

Slavery in New England



Why Did Slavery Take Root in New England?

BY JOANNE POPE MELISH, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF HISTORY EMERITA, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

THE ROBBINS HOUSE
CONCORD'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Richard A. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University Press, 2016)

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

Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and 'Race' in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998)

Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren By Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015)

William Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, MA; University of Massachusetts Press, 1988)

Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York and London: Liveright, Div., E. W. Norton & Company, 2016)

Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967)

CONTENT REVIEWERS

Robert Bellinger, Suffolk University, Black Studies Program Director; **Robert Gross**, University of Connecticut, History Professor Emeritus, Author of *The Minutemen and Their World*; **Kerri Greenidge**, Tufts University & University of Massachusetts, Boston, African American History Lecturer, Author of *Boston Abolitionists*.

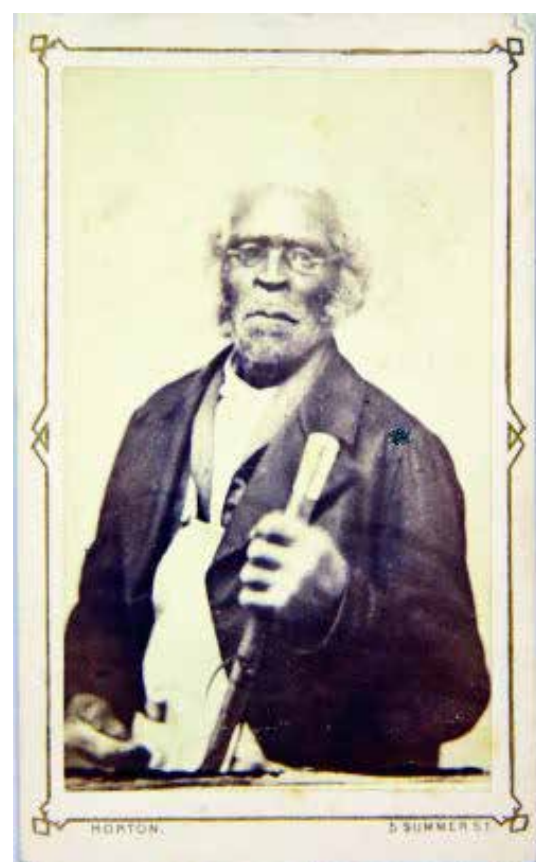
Cover Image: *The Fishing Party* by Lydia Hosmer, 1812 (Courtesy of the Concord Museum)



© THE ROBBINS HOUSE, INC.

Beginning in the 1770s, the Revolutionary movement spurred growing demands for freedom in petitions and lawsuits brought by and on behalf of enslaved people. These efforts seized on the natural rights argument used to justify colonial resistance to Britain and on the disruption of the War for Independence itself. In Massachusetts, judicial decisions on behalf of two enslaved people, Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman and Quok Walker, sounded the death knell of slavery. Elsewhere in New England, *post nati* statutes promised freedom at adulthood to children born to enslaved women. By 1820, most enslaved people in New England had become free, although the institution did not become illegal in Rhode Island until 1842, in Connecticut until 1848, and in New Hampshire until 1858.

Despite the lingering existence of slavery in some places long after 1800, New England, like Canada (where slavery remained technically legal until 1833),



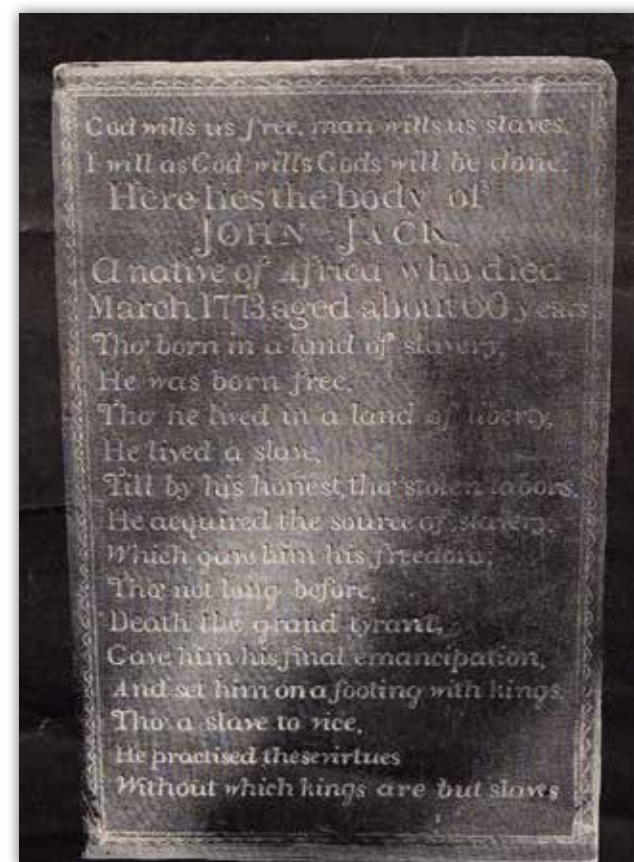
▲ Jack Garrison, who lived in the Robbins House from 1823 to 1837, escaped slavery in New Jersey and found freedom in Concord, Massachusetts, by 1810. (Photograph of John “Jack” Garrison, Courtesy of the Concord Museum.)

served as a magnet for fugitives escaping from the still-entrenched slave regimes further south. Among them was New Jersey, where more than two-thirds of the roughly 3,500 people of color in the Northern states still in bondage in 1830 lived. **Jack Garrison**, who married **Susan Robbins**, daughter of **Caesar Robbins**, spent his first three decades enslaved in that state. But after its 1804 *post nati* law ended his hope for freedom, by binding previously enslaved people to indentured servitude, he emancipated himself. Arriving in Concord by 1810, Jack Garrison began a new life as a free man, although he was considered a “fugitive slave.”

ENDNOTES

¹ “Petition of a Grate Number of Blackes” to Thomas Gage (May 25, 1774). From the Massachusetts Historical Society, 5th series, vol. 3 (Boston, 1877), pp. 432 ff.

² Most indigenous people in New England still identify themselves as “Indians” in preference to “Native Americans” because this term reflects the language in which English settlers made and broke treaties with indigenous tribes.



▲ The 1773 epitaph on the headstone for John Jack, an enslaved man in Concord who earned enough to buy his freedom, was written by Daniel Bliss, a British-sympathizing lawyer who highlighted the hypocrisy of Patriots in demanding liberty for themselves while they enslaved others.

Most Americans think of slavery as solely a Southern institution. In fact, the American slave trade was centered in New England, and enslaved people labored throughout the region from the mid-1600s through the American Revolution.

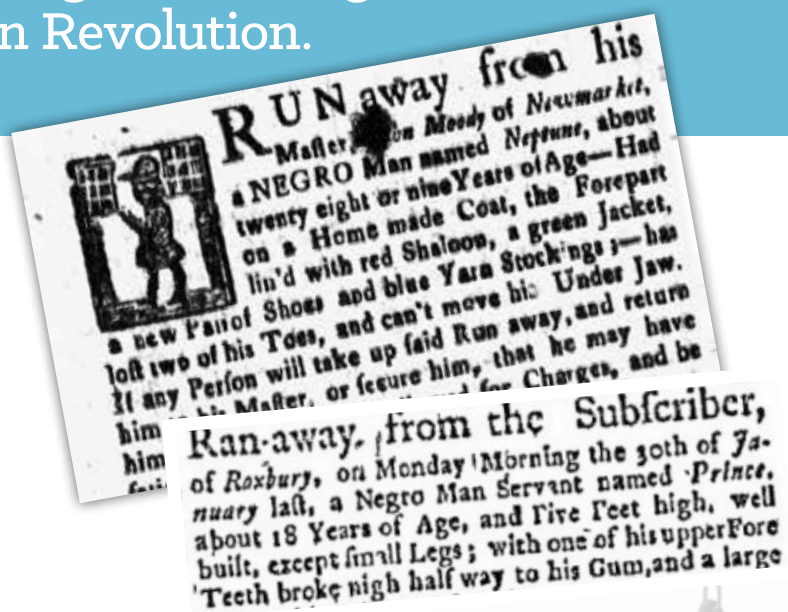
Near the peak of Northern slavery in the 1750s, close to one-third of the population in some southern New England towns was enslaved. A few people still labored in bondage in these states on the eve of the Civil War—long after militant Northern abolitionists had declared war on *Southern* slavery.

The physical conditions to which people of African descent were subjected in New England varied widely, from severe privation and harsh punishments at one extreme, to the usual provisions afforded to white domestic servants and apprentices at the other. If Massachusetts lacked the killing fields of Caribbean plantations, it nonetheless exploited the labor and controlled the lives of the enslaved with rigor. No manner of treatment could compensate for the violation of human dignity and individual autonomy inherent in the slave system.

Consider the protest of “a Grate Number of Blackes” to Thomas Gage, then military Governor of Massachusetts Bay, in 1774:

“...we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest friends and sum of us stolen from the bosoms of our tender Parents... the endearing ties of husband and wife we are strangers to for we are no longer man and wife then our masters or mestreses thinks proper marred or on marred [married or unmarried]. Our children are also taken from us by force and sent maney miles from us wear we seldom or ever see them again there to be made slaves of for Life...”¹

The anguished petition of these enslaved people, and the many other documented acts of resistance of men and women like them, give the lie to the notion that Northern slavery was a “mild” institution. Whatever privileges were allowed to the enslaved, such as earning wages or even owning property, existed at the whim of masters and were often revoked arbitrarily.

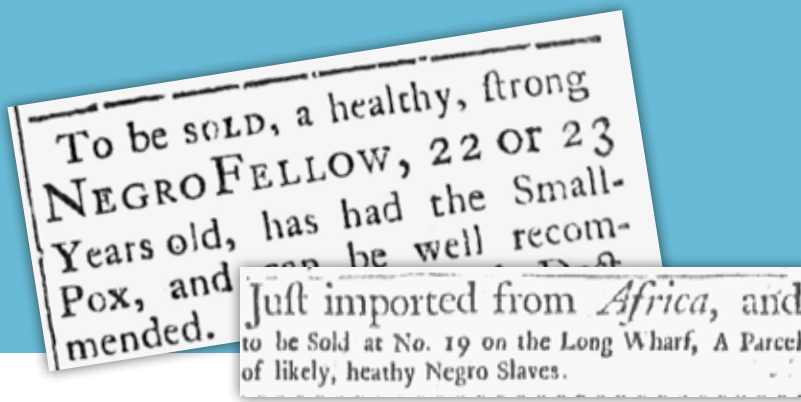


▲ *Boston Evening Gazette Post*, March 6, 1769 detailing scars to identify runaway slaves.

More than a hundred New England slaves fled from bondage, and in the advertisements seeking their return, many were identified by their scars. Others were driven to murdering their abusers. Accused of poisoning their enslaver, Phillis was burned alive and her brother Mark was hanged, tarred, and his body displayed in an iron gibbet in Somerville. Twenty years later, Paul Revere reported seeing Mark's body, still hanging, in detailing his famous ride. Indeed, Northern slavery was far from benign.

Slavery was part of New England history from the outset of English settlement.

Massachusetts legalized slavery in 1641, enabling colonists to exploit captive Indians for forced labor at home and sale abroad.² In 1638, William Peirce, a privateer sailing from Salem, carried seventeen Pequot captives to the West Indies and exchanged them for “some cotton, and tobacco, and negroes.” Thus began New England's participation in the horror of the Atlantic slave trade.



▲ More than 1,103 different “slaves for sale” ads appeared in the *Boston Gazette* from 1719-1781, with over 2,500 individuals being sold. (*Massachusetts Gazette*, December 11, 1766)

Massachusetts was the principal slave-trading colony until about 1700, when Rhode Island gradually took over.

The slave trade became the lynchpin of the bustling New England maritime economy. Commercial services such as banking and insurance, and crafts from shipbuilding to rope-, candle-, and barrel-making, profited from this commerce. Chief among these industries was the manufacture of rum, the principal medium of exchange for enslaved people on the coast of Africa. Massachusetts boasted more than 60 distilleries by the middle of the 18th century. New England merchants traded rum for captives on the African coast, whom they transported to the West Indies to perform the grueling labor of growing sugar cane and turning it into molasses, which was shipped back to New England for conversion into still more rum in the infamous “triangular trade.”

Yankee slave traders returned home with African captives for their own use or for sale. By 1715 approximately 4,150 people were enslaved in New England, with nearly half of these in the Bay Colony. When **Caesar Robbins's** name first appeared on a muster roll as living in the household of John Robbins of Chelmsford in 1760, the Massachusetts population described as “Negroes,” nearly all enslaved, had grown to about 5,500, or 2.2% of the total population.



▲ The 1700s Triangular Trade Route (Map Courtesy Fasttrack Teaching Materials)

Men and women in bondage were concentrated on the seaboard and along the Connecticut River. Enslaved men and boys worked in tanneries, ironworks, and mills; loaded and unloaded boats; and served as draymen (cart drivers), laborers, carpenters, and masons. Agricultural and domestic tasks were the norm on small outlying farms and in rural settlements. On the larger plantations of southern New England, large groups of enslaved men and women grew grain, produced butter and cheese, and raised livestock for export to the West Indies. In all settings, enslaved men, women, and children performed household labor, including cutting wood, tending gardens and orchards, and caring for horses, cattle, pigs, and poultry.



▲ In this commissioned portrait, an enslaved boy serves tea to Rhode Island planter and Caribbean exporter **John Potter** and his family. The scene announces their status and captures the legacy of wealth afforded by slavery. (Collection of the Newport Historical Society, c.1740)

*NOTE: names in bold are associated with the Robbins House.