Robert J. Smith, III

Dr. Ran Henry  
ISLS 3000

March 28, 2022

The Wild Apples of Freedom

Did early abolition of slavery in Massachusetts result in better treatment of free or freed blacks who lived in Henry David Thoreau's neighborhood? This question relates to a core aspect of Thoreau’s life, specifically his activism against slavery and the assistance he rendered to runaway slaves. He was versed in its various manifestations across different regions of the nation. Many people conceptualize the American institution of slavery as purely southern in nature, but this is far from reality. Slave labor in the northern reaches of the Atlantic colonies involved different tasks and was notably less intensive and extensive than in southern colonial environs (Littlefield, 2022). The northern strain of that notorious pestilence is less understood because the largesse of the Civil War pulls more eyes toward the South. This leaves a critical deficit in the stories of black peoples in the northeast. American society knows that black individuals faced an inequitable existence in the southern states; was the same true in the northeastern reaches of the country where Thoreau and his fellow radical thinkers boldly spoke out against the cruel institution that the bedrock of liberty, the United States, permitted under its laws?

Even national institutions like the Library of Congress seem to downplay the struggles of free black people in the antebellum north: “Although their lives were circumscribed by numerous discriminatory laws even in the colonial period, freed African Americans, especially in the North, were active participants in American society. Black men enlisted as soldiers and fought in the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Some owned land, homes, businesses, and paid taxes” (Library of Congress). As a literary microscope, Thoreau’s *Walden* paints a different picture and is a valuable resource to begin the examination of this misunderstood population and society’s treatment of them. The author’s voluntary self-reliance is in fact what free black Concordians found necessary and certainly not as convenient.

The free and freed black inhabitants of Concord during Thoreau’s time found a mixed experience that bordered between tolerance, isolation, and deprivation. While American abolitionism found a center of support in Concord, Massachusetts, much enabled by the females in the Emerson and Thoreau families, a variety of scholarship distinguishes that activism from antiracism and makes clear that early freedom relative to the rest of the United States did not guarantee safety or comfort for black individuals. Emancipation in Massachusetts had been gradual, and there were no reparations to go along with newfound freedom (Lemire ch. 4). A black individual in Concord was likely better off staying in Concord where he or she was known; free status or local memory of emancipation could vanish outside of the town boundaries or the course of the individual’s sphere of familiarity. When Brister Freeman left patriotic service and declared himself free, he was not unmindful of the challenges he faced. Salem, Massachusetts, showing its unfriendliness to the immigration of outsider freedmen looking to start their own lives, voted to set a timeline for all such individuals to leave town in 1790, ten years after Freeman returned to Concord (Lemire 116). This practice was commonplace in Massachusetts; freed black individuals ran the risk of being “warned out” of towns where inhabitants did not wish to support them. Sadly, when Brister Freeman could not pay his local taxes, his home town of Concord seized his property despite his former master providing funds to bail his former slaves out of such situations. Brister’s debt paid, he still could not keep his land, a twist of cruel irony given his voluntary enlistment to free the colonies from the shackles of arbitrary taxation without representation (Trent).

*Walden* was not far removed from Massachusetts’ early, revolutionary example of abolition, and the memories of the circumstances of the liberated were not forgotten to the mists of time. Thoreau arrived in a place and time given to swift change, enlightened thought, and ardent passions. Yet what made Thoreau such a radical in his time was not just his support of a more universal abolition in the face of growing national discord; he engaged in civil disobedience by spurning the Fugitive Slave Act, helping runaway slaves on their journey north into Canada. Free black Concordians mostly lived on the edges of town. They squatted on tracts of land that were not of much value to their true owners; here on these tracts, off the beaten path and more frequent causeways, they were allowed to remain. Walden Woods and the Great Field were the two concentrated communities of free black Concordians, both outside of the town center (Walls 200-201). Thoreau knew very well the lives of the free or freed black individuals in his small neighborhood and even acknowledged them in his writings. He announced them by name and cared enough to dedicate several pages to describing their environs, professions, and tragic demise, noting that tiny but overlooked vestiges of their existence remained in Walden Woods. Were those traces not unlike the bones Zilpha White muttered about in her obscure solitude in the woods, meager and forgotten?

It is interesting that one free black community in Concord survived for generations while the other vanished into the brambles and leaves of the Walden Woods. Why did some free or freed families die out while others stayed in place for multiple generations? The cost of freedom was steep for free or freed black Concordians, as the town, state, or country did not give them anything for their years of sustaining or succumbing to abuse. Their neighbors preferred to pay them pittances for their labor to virtually ensure their continued lower status. However, Thoreau recognized that value existed on a different plane where freedom at any cost was paramount. He mocked Brister Freeman’s epitaph including the word “colored” as if it meant discoloration, and it is not difficult to see Thoreau smiling along Walden Pond as he enjoyed Brister’s wild apples, symbols of the sweetness of freedom.

Works Cited

Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006**.**

Littlefield, Daniel C. “The Varieties of Slave Labor.” Freedom’s Story, TeacherServe©. National Humanities Center. March 15, 2022. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/slavelabor.htm>

Lemire, Elise. *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2009, p. 116.

Lemire, Elise. The New England Quarterly, vol. 80, no. 2, New England Quarterly, Inc., 2007, pp. 338–40, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20474545.

Lemire, Elise C. “Repeopling the Woods: Thoreau, Memory, and Concord’s Black History.” *Thoreau at 200: Essays and Reassessments*, edited by Kristen Case and K. P. Van Anglen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, pp. 59–74.

Trent, Sidney. “The Black people who lived in Walden Woods long before Henry David Thoreau.” *Washington Post*, Nash Holdings, 28 November 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/11/28/thoreau-walden-brister-freeman-slavery/>

Walls, Laura Dassow. *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017, pp. 200-201.