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## Black Regency

The Regency era charts the anti-slavery movement from its conception during the Enlightenment to the abolition of slavery at the dawn of the age of reform. During this time, the first anti-slavery legislation was passed, parliament was lobbied by petition and slavery was finally abolished in Britain and across the Empire. Throughout Britain, black people started to establish communities, concentrating around the large industrial towns and ports. They also began to make increasing numbers of the army and royal navy and across other professions.



### Petitioning Parliament for Change

In the early days of the campaign against slavery, the impetus for change was certainly not lead by the rich and powerful. Throughout the 1780's and 90's, there was a great deal of unease over the slave trade among the middle and working classes. In response, two nationwide petitions were organised. The first took place in 1788, when over 100 petitions against the trade were presented to the House of Commons in the space of just three months. The campaign of 1792 was more ambitious still. In all, 519 petitions were presented to the Commons, the largest number ever submitted to the House on a single subject or in a single session. The area that provided the most general support among the working populace was the industrialised north. However, every English county was represented by the petition of 1792, in addition to which Scotland and Wales made significant contributions.

Petitioning parliament almost worked and in 1792 the House resolved by 230 votes to 85 that the slave trade should be gradually abolished. However, events in France had started to shape the political landscape. In the same year as the petition was handed over to parliament, Louis XVI of France was executed marking the beginning of 'The Terror'. Mass public actions were viewed with increasing suspicion as the British ruling classes watched the Revolution with growing unease. Unable to afford courting the mob, the authorities cracked down on any radical actions and reforms. In 1793 the Commons refused to revive the subject of the slave trade, effectively reversing the resolutions of the previous year.

Finally in 1807, the trading in and capture of slaves was abolished within the British Empire. However, it was over 25 years before the owning of slaves was banned and £20,000,000 in compensation had to be paid to the plantation owners of the Caribbean, some of whom were the children of white plantation owners and black slaves.

### Some Prominent Regency Black People

#### Queen Charlotte (Portuguese Royal Line)

Queen Charlotte, wife of the English King George III (1738-1820), was directly descended from Margarita de Castro y Sousa, part of the black branch of the Portuguese Royal House. Sir Allan Ramsay was the artist responsible for the majority of the paintings of the Queen and his representations of her were the most decidedly African of all her portraits.

Ramsay was an anti-slavery intellectual of his day. He also married the niece of Lord Mansfield, the English judge whose 1772 decision was the first in a series of rulings that finally ended slavery in the British Empire. He was also, by marriage, uncle to Dido Elizabeth (Belle) Lindsay, the black grand niece of Lord Mansfield.

#### Dido Elizabeth Belle (Lived in Kenwood House)

Dido Elizabeth Belle (Elizabeth Lindsay) was the daughter of Sir John Lindsay, a Rear Admiral in the Royal Navy. Elizabeth was brought up in aristocratic London society and lived in Kenwood House, Hampstead Heath. The accounts of her relationship with the family comment on the affection with which she was held.

#### William Davidson – Cato Street Conspiracy

William Davidson (1786-1820) was born in Jamaica and came to Edinburgh at the age of 14 to study law. After this and some time spent at sea he became a cabinet maker.

In 1819 a peaceful protest of men, women and children in Manchester was ended with a massacre of the demonstrators by the authorities and came to be known as 'Peterloo'. This event inspired Davidson and other politically consciousness people of the time do something to change society. Davidson and his fellow radicals considered different ways of making the government pay attention to their demands. One of the suggestions was to blow up the MPs of the cabinet while they had dinner at Lord Castlereagh's house. The authorities were informed of the secret plans and they were arrested in a hay loft in Cato Street in London, and hanged at Tyburn.

#### Blackamoors or Black Peters

In London, the possession of young black boys as pages (dark skins were more popular to contrast with the powdered whiteness of their owners) had become both a fad and a badge of elitism during the late eighteenth century. Given classical Roman and Greek names and dressed in silks and satins, black pages paraded behind their owners, carried their owners' small dogs, and attended to the whims of their masters and mistresses. Their likenesses also appeared in their master's portraits to show their owner's status level and wealth. Such badges of prosperity were not confined to the aristocracy and elite. In a 1765 publication, *The Character of a Town Misse*, the author states that the "town misse" or:

"the fashionable high-class whore of the period hath always two necessary Implements about her, a Blackamoor, and a little Dog; for without these, she would be neither Fair nor Sweet."



The fashion passed in the early nineteenth century. However the young black boys grew up as footmen, valets and tradesmen.

**Miss William Brown**

Many black women found creative ways to combat the poverty caused by race and gender. Charles Dickens relays the story of a black woman, whom the Annual Register of 1815 for the ship *Queen Charlotte* listed as "William Brown." Brown, dressed as a man, had surreptitiously served for eleven years as a British sailor after leaving her husband during an argument. While serving in the Royal Navy, Brown distinguished herself as "able on the books of the above ship," and also "served as captain of the foretop highly to the satisfaction of the officer." A woman who liked to drink grog with other sailors, Dickens described her as a "smart figure, about five feet four inches in height, possessed of considerable strength and great activity; her features are rather handsome for a black, and she appears to be about twenty-six years of age." Brown was to share an award with her fellow shipmates, for Dickens relayed that "her share of prize money is said to be considerable." However, it is unknown whether she ever collected the money, because her husband had "entered a caveat against her receiving her prize money."

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