Abstracts for Maine Bicentennial Conference Papers on Panel #2:
The Maine-Missouri Crisis and the Politics of Slavery
Friday, May 31, 2019, 8:30 am – 10:00 am

African Americans and the Political Consequences of Maine Statehood

Mary T. Freeman
Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Maine

In September 1826, a group of six African American men addressed a letter "To the Public" on behalf of about six hundred of their "brethren" in Portland, Maine, in which they announced their intention to "erect a suitable house for public worship" to serve their community. Their plan came to fruition in the construction of the Abyssinian Meeting House, which was completed in 1828 and became the epicenter of Maine abolitionism and African American politics. The meetinghouse campaign represented one of the most visible moments of activism for these black Mainers, but their activities and influence extended into almost every aspect of nineteenth-century American history and politics. This paper explores the political endeavors of the progenitors of the meetinghouse plan and their abolitionist allies in the early decades of Maine's statehood. I will briefly explore the history of slavery and emancipation in Maine before focusing on African Americans and antislavery politics in the era of Maine statehood and subsequent decades. I argue for the significance of black Mainers to bringing the antislavery movement to Maine and reveal their prominent role in arguing for equal citizenship rights on a state and national level.

At the time of the Maine-Missouri Crisis, Massachusetts was one of the few states that allowed black men to vote. When Maine became a state, it upheld that right by embedding universal male suffrage in its constitution. Therefore, from the state's beginnings, African Americans were a significant, yet often-overlooked, constituency in Maine politics. Black Mainers held political offices and appointments, campaigned on behalf of national parties, and shaped political debates surrounding slavery and abolition in their home state. They also operated outside the conventional boundaries of electoral politics, serving tea to groups of abolitionists in their parlors, aiding fugitive slaves, educating their children, and combatting daily indignities of racist discrimination. Beyond Maine's borders, they agitated for suffrage rights in other states and contributed to national movements opposing slavery and racism. On both a local and national level, African Americans from Maine worked within and beyond the realm of formal politics to combat slavery and expand democracy.

"Doughface Pioneer: John Holmes of Maine, 1773-1843"

Matthew Mason
Brigham Young University

John Holmes, it seems, was born for controversy. While being at the center of several heated local and national frays over the course of a long public career caused him serious political and even personal pain, he never shied away from partisan combat. His opponents gave as good as they got from Holmes, in part because of the bitterness his many party switches provoked in them. By turns a Federalist, a Democratic-Republican, a Crawfordite, a National Republican, and a Whig, Holmes repeatedly faced the fury of a party scorned. Holmes' political style (favoring street fighting over statesmanship) and willingness to engage with a long train of divisive issues also helped render his career more contentious than most. His political life encompassed three full decades. On the national level, it persisted through the demise of one national party system and the long, confused transition to another. On the state level, it collided with and helped to shape the drive for statehood and Maine's founding political order.

None of the resulting conflicts marked his political and personal life more deeply than those involving American slavery. He earned the epithet "doughface" for his role in the controversy over slavery in Missouri, but he dealt with the moral, economic, constitutional, sectional, and partisan issues surrounding slavery at every stage of his public life. He usually did so, in true doughfaced fashion, in opposition to those who would wield slavery as a tool in state and national politics. But at other times, his political context allowed him to flourish antislavery pronouncements of his own. Tracing his mercurial career with an eye to this vital element in American life, then, helps illuminate the particular place of slavery in the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties, the factional politics of the 1820s, and the National Republican and Whig opposition to the Jacksonian Democracy. It also highlights the intersection of slavery with key events in Holmes' times, from the War of 1812, through the Maine and Missouri controversy, to the transition from the First to the Second Party System.

Close analysis of Holmes' time in politics also underscores the core importance of its Maine context. Whether the arena of conflict was Portland, Boston, or Washington, the dynamics of Maine politics shaped Holmes' stances on a host of issues, including slavery. While African-American bondage could not have seemed more distant from Maine's extreme northerly climes, it looked different through a Maine-centric lens. Mainers' hate-love relationship with Massachusetts, for instance, meant that Bay Staters' multiple responses to slavery helped condition the responses of people in Maine. Both accident and partisan politics made it so that there was no escaping slavery in Maine; for the same reasons, at key moments neither could Southern slavery escape Maine. Holmes the politician, consequently, could escape neither.

"Fire Bell in the Night: The Establishment of a Slave Society in Jefferson's Purchase"

Diane Mutti Burke
University of Missouri – Kansas City

Maine and Missouri are forever linked by the controversy over the expansion of slavery into the territories that culminated in statehood for both places. While much has been written about the political consequences of the conflict over the expansion of slavery into the territories, few scholars have focused their attention on Missourians' actual experiences with the institution. As part of the "Maine Statehood and Bicentennial Conference," this paper examines Missouri slavery in the era of statehood in light of both the new scholarship on slavery in the state (of which my work is a part) and the rich body of US slavery scholarship that has been produced in the past 50 years. The paper will first focus on the mindsets and motivations of the upland slaveholding southerners who migrated to Missouri in the years directly before statehood. I will describe the society that they established on what was then America's western frontier – one that had small-scale slavery at its core, as well as explore their responses to the controversy that threatened their emerging social and economic system. More important, however, I will examine the lived experiences of the enslaved people who had no voice in the political decision that would seal their fate.

The heart of the paper will describe the important role African Americans played in the economic and social development of the region. Enslaved Missourians did not engage in this economic and social labor willingly or without consequences. They routinely challenged their enslavement and worked to shape their circumstances through various forms of resistance, which ranged from economic sabotage and violence to the establishment of families and communities. As a result of the great compromise that secured the admission of both the free state of Maine and the slave state of Missouri, the small-scale system of slavery that black and white Missourians created on the northwestern-most border of the slave South was permitted to expand and flourish, setting the stage for Missouri's role in the even greater conflict that would erupt over slavery and its expansion in the 1850s and 60s.