

# SLAVERY IN MASSACHUSETTS

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

Because the North was free while the South was slave during the Abolitionist and Civil War eras, one may overlook the first two centuries of American history when the north was not free and when slavery was practiced in Massachusetts, even, though rarely, within the boundaries of present-day Winchester.

In the Colonial era, slavery as a punishment, either for criminals or prisoners of war, was an accepted European practice. Thus, a number of Scots defeated in border wars with the English were shipped to America, and many Indians defeated in war were sent to the West Indies (including the Squaw Sachem's son Wenepoykin during King Philip's War).

The African slave trade began in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1637 when some defeated Indians from the Pequot War in Connecticut were shipped to the West Indies and the return cargo in 1638 included cotton, tobacco, and Negroes.

In 1641, when Winchester's first settler Edward Converse had just established a mill along the Aberjona River, the Massachusetts General Court adopted *The Body of Liberties* (the first legal code established by New England colonists) which contained the following article on slavery:

There shall never be any bond slaverie, villinage or Captivitie amongst us unles it be lawfull Captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly selle themselves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of god established in Israell concerning such persons doeth morally require. This exempts none from servitude who shall be Judged thereto by Authoritie.

While this allowed some forms of slavery, many individuals decried the practice. The General Court of the colony condemned what it called "the heinos and crying sinn of man stealing." In 1645 and 1646 it ordered that some blacks be sent back to Guinea, hoping to deter "such vile and odious courses, justly abhored of all good and just men."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, slavery continued. The number of slaves in Massachusetts was never as great as in southern states, perhaps because the agricultural system generally did not require large gangs of laborers and the use of indentured servants was generally adequate for extra labor. It may also have had something to do with the Puritan ethic.

In New England, slaves were concentrated in seaports like Boston and other cultural/political centers. In 1676 the number in Massachusetts was said (by Edward Randolph) to be "not above 200." Gov. Dudley gave the number as 550 in 1708. But during the 18th century, the number ranged between 4,000 and 5,000.<sup>3</sup>

The end of slavery in Massachusetts has been attributed to the ratification of the Constitution of 1780, a 1783 judicial ruling, and the 1788 outlawing of participation in the slave trade. Whatever the cause(s), at the time of the first federal census in 1790, the slave population in Massachusetts was reportedly zero.

## SLAVERY IN WINCHESTER'S PARENT TOWNS - MEDFORD

Did the practice of owning slaves extend to Winchester soil? The answer is yes, but, apparently, just barely. To find it, it is necessary to look at the parent towns.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the territory now within Winchester boundaries was part of Woburn, Charlestown, and (after 1754) Medford. These towns definitely had slaves. The largest concentration of slaves was in Boston, and Charlestown shared the same harbor and mercantile businesses that promoted their presence. Medford, Charlestown's neighbor across the Mystic River, had an important shipyard and was also positioned to share in the trades and practices of Boston.

While the history books on Winchester and Woburn are silent on the subject of slavery, Charles Brooks' *History of Medford*,<sup>4</sup> [link] addresses the topic. In 1754, he wrote, there were 34 slaves held by 20 owners. Most owners had one slave. The largest slave-owner was Isaac Royall, with 12 slaves in 1754. The Royall's slave house, in fact, still exists, adjacent to the Isaac Royall House now maintained by Medford as an historic house museum.

The Medford (or southeast) section of Winchester was originally a land grant to Zachariah Symmes. His son William was the first to live there. There is no known indication that William or his heirs had slaves, though his sister Mary, who lived in Boston with her husband Thomas Savage, had "a Negro maid," bequeathed to her by her husband (in a will written in 1675 proved in 1682).<sup>5</sup>



*John Brooks House*

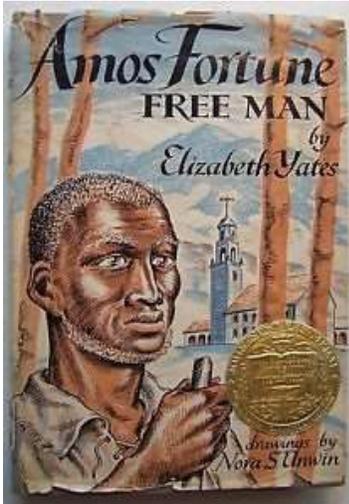
In 1715, Ebenezer Brooks bought some land from William Symmes and built a house near Symmes Corner. His grandson Ebenezer (brother of Gov. John Brooks) lived there and had a slave named Caesar, inventoried in his estate in 1781. With this one record slave-holding is established in Winchester territory.

## CHARLESTOWN

Up through the early nineteenth century, Charlestown stretched north to Church Street, west of the Medford section. The Charlestown (or southwest) section of Winchester included principally the Gardner farm (the original Increase Nowell land grant) and the former Squaw Sachem

reserve. To date no record of the Gardners using slave labor has appeared. As of 1771, neither they nor any of their neighboring land owners were slave-holders.

## WOBURN



*Cover of one publication  
about Woburn's Amos  
Fortune*

Though farther removed from the seaport, Woburn also knew the practice of slavery. The story of one slave has been told in articles and books. His name was Amos Fortune (1710-1801), and he was owned by Caleb Copeland, a weaver in Woburn and Ichabod Richardson, a Woburn tanner. After obtaining his freedom in 1769, Fortune bought three wives, in succession, out of slavery and moved to New Hampshire. When he left, there were still other slaves in Woburn. According to a tax valuation list of 1771 (two years after Fortune was freed), 17 Woburn households had among them 18 “servants for life.”

Were any slave-owning households located in South Woburn (the northern section of Winchester)? Yes, though references to them are rare.

An Historic Resource Study issued by the National Park Service, about George Washington’s headquarters and home in Cambridge tells of a slave named Darby Vassall. “At a tender age he was ‘given’ to George Reed of South Woburn, a recent convert to Episcopalianism and one of the group who from that distant township occasionally attended Christ Church, Cambridge.” Apparently, Vassell was later freed. Further on this Reed, “The Town records state that a “Negro woman of George Reed” died on 15 May 1775 at the age of twenty, so he was definitely a slaveholder.”<sup>6</sup>

Other South Woburn residents may have owned slaves, but given that there is no complete record of South Woburn residents in this early period and records of slave ownership are lacking, it may be difficult or impossible to learn more.

In at least one case, it is known that the northern part of a family which bridged both north and south Woburn had slaves. That family is the Wymans. One of the immigrant founders of the family in America, Francis Wyman (1619-1688), left “a Negro girl named Jebyna” to his wife in his will. Nearly a century later, four Wyman households in Woburn had one “servant for life” each. None of these apparently were in the South Woburn branch of the family; however, a look into one year does not rule out the possibility of South Woburn slave-owners at other times.

There is evidence that indentured servitude was known among at least one generation of Converses (the family of the first house-builder). The will of Samuel Converse (1637-1669) includes a “man servant” as part of his estate. This is probably not an African slave, since he is not identified as a Negro and since a time period of “about a year” is specified in connection with this servant.

## CONCLUSION

Winchester's participation in slave ownership was apparently minimal. Through the end of the 18th century, the area was sparsely populated, including only about three dozen houses in 1798. The end of slave ownership at the end of the eighteenth century produced no visible change in this area's culture or economy. Nevertheless, it has been documented and, since its territory was part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Winchester shares in its history of allowing and profiting by slavery, as well as the later history of abolishing it.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 24, 2000. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, Volume 4, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, Volume 4, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> *History of the Town of Medford, Middlesex County, Massachusetts: From Its First Settlement, in 1630, to the Present Time*, by Charles Brooks, Boston, 1855.

<sup>5</sup> *The Symmes Memorial: A biographical sketch of Rev. Zechariah Symmes, minister of Charlestown, 1634-1671*, Boston, 1873, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> "George Washington's Headquarters and Home, Cambridge, Massachusetts," by J. L. Bell. Historic Resource Study, Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 29 February 2012.