Ellen Garrison was born in this house in 1823, when it stood in its original location at the edge of the Great Meadow.

That year, Ellen’s uncle, Peter Robbins, a first-generation free black man, purchased this house, a barn, and thirteen acres of land from wealthy Concord landowner Humphrey Barrett. Peter and his wife Fatima moved into the western half of the house, while Ellen and her family lived in the eastern half.

Ellen’s father, Jack Garrison, escaped slavery in New Jersey and arrived in Concord in the early nineteenth century. Her mother, Susan Robbins Garrison, and her uncle Peter were the children of Caesar Robbins, a Revolutionary War veteran. Caesar was a free man in Concord who had been enslaved at birth in Ontario. Ellen had two older brothers, John and William, and one older sister, also named Susan.

The Robbins and Garrison men were skilled farmers and technicians. They sold the products of their farm, including eggs and butter. They also did jobs such as maintaining the roads and cutting wood for the town and other landowners.

Peter and Susan had no children together, and Peter lost the house to debt in the 1860s. In 1861, Ellen and her family moved to nearby Monument Street. In 1862, Peter married Susan, a relative of Fatima, purchased the farm. Three generations of the large family were the last African American occupants of the Robbins House, while Ellen and her family lived in the easterly half.

In 1830s. In 1837, Ellen and her family moved to nearby Monument Street. In 1852, Ellen grew up during a time when the rights of African Americans became a topic of local and national importance. The 1830s and 1840s were especially pivotal years in Concord, and influential abolitionists like Frederick Douglass often visited the town to give abolitionist lectures. Following one such visit by the sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimke, local women, including Ellen’s mother, founded the Ladies’ Antislavery Society of Concord.

Ellen’s family engaged deeply with questions of civil rights. At the end of 1837, her elder sister, appeared alongside 200 other Concord women on a petition protesting landowners have often lived on the margins of town or on less productive landowners have often lived on the margins of town or on less productive

agent Edward Jarvis later recalled that the Garrison children were “bright and intelligent and loved to read.”

As children, Ellen and her siblings attended Concord’s public schools. Local antiquarian Edward Jarvis later recalled that the Garrison children were “bright and intelligent and loved to read.”

But Ellen felt as she

didn’t agree with slavery long before the Civil War. Was being against slavery the

“Crowded out” in Concord

As Concord prepared for its bicentennial celebration in 1851, 12-year-old Ellen’s mother teacher that her mother had forbidden her to walk in the procession. As only black child in her school, Ellen had been treated and “crowded out” of previous processions. Eventually Ellen and her mother relented and Ellen walked hand in hand with her classmate Abbie Prescott “through the day, through the gaze of curiosity, surprise, ridicule and admiration.”

Advocacy & Marriage in Boston

1841 - c. 1860

Ellen Garrison moved to Boston in the early 1840s, shortly after her mother died. She carried a letter of recommendation from Concord antislavery activist Mary Washburn Brooks to Mary Weston Chapman, a founder of the Boston Female Antislavery Society.

In Boston, Ellen joined the African Baptist Church on Joy Street, where her uncle helped guide her. While there, she continued her mother’s legacy of antislavery activism, and began her career as a teacher.

During her time in the city, Ellen became increasingly involved with local and national questions about civil rights. She signed at least four petitions calling for equal rights for African Americans, including one demanding the desegregation of Massachusetts railroads and another for desegregating Boston schools. In the late 1840s, Ellen helped organize two events to honor prominent abolition leaders.

In 1847, Ellen married John W. Jackson, a free black tenant from Dedham. Both were 34. Her husband died within a few years, however, and by 1851, Ellen Garrison-Jackson had moved to Napier, Rhode Island, where she had charge of a small private school.
**Educator of Freedmen in the South**

1865 – 1870s

In the midst of the Civil War, Ellen applied to the American Missionary Association (AMA) for a position to teach newly freed people in the South. Immediately following emancipation, and before the war ended, the AMA began setting up schools to educate the previously enslaved population. After the war, the United States government established the Freedmen’s Bureau to ensure its efforts.

Ellen explained her motivation to teach a letter written in June 1865:

> I have a great desire to go and labor among the Freedmen of the South. I think it is our duty as people in peace to live our lives to elevate our own race. We can feel the oppression we do feel for our sakes, and who can feel the sympathy that we can, who are identified with them?

Ellen’s request was granted, and between 1865 and 1870 she taught hundreds of freed people of all ages in Maryland and Virginia.

As part of her teaching engagement, Ellen submitted weekly reports describing the conditions in her school, and the progress of other students. The reports requested the answers to several questions such as:

- “Is the evaluation done in any more capacity than the blacks?”
- “Is the color of the scholar show equal capacity with the white?” (As compared to schools in northern schools. The report clarified.)
- To which species, were, consistently respond “Equal.”

In the summer, she returned to Concord, where she continued to refer to her “harrow” straining in her brother John’s healthful and temperance blood.

**Target of Harassment**

Ellen taught in the South during Reconstruction, a time when the United States government struggled to realign the country in the aftermath of the Civil War. During this period troubling questions arose around the plight of newly free African Americans:

- Could the government guarantee the civil rights of formerly enslaved people?
- Would it be possible to protect these rights in the face of opposition?

These questions were Ellen’s as well. In her time in the North, Ellen was moved to teach a black teacher in a school. The report stated, “she described the situation in a letter written on May 9, 1866:

> ‘An outrage has just occurred which demands attention. It was nothing less than the lynching of a colored man. The victim was a colored man, and the black teacher were “forcibly ejected” from a school. I wrote to the blacks in Kansas to see if one could not be found in this country. I feel there is a need for a future activist.

Ellen was in her childhood preparing her to be a future activist.

Despite the risks, Ellen remained dedicated to her work. She went on to describe her encounters with these “rowdies,” explaining how integrated she “was not content with simply existing in my house,” but instead, “to go and labor among the Freedmen.”

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**Testing the Nation’s First Civil Rights Act, 1866**

Ellen challenges segregation in a train station one month after the first Civil Rights Act of 1866. Her experience of hardship came to a head in a Baltimore train station on May 5, 1866, when she and another black teacher were “forcibly ejected” from a train. She described the situation in a letter written on May 9, 1866:

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**Civil Rights Law During Reconstruction**

During the Reconstruction era, the United States government took significant steps to protect the civil rights of African Americans. However, the effectiveness of these laws was limited by the opposition of white southerners and the government’s own policies.

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**Final Years, Kansas “Exoduster”**

By 1870, the federal government fully restored Reconstruction to the Southern states. Over the next decade, many states enacted “Jim Crow” laws aimed at restricting African American social and political rights, effectively ending Reconstruction. In 1871, Ellen continued to teach the children of the formerly enslaved.

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**Timeline of the Reconstruction Era**

**Who Were the Exodusters?**

While research continues on the details of Ellen’s death and her final resting place, we know she owned her own home and land, and continued to educate and agitate until she disappeared from the historical record after 1890.

Remarking on her call to “go and labor among the Freedmen,” Ellen Garrison concluded: “I am not a Exoduster, but I am a believer.” She settled in a community of formerly enslaved people known as “Exodusters,” and in 1866 trained to be an educator in Kansas. Throughout the 1870s, Ellen continued to teach the children of the formerly enslaved.

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