



# The French Society of Friends of Black People (1788-1799)

Bernard Gainot

**Appearing in Paris in 1788, the French Society of Friends of Black People (Société des Amis des Noirs) followed the model of its British counterpart. During the revolutionary decade, it evolved from a philosophical society to a political club, which paradoxically, declined after the abolition of enslavement in the French colonies.**

## Foundation of the French Society

The Society for the Abolition of the Trade of Black People\* (Société pour abolition de la traite des nègres), founded in Paris on 19 February 1788, was inspired by other anti-slavery societies, which emerged in the United States after 1783, at the initiative of the Quakers, notably in Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, the closest reference model was the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in London in May 1787. The main leaders of the French Society were publicist Jacques-Pierre Brissot and the banker of Genevan origin, Étienne Clavière. Both had stayed for extended periods in Anglo-Saxon countries and were fervent admirers of the young American Republic. In the entourage of Mirabeau, writer and French reformer politician, they wrote the Analysis of English Papers (Analyse des papiers anglais). The latter was intended to serve as a link between the supporters of constitutionalism (which gave primacy to the law), on both sides of the Channel, but also to coordinate efforts with English anti-enslavement activists (the key figures being Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and William Wilberforce). The objective was to obtain, by law, the immediate abolition of the trade of enslaved African peoples, and eventually, the eradication of slavery-based economies, while preserving the economic system of the colonial plantation.

The original trio were soon joined by encyclopaedist Nicolas de Condorcet, who in 1781, had published under a pseudonym a vigorous pamphlet against the trade of enslaved peoples. Later, the Abbot Henri Grégoire joined the main group, along with Pastor Benjamin-Sigismond Frossart\*, and Doctor François-Xavier Lanthenas. Many political figures, who played a large role at the start of the French Revolution, also ensured the growth and influence of the Society. In addition to Mirabeau, these included the Marquis de La Fayette and the Duc de La Rochefoucauld d'Enville. The register of the Society for the Abolition of the Trade of Black People reveals a regular and sustained rhythm of meetings, of the order of three per month, with an average participation of twelve members.



## Characteristics and specificities of the French Society

The Society was like a philosophical society (statutes, regulations, co-optation of members), but also resembled a pressure group or lobby, oriented towards decision-making bodies: firstly, the Secretary of State for the Marine and the Colonies, and then from July 1789 onwards, the National Constituent Assembly. It aimed to obtain legislation that would prohibit the trade of enslaved African peoples, in consultation with the other colonial powers (primarily England, and then the United Provinces—current-day Netherlands—and Portugal). They believed that the slowing down of the source of the labour supply should be accompanied by an improvement in the lot of enslaved populations on the plantations, followed ultimately by an increase in the number of enfranchisements. Eventually, the system of enslavement would come to an end, without any major disruption to the economic structure.

Unlike its British counterpart, the French Society did not organize mass petition campaigns to win over public opinion. It sought mainly to obtain legal texts likely to advance their objectives. It published pamphlets and attempted to win over influential people amongst the ministries, and prepared speeches to win a parliamentary majority. However, the Society came up against other lobbies, as powerful as itself, if not more so. These included the Club Massiac, which represented the interests of some of the plantation owners of Saint-Domingue and the merchants of the major port cities. This club controlled the Colonial Committee of the Assembly, through deputies committed to maintaining the status quo, like Barnave and the Lameth brothers. The arguments that the latter constantly repeated were that any attack on the system in place would lead to the economic ruin of entire regions, and apocalyptic social unrest in the colonies.

The activities of the Society of Friends of Black People also comprised translating the publications of foreign abolitionists and preparing articles to be used in the national press. There was also a prospective dimension: the aim was to support initiatives that would create establishments on the African coasts based on freedom of work and freedom of trade. The model of reference here was England's relationship with Sierra Leone.



## The French Society and trouble in the colonies

From the autumn of 1789 onwards, the Society, under the impetus of Grégoire, Brissot, and Julien Raimond, an individual of mixed race from Saint-Domingue, evolved into a political club. It was a staunch supporter of the group of the Free Peoples of Colour, which sought to overturn segregation laws and gain equal political rights with European settlers. Consequently, the focus of members was less the public powers and established authorities, whether colonial or commercial, than the protagonists of a broad revolutionary movement emerging in the colonies. This movement was driven by free people of colour, but within it, the enslaved populations were quick to play a role in the overthrowing of the entire system. This radicalization marginalized the more moderate members, who subsequently left the Society. Membership, which normally consisted of some one hundred and thirty individuals now began to dwindle, and meetings became more irregular. The Society also suffered from the political involvement of its key figures in the struggles overwhelming mainland France.

Over the following years, references to the Society remained present in the public debate, up until the complete abolition of slavery in all the French colonies by the brief decree of 16 Pluviôse Year II (4 February 1794). For its opponents, it was used as a scare tactic to maintain the myth of an occult committee determined to ruin the colonies for the greater benefit of the enemies of France, England, and Spain. For its supporters, this was a venerable agreement that was invoked to illustrate the very strong links uniting the “revolution of Black and mixed-race people” in the colonies, and the course of the Revolution in France, without however evoking the precursors like Brissot and Clavière, who had been guillotined, for having wanted to bring “the Blacks to revolt”, amongst other reasons. Informal discreet meetings were sometimes held with former members who had survived Revolutionary turmoil, either in Paris or the Cap in Saint-Domingue (current-day Haiti).

## The Renaissance of the Society under the Directorate (1795-1799)

During the Directorate, a liberal Republican French regime, the Society underwent a veritable renaissance. The Society of Friends of Black People and the Colonies (Société des Amis des Noirs et des colonies) wanted to take up the torch. Various attempts to resume sessions took place between 1795 and 1797, around key figures from the initial Society, like the Abbot Grégoire, Doctor François-Xavier Lanthenas, Pastor Benjamin-Sigismond Frossard\* and the General Servan, former Minister of War. However, it was after September 1797 that the situation became more favourable. By eliminating the Royalists, the Directorate also hit the spokespersons of the lobby who wished to gradually or brutally restore the slavery system. The Society of Friends of Black People and the Colonies adopted statutes and held increasingly regular meetings. It welcomed the engineer of



Swedish origin Carl-Bernhard Wadström, a refugee in France, and advocate of “new colonization” in Africa, and even Jean-Baptiste Say, former secretary of Mirabeau and editor of the newspaper *La décade philosophique*, which reflected the dominant ideas within the Executive. By including well-known philanthropists such as Charles Leclerc de Montlinod and Charles-Philibert de Lasteyrie, it reconnected with a current that had become increasingly popular in the years preceding the Revolution. We can also note the significant presence of Black or mixed-race deputies like Pierre Thomany, Etienne Mentor, and Louis Boisrond, as well as some women activists, especially Helen-Maria Williams, or “female citizens” Say and Wadström.

By formulating its objectives and defining its structures, the Society tried to adapt to the new situation created by the abolition decree of 4 February 1794, whose annual commemoration it organized. First, it wanted to support the “regeneration” of those places where the decree was applied (Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, Guyana). It also wanted to assist in the restructuring of plantations which were now to function by means of hired labour. Furthermore, it sought to privilege research into technological innovations that would lighten the work. A first commission focused on these objectives. A second dealt with the question of the “new colonization” (the establishment of trading posts on the African coast, based on the free labour of African populations, offering a possible substitution for the system of enslavement), which would become the great post-abolitionist hobby horse. The other two commissions pursued some of the objectives of the previous society, such as writing a global history of the transatlantic trade in enslaved African peoples and translating foreign works which might be of interest to French abolitionists.

## The disappearance of the Society

However, these projects went unfinished. In the spring of 1799, a succession of events impacted the Society. Two of its eminent members died: Wadström and Lanthenas. Sessions became more irregular. Out of a total of ninety-two members, it was increasingly difficult to command a gathering of five members per session.

The Society also suffered from the climate of the time. Born into the atmosphere of the Republican union and determined to preserve the achievements of the “revolution of Black and mixed-race people” it had become an official institution. Its meetings were now held in the premises of the Ministry of the Marine and the Colonies on the Place de la Concorde. It sought to pilot the colonial policy of the Directorate. But, in the spring of 1799, Republican unity shattered. A Democratic Republican opposition was growing, which had the support of some prominent Society members like Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, the father of the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue and the young Black deputy Étienne Mentor. Others were more discreet, with more conservative positions,



as was the case with Grégoire, Say, and Pierre-Jean Cabanis. Unlike Truguet, the new Minister of the Marine, Bruix did not support the abolitionist cause and closed the room where Society meetings were held. This was the final blow to a dying organisation, which left in its wake, a few notes, and a substantial file of projects without a future.

A few months later, the reaction by colonial advocates under the Consulate made the Society of Friends of Black People responsible for all colonial troubles. Yet, it was its legacy that contributed to the rebuilding of the abolitionist movement after 1815.

Translated by Emma Lingwood





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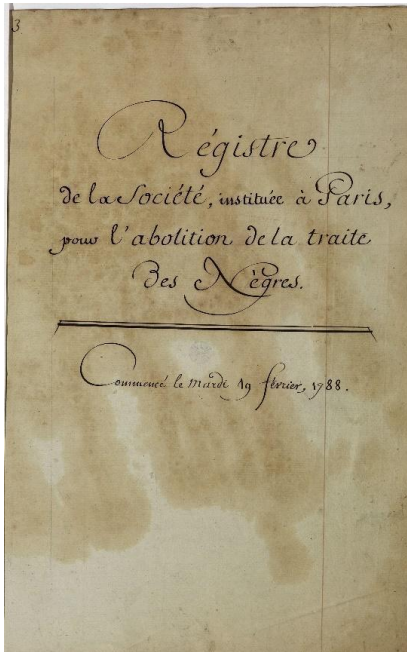
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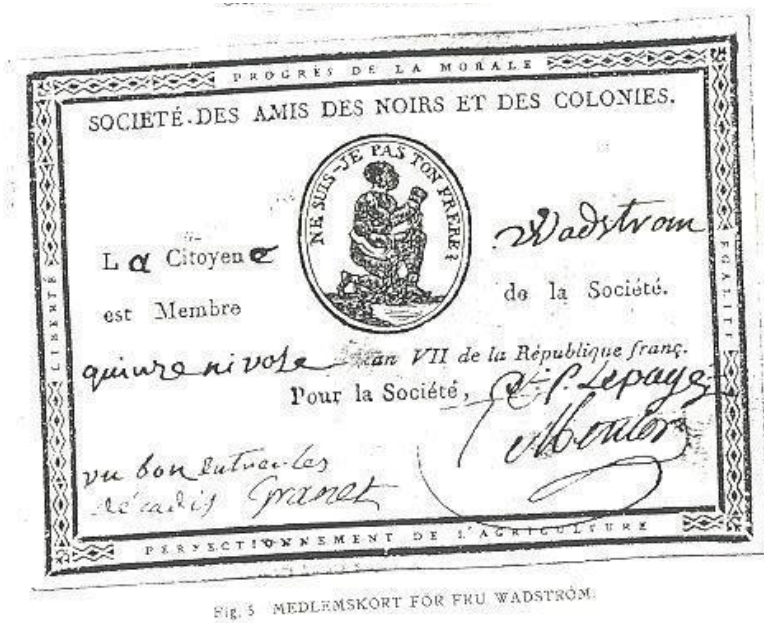
Antislavery Medallion, Josiah Wedgwood, William Hackwood, 1787 © Met Museum



Medallion "Am I not a Man, a brother?", soft porcelain, Manufacture royale de Sèvres, 1789 © Wikipedia



Archive, inside cover from the “Register of the Society, established in Paris, for the abolition of the trade of enslaved African peoples, 19 February 1788” © Université de Caen.



Card of the Society of Friends of Black People and the Colonies, in the name of **Madame Wadström**, signed by C.P. Lepage and **Etienne Mentor**, a Black deputy, dated 4 January 1799, Papers of Wadström, Norrköping at the Arbetets Museum (Museum of Work), Sweden.





Portrait of the Abbot Grégoire, Pierre Joseph Célestin François, 1800 © Musée Lorrain, long-term loan from the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nancy.



Cover of the book by Benjamin-Sigismund Frossard, *The Cause of the Black Slaves and the Inhabitants of Guinea*, Lyon, printed by Aimé de La Roche, 1789 ©John Carter Brown Library



Portrait of Helen Maria Williams, unknown, 1816 © Wikipedia



The abolition of the trade of enslaved peoples declared by the Convention on 4 February 1794, Nicolas André Monsiau, 1794 © Musée Carnavalet, RMN-Grand Palais / Agence Bulloz