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### Before Forty Acres: Reparations for Slavery in the Revolutionary Era

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# BEFORE FORTY ACRES: REPARATIONS FOR SLAVERY IN THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA

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This thesis aims to contribute to scholarship that considers reparations for African Americans as an independently significant concept in American history and culture. I adopt the social movements historiographical frame to investigate the two earliest examples of reparative payments to African Americans, both of which occurred in the Revolutionary Era, decades before the Civil War. In the first chapter, I investigate the Pennsylvania Quakers' reparative program, which began in 1776 and was motivated by spiritual beliefs, internal activism, and institutional advocacy. In the second chapter, I analyze a series of African-American petitions for emancipation and reparations delivered to the Massachusetts Legislature between 1773 and 1783. I pay particular attention to the arguments and social movement for reparations, and to Anthony Vassall's 1781 petition and Belinda Royall's 1783 petition, which both prompted the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to become the first American government to pay reparations for slavery. The introduction and conclusion connect these two earliest examples of reparations to the present-day reparations debate. I argue that each example represents a distinct strain of reparations thought and activism that is echoed in today's efforts. The Quakers' expansive, self-critical, and community-building program is echoed by advocates of a broad national program with spiritual or transformative potential, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates. The Massachusetts example is echoed in individualistic, narrow conceptions of reparations, which seek to use political avenues to gain justice for victims of discrete wrongs. The most notable modern example of this strain is the reparations paid by the State of Florida in 1994 in response to the 1922 Rosewood Riots. I hope to expand understanding of the history of reparations in America and contextualize the current debate.