each slaveholder was paid a cash bounty to replace the value of each enslaved African person that was freed by the Emancipation Act of 1834.

Friendly societies in Bermuda's Black population arose among the free Blacks but quickly spread among all Blacks after the 1834 Emancipation. These friendly societies did not prevent Whites from joining, but the story of friendly societies in Bermuda is really about the Black population in the main. There are 4 principles which were common to all Orders in Bermuda and which were based on the grounding tenets of the British founding bodies. These principles embodied a duty:-

- To nurse and sit with the sick and dying members;
- To assist and financially support infirm and others who could not work;
- To look after the widows and orphans of members; and
- To attend meetings and support the officers and the general body.

Surely these provisions of the friendly societies would address many 'needs' of the formerly enslaved Blacks. The peculiar racial dynamics of Bermuda created other needs. Although Emancipation told the formerly enslaved they were 'free' they certainly did not participate as 'full citizens' of Bermuda. Blacks of 1834 were not equal before the law; did not have equal access to political participation; and were disadvantaged in economics and religion and in every other conceivable theme. Blacks in Bermuda did not enjoy the huge numerical superiority of other jurisdictions and therefore in Bermuda they may have had to assert themselves in a more circumspect manner. Friendly societies or something similar were urgently needed among Bermuda Blacks and showed a wide range of roles.

In Bermuda we find that friendly societies demonstrated the following behaviours:-

- The first resource for organizing and supporting the newly freed masses;
- A center for socialization among members;
- A focusing and organizing body for self-help projects;
- A 'spokesperson organization' for neglected sectors of the community;
- A representative from the masses that was acceptable to the ruling oligarchy;
- A means of self-management and self-direction in financial affairs by the masses;
- A means to self-provide and self-manage the welfare resources for the masses;
- A means to supplement and initiate education to meet their needs and aspirations;
- Monuments to successes of the efforts of the Black people as a community; and
- Links to other jurisdictions for traveling members through 'fraternal recognition'.

Lodge members supported each other in meeting the discipline and behaviours that were required of them. Family members and associates indirectly secured some of the membership benefits. The lodge hall was a beehive of community activity. The public attended social functions of the lodge or of others who simply used lodge facilities. Lodge assistance was available to members and extended to others to encourage them to join. The underlying principle was that the good which the lodge did was to benefit the whole community. A rising tide lifts all boats that were in the water. Lodges set out to improve the life and behaviours of the member and for these enhancements to lead to an improved community life.

**Table 4 Notable Bermuda history/culture impacts involving friendly societies**

August 1, 1834	Peaceful and calm passage of first day of Emancipation.
August 1834 onwards	Assisting bereft and newly freed persons with resources under 'friendly terms'.
Spring 1835	Court representation of 'enslaved persons' aboard the slave ship "Enterprise" in Bermuda.
Emancipation celebrations from 1835 forward. Cup Match became an iconic Bermuda event in 1902.	Peaceful/calm celebration of subsequent Emancipation Day anniversaries by the lodges become grander and more public with cricket games between friendly societies.
(1830's to mid -20 <sup>th</sup> century) By numerous lodge Orders	Use of lodge premises to establish private primary school education to supplement meager provisions from the state. Special assistance to secondary education e.g., the Berkeley Institute.
Mid- 19 <sup>th</sup> to mid-20 <sup>th</sup> century. Assistance with significant assets to community	Use of lodge resources for community development as an asset for general use by groups and individuals.
From early 1900's. Visiting nurse service and then private nursing homes and later the Cottage Hospital	Use of lodge resources to establish a 'professional standard nursing service to members and the public' despite the inadequate race-based access to government provided services.
From early 1900's	Provision of financial support and encouragement to Black young ladies entering nursing training in UK especially.
The few non-Anglican and non-Catholic include British Methodists, African Methodist Episcopal; Jehovah's Witnesses; Pentecostals and others.	Use of lodge premises and resources to assist the arrival of new religious groups. Friendly Societies were generally non-denominational but "Christian". They did not proscribe to members and so a member's sympathetic ear was the entry key.
Since the mid-1800's. Bermudians travel to other lodges and receive foreign colleagues by reciprocal recognitions.	Attendance at international conferences and holding regional gatherings in Bermuda has been infrequent but important. Bermuda is geographically quite isolated but such interchange has kept Bermudians very aware of having a role on the world stage.

## Friendly Societies Activities in the Community

### *Parades*

A major distinction in Bermuda between the friendly societies and the Free Masons is based on their public profile and presentation. The Free Masons identified themselves as a 'secret society' and had a negligible public visibility. They rarely congregated in public and did not invite the public to their events. Contrarily, the friendly societies were constantly 'on parade' and their popularity was a source for recruiting new members. In the racist post-Emancipation world the lodge's public parade was an opportunity for Black persons to display the symbols of power and prestige and authority that were otherwise denied to them. There was the disciplined marching throng of resplendent members with the accompanying musicians — sometimes a full band. Officers were in exotic regalia bearing mystic and well-known emblems and symbols. The parade would be followed by a 'feast' of some level from a 'simple repast of cakes and sandwiches and desserts etc' to 'full sit-down banquets with dignitaries from all walks of life from Blacks and Whites'. The multiple parades marked lodge specific events like 'founders Day', Thanksgiving events, as well as community general events like Christmas and Easter as well as national themes like the Royal visits and other national commemorations.

These public parades were powerful images and experiences for the individual and the community. The finery and splendour expressed such pomp and ceremony that Blacks could achieve when the racism of the day and segregation declared them to be 'persons of negligible worth'. While enslaved the Blacks could not carry a sword or any weapon, and even 'free Blacks' were considered presumptuous and aspiring falsely to look like 'gentlemen' if they were seen to be carrying a sword. Lodge members not only paraded with swords and spears but also with symbolic tokens that denoted their aspirations and striving for 'education' and for qualities like 'industry' and 'unity'. Participants gained self-confidence and self-respect; bystanders were uplifted by seeing what heights could be achieved by similar persons from the community; and segregationists were forced to acknowledge the spectacle and the status of the parades which were in line with what was seen in other great jurisdictions of the region.

### *Education and schools*

Education was not a huge priority in earlier Bermuda. The formerly enslaved had been given/allowed such education as made them more useful to their enslavers. Some could read a bit of the Bible and had sufficient mathematics for work in mechanical trades like carpentry, smithy and cooperage or in trading. Slave masters and owners often had comparable educational levels. Isolated Bermuda did not have a huge land mass or a grand economy when compared to some nearby jurisdictions. Hence, the authorities deemed that there was little need for a well-educated populace as the majority would have fairly modest employment. Both Blacks and Whites in the seafaring and farming world of Bermuda showed the same passing familiarity with the 3 R's as did the general population in Britain.

On the other hand, in post-Emancipation Bermuda Black parents realized that everyone could achieve more with a better education. Improved literacy would mean a more fulsome involvement in the life of their church. There would be less dependency and a need for less abject trust in the personal honesty of legal and other professionals. Advance and success in roles and performance within the friendly society world was not dependent on 'high' learning but could be greatly assisted by such an advantage. Lodges took steps to continue and improve the education of their adult members when they could while making extraordinary efforts to educate the children. While Whites expected the Blacks to be content to be cart drivers and to engage in other menial work (especially as domestic servants) the Black parents wanted more than the 3 R's and to be able to read the Bible. Private schools were often set up in lodge halls with subsidy from the lodge. Members and the public at large were able to access the facilities by paying of fees. These met the needs for primary school education. Secondary schooling was not provided at all by government but several private efforts were made in collaboration with lodges. Notably the Berkeley Institute has had an outstanding reputation for secondary education for 120 years with several of its early years being passed in a Good Samaritan's Lodge.

#### *Sick aid and other social benefits*

The absence of general access to medical care by the Black population and the segregated access to the limited means that did exist were common to Bermuda and much of the Caribbean. The provision of nursing care and sick aid were inherited directly from the duties seen in lodge Orders from England. This proved a cohesive strength in local communities. Lodge members might be required to visit a sick member and provide assistance with chores and domestic responsibilities. Funds could be sent to help pay for necessities such as rent and food purchases. Actual basic nursing care might even be given in regard to cooling fevered persons or changing of dressings. A recovering individual and persons with long standing conditions might receive other sustained help. The friendly society member was truly their brother's/sister's keeper. In Bermuda this duty was taken to another level such that the origins of our government social assistance programmes as well as senior care homes can be traced to relevant efforts among the friendly society programs.

A member in good standing received benefit throughout life and even after. Enslaved persons were seldom given any respect even in death. This was only a continuation of the disrespect in their lifetime. Often no grave was marked and burial might be in unsanctified ground. It was an extra humiliation to be unable to have or give a decent burial for a loved one. Now there was provision of a death benefit as an agreeable sum of cash money from the lodge to pay for burial expenses and a celebratory wake and a grant to surviving family. Lodge schemes ran the gamut from simple contributory plans on an annual basis to permanent systems of much longer duration which foreshadowed the popular life insurance policies with death benefits from commercial firms. A further important death benefit was not cash but was the approbation and acclaim that might be bestowed on a departed member.

Members could be buried in full lodge dress with their lodge in attendance with support from associated and fraternal lodges. Honours of various forms were enacted over the departed member and a stately parade complete with band and/or choir from the lodge might carry the member to their final resting place. Further ritual and complex tributes might follow in a private graveside service according to the practices of the Order. What a mighty turn-around. Persons moved from being a no-body in the White world to a striking and amazing personage in the friendly society.

## **Discussion**

The occurrence of enslavement by Whites against Blacks is an actual repulsive fact that must not be forgotten or rephrased in our time of massive communication ability in the shade of political correctness and ‘fake news’. History, for most of its time, has been presented from the perspective of the dominant voices in the community. But the ‘full telling of history’ has been appreciated to be a powerful tool that can unite a divided community and also can improve relationships between antagonistic communities. This casts the friendly society story as a powerful treasure. The friendly society story is used to trace how the positive actions of Black people have been foundational to their own progress. Despite great disadvantage they were able to lift themselves up by their own actions. It is theoretically and practically impossible to lift oneself by one’s own bootstraps. Maybe the friendly society has demonstrated that Blacks could and did lift up their neighbour and as each raised another then all were lifted out of the muck and mire to which segregationists and racists would condemn the Blacks (and the Brown and the Jews and the women and indeed any who were not born as White Anglo Saxon derived males).

For most of the public the defining image of Blacks prior to the ‘giving of Emancipation’ is one of the dim and dreaded spectres of ‘slavery’. Slavery was a demeaning experience that brought to the fore the worst aspects of selfishness and self-interest of men and women as they abused and demeaned and exploited others. The enslavers and the appeasers and apologists burned their integrity and any innate drive to recognize equity and human brotherhood on the altar of self-advantage and profit and advantage for one group of persons who abused and misused another group. In all of this the Blacks were posed as helpless and hapless victims — both childlike and unsophisticated examples of powerlessness who needed Whites as saviours and guides. It is anathema to those who hold the ‘victim’ image that Blacks might have actively and successfully brought about the changes that undergirded the success that Blacks have achieved up to this point.

Knowledge of such accomplishments and organization as the success of the friendly society movement is critical for the Black Diaspora. The modern Black Diaspora is a mental and physical creation of enslavement and the post-slavery world. Among many of us, the victim perspective has persisted for so long and so effectively because it was thought to be the only story.

Academics said that the enslaved and their immediate descendants were all powerless and therefore this state of minimal or negligible power would have persisted unless the powerful group gave concessions of its power. Blacks were not thought to have created any institutions or organizations or movements of their own which were successful. Therefore, it was told that post- Emancipation Blacks had used no power vehicle or power source of their own.

‘The people’s history’ showed a contrary story. But just as maroonage had to be moved from folklore and shared and private memory of the formerly enslaved and their Black descendants into the common consciousness, so the friendly society story must be ‘discovered’ and then uncovered. Friendly societies were created by Bermudian Blacks as needed and as circumstances would allow. In slavery times friendly societies could only be formed among free Blacks who had sufficient social equity as to be able to meet in secret/private bodies and where there was sufficient social stability. Otherwise such an organization of Black group members was seen as dangerous opponents to the status quo of the slavery world. Knowledge of and pride in the friendly society story among Blacks raised all the fears and forebodings unveiled by maroonage.

The friendly society story reflects humanity’s response to a particular set of conditions. The concept is not necessarily complex or unique and could easily arise at several times and places. Similar institutions might be seen in African populations prior to their contact with chattel enslavement. Such institutions are a logical option in the specific circumstances of their social position — a community sector with little power where overt power display with violence against a weaker opponent was the norm. Populations formed friendly societies throughout the New World. It is certainly seen in the USA with the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows and many others. Parallel bodies are found in several Caribbean Islands. Bermuda’s friendly society story is introduced in some detail in this paper.

The scenario and rationale that foreshadow the formation of friendly societies is identifiable in Bermuda, and quite appropriately we find friendly societies being formed as needed and as circumstances allow. The first expression of this would be in smaller and more locally focused organizations which are here identified as ‘local friendly societies’. The number and range of interests of such societies is somewhat surprising, but perhaps this is only because we have until now known very little about the existence and story of such organizations. This is an area that is ripe to explore.

Distinctly, after the formation and success of local friendly societies it is natural to expect an advantage from joining a like organization that is bigger and better connected and presumably better performing in every way. Again the variety and number of such organizations in Bermuda appears to be surprising. These are known as internationally linked friendly society Orders as they were first created in overseas jurisdictions. Those found in Bermuda originate primarily from the United Kingdom, the USA and Canada.



## Value of the Friendly Society Story

The friendly society story is used to explore and suggest a viable response to the end of enslavement. The friendly society brought forward themes of self-help and mutual-help as an attribute for a group that was seen as powerless and dependent on others. The newly emancipated Blacks were not only seen as being economic lightweights but as anticipated drains on the economy. It was part of the White Man's burden. There is brief exploration of how education and public parades and other aspects demonstrate advance and achievement for the individual and the community at large through the means of the friendly society's impacts.

The friendly society story in Bermuda needs to be exposed to the usual academic procedures of verification and validation and analysis, etc. There can then follow the ideas of comparability and extrapolation. If it is confirmed that friendly societies existed in similar ways and can be examined using guidelines from the Bermuda scenario, then we can examine this in a larger jurisdiction like the USA. Will Canada and the rest of the Caribbean and Central America yield comparable stories?

The new Smithsonian Museum that is dedicated to the study and display of African American history has very, very little on the friendly society story. The author would suggest that there is much opportunity here for productive work in exploring what friendly societies existed and how they functioned and what they did. The absence of such exploration and exposition at the new museum might be the elephant in the room. Why is there so much ignorance of the topic? There are questions that can be asked through this lens by looking at other jurisdictions of the modern Black Diaspora. Some questions that come to mind are as follows:-

How did Black populations use friendly societies in the pre- and post- Abolition of Slavery periods in the USA? How have friendly societies been involved in the development of peace and stability or the transformation of cultural mashups into multi-cultural Caribbean societies/communities?

How have friendly societies affected the empowerment of vulnerable groups in relevant jurisdictions?

How have new perspectives of rights and new protections for vulnerable groups such as workers and seniors and children, etc. been affected by the friendly society story in the locale?

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20. Personal research and information available to the author as a senior officer and long term researcher in FS matters in Bermuda. Michael Bradshaw is a 30 year member of Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria; 8 years on the Bermuda Friendly Societies Association (BFSA) executive and 5 years as President.