

Resources for Researching Massachusetts Slaves and Slaveholders

By John C. MacLean

With slave ships arriving in the 1630s and accounts suggesting that Samuel Maverick owned slaves here beginning in the 1620s, Massachusetts was the first New England colony to keep slaves. Whether a slave, a slaveholder, or an ancestor who lived in a society that allowed slavery, historical records help to reveal their stories. Reports from 1754 listing the number of slaves over the age of sixteen are available on microfilm at the Massachusetts Archives for each Massachusetts town: There were 647 males and 342 females just in Boston, where the first African slave had arrived by 1638. The report for Hanover, however, is particularly interesting, as it also gives the names of the masters and the ages of the slaves they owned. By 1765, about 2.1 percent of the overall population of Massachusetts was identified in a census either as Negro or mulatto, both free and slave. Many communities near the coast had the highest percentages of African Americans, including Boston's 5.2 percent, and Cambridge at 5.7 percent.

By using a number of sources, we can often learn the names of slaves (commonly referred to as "Negro servants" or "servants" in the records), the identities of those individuals who owned slaves, and something about the story of slavery in the households and communities of Massachusetts.

Town and Church Vital Records

Vital records are a good place to start, although Massachusetts records for slaves are very incomplete. Slaves could be baptized, providing some church baptism records, and they could be married. Marriages had to be by the consent of their masters, and often the married couple lived in different households and even in different towns, perhaps getting together at church on Sundays or when they were so allowed by their masters.

The standard "to 1850" series of Massachusetts vital records are familiar to many researchers, but in looking alphabetically through those volumes for an ancestor's surname, it is easy to overlook the fact that at the end of each Birth, Marriage, and Death section, there will often be a category for individuals whose surnames are unknown (which might include former slaves) as well as a category entitled "Negroes." Researching Reverend James Chandler of Rowley's second parish (now Georgetown), for example, you would miss some pertinent information if you did not check the latter entries in the *Vital Records of Rowley*. You will find under births: "Phillis, d...Cesar and Sabina, 'negroes joined in wedlock and servants to James Chandler.' [born]...Mar. 13, 1756." Then, listed under marriages is: Chandler, Philis, and Cicero Green of Newburyport, Mar. 11, 1783." Going to the *Vital Records of Newburyport*, one discovers that she later remarried: "Green, Phillis [of Rowley, int.], and Titus Odiorne, Mar. 14, 1793."¹

Probate and Land Records

Probate records also can be a rich source of information on slaves. Some wills mention slaves and who would inherit them, and a few wills provide for manumission. Indeed, one of the most interesting examples is the 1787 will of Rowley's Reverend James Chandler. Chandler wrote of his slave, Sabina: "I commit to my said Wife my Negro Woman Sabina, not to be by her sold out of the House, but to serve her; and to be provided for by her, as is mete. But if said Sabina shall live to be a Burden, which my said Wife shall think too Heavy for her to bear, my Will is—that my Executor assist in providing for her, as is fitting for an aged Servant that has been faithful."²

Chandler further directed on Sabina's daughter Phillis:

"To My Negro Woman Phillis I give her Manumission or Freedom and five Pounds lawful Money, a Chest, & Such other Things in my House, as are known by the Family to be her Things. I give her also the Bed that her Mother & She lodge in and all the Bedding belonging to it. And I hereby testify that I gave her her Freedom when she was eighteen years old [in 1774], and covenanted with her that if she would live & Serve in my Family I would give her one Pound & Six Shillings & eight Pence pr year for her Service & find her her Clothes. She has lived with, and Served me ever since and I have paid her Nothing of the Money that I promised as her wages therefore I owe it to her and order my Executor to pay it to her. I Suppose that my keeping her Child [whose birth was not recorded in the vital records] more than answers for Interest, but I release what more it might be reckond of."³

Slaves were mentioned in probate inventories more often than in wills. Inventories listed the number of slaves a person owned, itemized their worth, and sometimes contained a slave's name. During the French and Indian War, for example, the 1757 inventory for the estate of Reverend John Cotton of Newton stated that he owned: "Quartus, A Negro Man, that went into his Majesty's Service, and it is uncertain whether he is living or Not," and "Phillis a Negro Woman upwards of Sixty years of age: an Incumbrance to the Estate." (Quartus and Phillis do not appear in the *Vital Records of Newton*.)⁴

Inventory valuations would reflect a slave's age and health, with males typically valued higher than females. By comparing these figures with other items in the inventory one can see the relative cost of a slave. The 1755 inventory for Captain John Codman of Charlestown listed five slaves ranging in value from 200 to 500 pounds. By comparison, Codman owned 50 acres in Harvard, Massachusetts, valued at 5 pounds an acre.⁵

Inventories can also provide a glimpse into the household. Francis Dizer of Charlestown owned a slave named Charlestown, and the garret of the Dizer household contained a "Negro's Cradle Bed & bedding." Similarly, the 1766 inventory of Ebenezer Kent, Jr., of Charlestown listed in the garret: "1 Cribb and Bead for a Negrow man."⁶

Occasionally there were interesting references in probate administration papers. Within about a year's time during the 1740s, for example, the administrator of the estate of Jonathan Gove of Weston purchased two pairs of shoes, three pairs of stockings, leather britches, four shirts, a wool coat and a wool great coat, and two woolen jackets for the slave Tombo.⁷

Estates of some former slaves also went through probate, such as the 1784 estate of "Jack Hatch a negro man late of Lincoln Labourer." A former slave in that town's Farrar family, Jack had also been known as Jack or John Farrar and as Jack Freeman. Among the charges against his small estate was an amount "Due to Jube Savage (So Calld) for boarding sd. Jack four weeks at 6/ per week in Octobr. 1781." Jube was the former slave of Samuel Phillips Savage of Weston. As a free man Jube had acquired some land and owned a home in Lincoln.⁸

Deeds can occasionally be a source for land transactions involving former slaves, and at least one document of manumission was recorded with the Middlesex deeds. Microfilm copies of Massachusetts probate and land records can be found on the fourth floor at the NEHGS Library. Indices for some of the probate records can be searched online at NewEnglandAncestors.org.

Tax Records

Town Assessors' records are one of the best sources for identifying families that owned slaves. These tax lists typically enumerated the number of polls and the total value of the personal and real estate for which an individual was taxed. In some years, however, the Assessors detailed each item of taxable personal property, including the person's productive slaves. Although they did not include young or old slaves, and they did not tax ministers (who frequently owned slaves), collectively these detailed tax lists can provide a fairly complete listing of the slaveholders within a community.

Tax records can be used to document when adult males received their freedom, as they then paid a poll tax, and sometimes a tax for personal property or real estate. In Lincoln, for example, former slave Cuff Hoar (Hoar was the surname of the family for which he had been a slave) was paying a poll tax by 1778. Like many freed slaves, Cuff would soon change his name. In the 1780 tax list the name "Cuff Hoar" was written and then crossed out. His new name of "Cuff Kneeland" was written below. Vital records show that Cuff Kneeland married Sudbury's Dinah Young on 1 February 1781, but regrettably he died the following month.

Many tax records are available in the local towns or on microfilm through Family History Centers (or borrowed from FHL through the microtext department at NEHGS). One of the best province-wide sources available in the Society's collection is the book, *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation List of 1771* (Call # REF F63/P838/1998 also LOAN), which listed a person's "Servants for Life."

Diaries and Manuscripts

Diaries can contain additional information. Reverend Israel Loring of Sudbury recorded for 3 January 1730, "Dyed Mr.

ABRAHAM BRIANT's Negro Servant"; and then seventeen days later, "About Midnight Dyed MICAH STONE's Negro Child." Also in Sudbury, Experience (Wight) Richardson wrote in her diary for 5 August 1745: "Zilpah my father negro woman died." (These three deaths do not appear in the *Vital Records of Sudbury*.)⁹

Manuscript collections may contain documents relating to slaves, potentially including a bill of sale. One such document from 1765 reads:

"I Joshua Brooks...in consideration of the sum of four pounds...paid by Josiah Nelson of lincoln, yeoman, in full satisfaction, do hereby sell convey and deliver to him...for ever a sartain Neagro Servant boy Named peter about one year and seven months old...."

Peter's father was a slave in Lexington, his mother was a slave to Joshua Brooks in Lincoln, and now Peter was sold into a third household.¹⁰

Newspapers

Newspapers provide some revealing resources relating to Massachusetts slavery, including people engaged in the slave trade. Advertisements for the sale of slaves appeared in the *Boston News-Letter*, the first successful weekly, shortly after the paper began in 1704. An analysis of the *Boston Gazette* found that there were 1,103 different advertisements for the sale of slaves between 1719 and 1781, an average of nearly eighteen ads each year.¹¹

While obituaries were rare in newspapers, it is interesting to note that the author of a 1766 obituary for Massachusetts Superior Court Judge Chambers Russell considered it important that Russell was "an uncommon kind and indulgent Master; ever considering and treating his Slaves, as being intitled to the Rights of Humanity; and making them in all Respects, as happy as was consistent with their State."¹²

Revolutionary War to Freedom

Many town histories contain information on slaves in their community, while studies such as the NEHGS publication *History of the Black Population of Amherst, Massachusetts, 1728-1870*, by James Avery Smith, or *Prince Estabrook: Slave and Soldier*, by Alice M. Hinkle, or the National Park Service study *Patriots of Color: 'A Peculiar Beauty and Merit,' African Americans and Native Americans at Battle Road & Bunker Hill*, by George Quintall, Jr., provide important studies of individual contributions to our shared heritage, including service fighting for the founding of our nation.

In May 1775 the Massachusetts Committee of Safety had adopted a policy allowing free Negroes to serve in the military, and in April 1778 slaves were also allowed to serve if they were given their freedom. Many African Americans fought, with their participation listed in *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* and in related documents at the Massachusetts Archives.

There were many other Massachusetts laws, regulations, and court cases relating to slaves, including laws that allowed slaves to bring actions in court. Indeed, two landmark cases, initiated by slaves Quock Walker and Mum Bett (later known as Elizabeth Freeman), were decided in 1783 and led to the end of slavery in Massachusetts. While the 1787 will of Reverend Chandler demonstrates that slavery did not immediately end throughout the Commonwealth in 1783 (as is often thought), when the 1790 census was taken, not a single individual in Massachusetts was classified as a slave.

1. *Vital Records of Rowley, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849*, Vol. 1 (Salem, 1928), p. 237; *Ibid.*, p. 434; *Vital Records of Newburyport, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849*, Vol. 2 (Salem, 1911).

2. Rev. James Chandler, 23 May 1787 will, Essex County (Massachusetts) Probate, docket 4,936.

3. *Ibid.*

4. John Cotton, 19 September 1757 inventory, Middlesex County (Massachusetts) Probate, first series, 523.

5. John Codman, 13 August 1755 inventory, Middlesex Probate, first series, 4,727 (all values were in "Old Tenor")

currency).

6. Francis Dizer, 8 October 1770 inventory, Middlesex Probate, first series, 6,326; Ebenezer Kent, Jr., 19 December 1766 inventory, Middlesex Probate, first series, 13,137.

7. Jonathan Gove, 27 December 1746 administrator's report by John Gove, "An account of clothing which ye Provided for the Negro man Tombo," Middlesex Probate, first series, 9,595.

8 Jack Hatch, 11 March 1784 administrative paper, Middlesex Probate, first series, 10,743; Jack Hatch, 12 March 1788 administrative paper, in *Ibid*.

9. *The Journal of the Rev. Israel Loring (1682-1772) of Sudbury, Massachusetts*, ed. Louise Parkman Thomas (1987 typescript), p. 145; *Diary of Experience (Wight) Richardson, Sudbury, Mass. 1728-1782*, Trans. Ellen (Richardson) Glueck and Thelma (Smith) Ernst (1978 typescript), p. 6; both transcriptions are available in the NEHGS Library.

10. Joshua Brooks to Josiah Nelson (9 January 1765), in John C. MacLean. *A Rich Harvest: The History, Buildings, and People of Lincoln, Massachusetts* (Lincoln, Massachusetts: 1987), p. 217; the site of Josiah Nelson's house is now part of the Minute Man National Historical Park.

11. Robert E. Desrochers, Jr. "Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704–1781," *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 59(July 2002), p. 623.

12. *The Massachusetts Gazette and Boston News-Letter* (15 January 1767), p. 3.