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), 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 helping 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.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING


CONTENT REVIEWERS

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Cover Image: The Fishing Party by Lydia Hosmer, 1812 (Courtesy of the Concord Museum)
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 mistreses thinkes proper marred or on marred [married or unmarried]. Our children are also taken from us by force and sent money miles from us we seldom or ever see them again there to be made slaves of for Life...”

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.

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

The slave trade became the linchpin 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 New England. 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.

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.

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