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RAN-away from William Thompson of Billerica, on the 24th ult. a NegroMan named Cæsar, about 5 Feet 7 Inches high, carried with him two Suits of Cloaths, homespun all Wool, light coloured, with white Lining and plain Brass Buttons, the other homespun Cotton and Linnen Twisted. Whoever takes up said Negro and secures him, or returns him to his Master, shall be handsomely rewarded, and all necessary Charges paid by **JONATHAN STICKNEY.**
N. B. All Masters of Vessels and others, are cautioned from carrying off or concealing said Negro, as they would avoid the Penalty of the Law.

The Boston Gazette ran the above advertisement on May 9, 1774, alerting readers that a slave owned by William Tompson, a prominent Billerica landowner, had run away. The text reads:

Ran away from William Thompson of Billerica, on the 24th, a NegroMan named Caesar, about 5 Feet 7 Inches high, carried with him two Suits of Cloathes, homespun all Wool, light coloured, with white Lining and plain Brass Buttons, the other homespun Cotton and Linnen Twisted. Whoever takes up said Negro and secures him, or returns him to his Master, shall be handsomely rewarded, and all necessary Charges paid by JONATHAN STICKNEY.

N. B. All Masters of Vessels and others, are cautioned from carrying off or concealing said Negro, as they would avoid the Penalty of the Law.

The Lost History of Slaves and Slave Owners in Billerica, Massachusetts, 1655-1790

CHRISTOPHER M. SPRAKER



Editor's Introduction: *In 1641 Massachusetts was the first colony to legalize slavery and was a center for the slave trade throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A 1754 census listed more than 2,000 slaves in the colony. In 1781 the commonwealth was among the first states to abolish slavery (although by judicial interpretation, not by legislative action). Until recently, most studies of slavery in colonial New England have focused on the region's more densely populated commercial and urban areas. This article contributes to a growing literature about New England's smaller, lesser-known towns by examining slavery in Billerica, Massachusetts, a once typical-sized farming community in Middlesex County, 25 miles from Boston.*

The author argues that slave labor significantly impacted the economic, political, and social development of Billerica during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in three specific ways. First, slaves provided aspiring individuals with much sought labor, thereby ensuring economic production on farms while their masters engaged in an array of new professional opportunities in the booming New England economy. Second, slaves helped link prominent families together in a web of personal connections whose primary function was to provide individuals with the

social influence necessary for them to succeed. Third, by utilizing both of these advantages, many Billerica slave owners, as well as their descendants for generations to come, had success in climbing local, as well as colonial, political and social ladders.

By acknowledging that the lives of these individuals who, in many instances, are missing from the historical record, or at least from our remembered version of the past, the hope is to gain greater insight into an important yet forgotten demographic in colonial Billerica (and Massachusetts more generally): slaves and slave owners. Christopher Spraker received his MA in history from Salem State University and is a researcher and writer at Oliver Brothers, a fine arts restoration company in Beverly, Massachusetts.

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On May 9, 1774, an ad appeared in *The Boston Gazette*, alerting readers throughout the colony that a slave named Caesar had run away from William Tompson of Billerica carrying “two Suits of Cloaths, homespun all Wool, light coloured, with white Lining and plain Brass Buttons, the other homespun Cotton and Linnen Twisted.” For the 50-year-old William Tompson (1724-1806), a farmer, town selectman, representative to the General Court, militia officer, large landowner, moneylender, and generally influential citizen, this was significant for several reasons.

First and foremost, Caesar was a valuable piece of personal property, one that Tompson may have owned for a long period of time. Second, the middle-aged farmer had no sons, only one grown daughter, and as such, the prospective loss of Caesar’s labor, either on the farm or as a personal servant, would have been a significant setback to Tompson’s economic and political well-being. Lastly, Tompson was closely connected to a network of Billerica slave owners and their relatives, many of whom represented the town’s wealthy and political elite in the decades leading up to the American Revolution.¹ Exactly how Caesar’s departure impacted Tompson’s wallet and social standing we can only speculate. Still, this would have marked a sad occasion for the slave owner.

The story of William Tompson and Caesar is intriguing on multiple levels. To begin with, it is one of the few known instances of a slave running away in Billerica’s history. Billerica is a suburban town located in Middlesex County, roughly 25 miles northwest of Boston. Considering that Billerica was founded as a large area in 1655 and then had several towns—Bedford, Tewksbury, and Wilmington—break away from it during the colonial period,

the runaway date of 1774 also hints at a much larger tale: more than 100 years of prior experience with slavery in the town and surrounding communities. Yet, this important narrative has been told, at best, only sporadically over the past two centuries.

For various political and social reasons, the story of slavery in Billerica, as well as throughout the North, was relegated to footnote status in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Following the Civil War, many historians and antiquarians helped create an officially accepted regional history emphasizing the relatively small number of slaves in the region—compared to that of the South—prior to the American Revolution. Furthermore, by arguing that most slaves were either status symbols for wealthy northerners or used for farm and household labor, this version of the past stressed that slavery had played a negligible part in the development of the New England economy and its evolution from an agrarian to a market-based one during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To the extent that they acknowledged the existence of slavery, these antiquarian historians used the notion of slaves as bonded family members to try and lessen the severity of colonial slavery throughout New England. Many nineteenth-century historians—certainly the ones writing town histories—had a tendency to stress that slaves in Massachusetts were, for the most part, partial family members. For instance, many slaves ate dinner with their masters' families, slept in the same house (rather than in slave quarters), and so forth. This was certainly an attempt to lessen the severity of slavery in the North, especially when one considers the time period in which they were written, in the late nineteenth century, after the Civil War. This line of thinking also perpetuated the notion of the "house slave" as being both common in colonial New England, and a more benign form of bondage than the field slavery typically associated with the South. The town histories of Billerica, Bedford, and Tewksbury each engage in this to some degree.²

It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that historians started to re-evaluate the impact that the slave trade and slavery (an important distinction) had on the development of the New England economy during the colonial era.³ Studies of African culture and slavery in the North have exploded in the last 50 years. For an early argument on the importance and impact of slavery in New England, see Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942). Edgar J. McManus expanded upon Greene's pioneering work in *Black Bondage in the North* (1973). For a more recent study of African-American life, culture, and slavery in New England, see Alexandra A. Chan's *Slavery in the Age of Reason: Archaeology at a New England Farm* (2007).

While Greene raised the argument over the significance of slaves as a labor force in New England, later historians continued to crunch numbers and to further explore the extent of slavery's impact throughout the region. In *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (1988), William D. Piersen argued that the majority of New England's slaves were clustered "in and around the coastal urban centers" (Boston, Salem, and so forth in Massachusetts), thereby contributing directly to the region's booming shipping industry.⁴ Moreover, the concentration of enslaved and free blacks in coastal commercial areas contributed not only to the development of the New England economy, but also allowed for the creation of a "black subculture in New England which a more scattered settlement might have precluded."⁵

Though unquestionably important, fewer studies have focused on the impact of slavery in New England's more rural colonial areas. Even to this date a systematic study of slavery in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, has yet to be conducted. Unsurprisingly then, in many towns the older "footnote" version of the past persists, especially among the general public.⁶

Recently, however, a historiographical reinterpretation has started to confront the long held notion of slavery as insignificant in these smaller rural towns. What is more, it has produced a composite sketch of slave owners in such places that includes individuals pursuing titles, government positions, professional careers, and wealth for their families. Elise Lemire's *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (2009), for instance, argues that in Concord, Massachusetts, slave ownership corresponded closely with wealth, education, leadership, profession, ambition, and family background. She also argues that it was extremely significant to the overall development of the town during the eighteenth century and beyond.⁷

If we adopt this approach with regard to Billerica, the evidence suggests that slavery played an important role in the economic, political, and social rise of individuals and families in the town during the colonial period. Similar to neighboring Concord, slave owners in Billerica were a statistical minority (1-2% of the population); however, they were members of wealthy families in and out of town, large landowners, and increasingly influential in town politics. For many of these people, like William Tompson, slaves served a dual purpose. They were not only status symbols, but also highly valued economic producers who helped provide their masters with the time and opportunity necessary to pursue titles, trades, and lofty positions within local government.

This article makes several key arguments. First, that by positively contributing to the wealth and status of upwardly mobile white individuals

and families, the important role the enslaved played in the development of Billerica as a town must be recognized. Second, that far from being singular, Billerica was part of a wider network in which some colonists regularly purchased slaves to help advance the economic and political welfare of their families. As an example, Billerica points to a larger picture of slavery's impact throughout Middlesex County, especially when taken in context with the well-documented case of neighboring Concord. Finally, and perhaps most important, by acknowledging that the lives of these individuals are in many instances missing from the historical record, or at least from our remembered version of the past, the hope is to gain greater insight into an important yet forgotten demographic in colonial Billerica (and rural Massachusetts more generally): slaves and slave owners.

HELP WANTED: SLAVES IN THE EARLY RURAL ECONOMY

From its inception in 1638, when the first African slaves were brought to Massachusetts, to its demise more than 150 years later, the institution of African chattel slavery was closely tied to the New England economy. Entering a society hungry for skilled as well as unskilled labor, slaves in New England joined a pre-existing socially marginalized labor force of young white indentured servants, as well as some Native indentures and slaves.⁸ Massachusetts dominated the colonial slave trade during the seventeenth century, mainly trading the region's chief exports of agricultural produce, fish, lumber, and livestock to West Indian plantations in return for sugar, rum, and slaves. This monopoly over the trade in goods for slaves was short lived; by the second decade of the eighteenth century, Newport-based Rhode Island merchants had turned their full attention to the African and West Indies slave trade.⁹

Regardless of which colony took the lead, the effects of the trade were felt throughout the whole of New England. Bernard Bailyn explains that "only a few of New England's merchants actually engaged in the slave trade, but all of them profited by it, lived off it."¹⁰ In Massachusetts the strongest reminder of the slave trade was the appearance of enslaved Africans and Natives throughout the young colony's communities. Thus, we know that between 1638 and 1762 at least 23 ships arrived in Boston with slaves for sale in the local market, the majority coming directly from Africa.¹¹ It is important to note, however, that the importation of slaves into New England was not uniform during the colonial period. In fact, a relatively small number entered the region during the seventeenth century, perhaps fewer than 1,000.



Slave Quarters, Royall House, Medford MA

Outside of Boston and Cambridge, nearby Medford had the largest number of slaves in the colony in the 1750s. Most were owned by Isaac Royall, Sr. Royall was a prosperous merchant who amassed great wealth in Antigua in the early 1700s, running a sugar plantation and trading in slaves and rum. He moved to Medford with his family and 27 slaves in 1734. Source: Medford Historical Society, <http://www.medfordhistorical.org/slaveryinmedford.php>.

Nevertheless, some early wealthy colonists purchased slaves along with indentured servants to assist with the arduous rigors of everyday life.¹²

As a result, when the area previously known as Shaweshin was granted to Cambridge in 1643 and officially incorporated as the town of Billerica in 1655, several of the town's earliest settlers utilized slave labor to plant their new homes. For example, Simon Crosby (1637-1725); Jonathan Danforth (1627/28-1712); Job Lane (1620-1697); Job's son, John Lane (1661-1714/15); Nathaniel Tay (1650-1724); Samuel Whiting (1633-1713), the town's first minister; and perhaps Nathaniel Paige (d. 1692) each brought at least one slave with them to Billerica or purchased one some time before 1700.¹³

The role these early slaves played in the lives of their masters is uncertain; however, one could assume that their workloads were heavy. In an unsettled area, fields needed to be cleared and planted, homes and other buildings needed to be built, wells needed to be dug, and errands needed to be run. To be sure, John Warwick (d. 1686), the Indian slave of Jonathan Danforth; Simon (roughly 1653-1712), the African slave of Samuel Whiting; and Dick (d. 1674), the African slave of Simon Crosby were regarded as personal servants to their masters and, as a result, would have conducted myriad tasks in the field and in the home.¹⁴

Unlike slaves in Boston and Salem, where black communities sprang up in port areas (where slaves most often worked and lived), slaves sold into the interior of Massachusetts, in small towns like Billerica, were almost completely isolated physically and psychologically. Here slaves had to “live, work, eat, and sometimes even sleep, alongside their masters in an environment that remained predominantly white.”¹⁵ As perhaps the only slave in the home of their owners—and as one of only a handful of Africans or Indians in Billerica at the time—the psychological burden would have been intense for those living in captivity.

If the 45 years of Billerica’s initial settlement (1655-1700) saw only a handful of slaves and slave owners living in town, the years leading up to the Revolution witnessed a steady increase.¹⁶ From 1700-1755 various members of the Blanchard, Bowers, Davidson, Dows, Farmer, Kidder, Kittredge, Hunt, Munroe, Nickles, Rogers, Ruggles, Sprague, Stearns, Stickney, Tompson, Trull, and Walker families each owned at least one slave, while descendants of earlier families, like the Crosbys and Lanes, also continued to own them.¹⁷

The Massachusetts Slave Census of 1754 lists a total of 2,674 slaves in the colony. However, only individuals over the age of sixteen are recorded. There were at least eight slaves living in Billerica in 1754, and as many as 14 in 1765 (out of a total population of 1,334 persons). However, this is most likely an undercount due to the exclusion of children from the census.¹⁸ Understanding the type of world they inhabited, or were sold into, is imperative to fully comprehend the lives of slaves and slave owners.

New England in the early eighteenth century was a world in flux. As religious, political, and military conflicts threatened to tear society apart at its seams, the early stages of a consumer revolution began to change many New Englanders’ basic outlook toward life. In Massachusetts, the Puritan utopia of the Winthrops and Mathers was being forced to come to terms with an increased flow of goods and wealth into the region via the burgeoning transatlantic trade.¹⁹ Part of this shift saw the first newspaper in Boston, created in 1704 mainly for the elite of the Boston and Salem ports, followed

by *The Boston Gazette* in 1719, and the *New England Courant* in 1721. These newspapers, the latter specifically aimed at catering to the interests of “would-be British Gentlemen,” penetrated the Massachusetts interior, linking local men with aspirations to information networks and economic opportunities that had previously eluded them. Beside the latest wares and fashions from England and beyond, newspapers also advertised slaves for sale.²⁰ It was in this changing world that Billerica families like the Tompsons, Crosbys, Bowers, Lanes, and others purchased imported goods as well as human beings to help improve their financial and social standing.

Closely connected to the changes in consumer habits, a diversification of the New England economy was also well underway by the early eighteenth century. Many people with capital (newly acquired or old) chose to pursue occupations as merchants, printers, shop owners, and various other professions, especially in regions near the coast. In rural areas like Billerica, some farmers attempted to advance their economic and professional well-being by engaging in secondary careers as teachers, doctors, land speculators, justices of the peace, merchants, innkeepers, and so forth. In fact, almost all slave owners in Billerica were engaged in some sort of time-consuming secondary (to farming) activity, be it professional or civic, during the eighteenth century.²¹

Slaves sold to owners in a town like Billerica were usually expected to possess a wide variety of skills to suit the diverse nature of the growing economy. Individuals whose non-farming careers had become their primary means of income might train or purchase slaves who had specific skill-sets. For instance, when a slave named William ran away from Billerica’s Nicholas Sprague (d. 1768) in August of 1735, care was made in the ensuing newspaper ad to mention that William was a “cloathier” (most likely a tailor) by trade.²² More often than not, however, farm or household labor skills were the chief skills desired for slaves in rural towns. As a result, it was common to find newspaper ads depicting slaves as “brought up in husbandry,” or “fit for town or country.”²³ Even as late as 1774, in the same edition of *The Boston Gazette* which saw William Tompson’s run-away ad, there was an advertisement for a “healthy, strong, good tempered Negro Man,” someone who “will make an excellent servant for a farmer.” Once in town, slaves were called upon to do a variety of jobs including cooking, sewing, planting, hoeing, gathering crops, attending to livestock, building walls, running errands, and so on, important tasks, whether directly or indirectly, to maintaining economic production on the farm.²⁴

On the micro level slaves helped perform the labor necessary to provide their masters with the financial stability and precious time to “engage in

new professional, artisan, and entrepreneurial activities.”²⁵ Here, revisiting the story of William Tompson provides an excellent example. We know that Tompson was a large landowner, money lender (essentially he was a local bank), town selectman, a representative to the Massachusetts General Court, and a Colonel in the Billerica militia. He was also one of the town’s leading farmers in terms of agricultural production. As of 1771, Tompson was among the top owners of livestock in town, was producing the second most bushels of grain per year (at 170), and was among the top producers of hay. While the quantity of his production was due in part to a large inheritance, it does not change the fact that son-less, Tompson would have relied on the labor of his slave Caesar (and perhaps other servants) to maintain his busy lifestyle. Other Billerica slave owners, like Josiah Bowers (1719-1794) and William Crosby (1697-1754), also maintained high levels of production on their farms while spending significant amounts of time pursuing secondary careers. Though unlike Tompson, these individuals had sons, they each owned multiple slaves.²⁶

Beyond farm labor (something easily translatable to economic production), some Billerica slaves may have been more directly involved as household servants. As such, their labor has been one of the key points of attack for individuals arguing against the economic importance of slavery in New England. Contrary to this interpretation, recent historians have argued that household labor (cooking, cleaning, sewing, running errands, etc.) increased the overall productivity of a home, thus helping to increase the standard of living for an entire family.

However, it is important to note that in many cases it is almost impossible to determine whether individual slaves performed strictly either farm or household labor. In *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780-1860* (1998), Joanne Pope Melish points out that in the past two decades feminist scholars have attacked the tendency of some historians to neglect the importance of non-market labor in colonial New England, traditionally considered labor performed by women and household heads in a purely agrarian society. She also argues that neglecting the labor of slaves in these areas is in part an extension of this tendency. Consequently, she concludes that if “nonmarket household labor in fact has value to the economy as a whole, by increasing the standard of living and by enhancing the market-oriented productivity of other household members, then the impact of slavery in New England has been vastly underrated.”²⁷

Existing probate inventory data from Billerica reinforces this interpretation, as it shows that slaves had high monetary values regardless of whether they were engaged in farm or household labor. For example, Lydia

(1730-1779), the household servant of Jonathan Bowers (1674-1744), and a “negro boy in the 14th year of his age” (probably named Robin), belonging to William Crosby, were both valued at £100 upon the death of their respective masters (Bowers in 1744 and Crosby in 1754). In each case, the organization of the deceased’s probate inventory also allows us to speculate on the primary roles of these enslaved individuals. Lydia was listed among various household items including silverware, tables, and chairs; Robin, on the other hand, was grouped with the livestock and farming equipment (a common occurrence). In the case of each inventory, at least one assessor was also a current or future slave owner in Billerica—Benjamin Tompson (1685-1753) and Thomas Kidder (1700-1791) in 1744, and Nathaniel Davidson in 1754—individuals who likely possessed a firm understanding of a slave’s variable monetary value. A female slave belonging to Samuel Ruggles (1681-1749), the town’s second minister, was valued at £200 in 1748. Though speculative, these examples point to a high average cost for slaves in Billerica irrespective of both labor and sex.²⁸

Providing crucial labor to affluent and middling farmers, slaves contributed to the economy of Billerica on a macro level as well. By allowing owners to engage in the increasing number of available entrepreneurial activities, slaves were furthering the gradual shift in Massachusetts from a household-based to a market-based economy. On a local level, however, slavery most directly contributed to the economic rise and or sustained success of individuals and families over generations, people who defined much of Billerica’s—as well as surrounding town’s—political and social life throughout the eighteenth century. A solid financial footing was a prerequisite for the life of an aspiring gentleman, something slaves and servants helped to provide. Nevertheless, money alone was not enough to ensure one’s political and social rise in a community. It also took close connection to a family and social network of similarly influential people.

A FAMILY AFFAIR: KINSHIP NETWORKS OF BILLERICA SLAVE OWNERS

Up to this point, we have outlined the economic importance of slave labor in Billerica. While this is certainly significant, it is not sufficient to say that slavery existed in places like Billerica because of economics alone. Quite to the contrary, *race mattered* in the decision to enslave people of darker skin in order to meet demands over production and consumption in colonial New England, just as it did throughout the entirety of the British Empire. This concept becomes complicated, however, when we take into account

An Inventory of the Estate of Capt. Jonathan Bowers late of Billerica deceased - as it was Shewed to us & appraised by us the Subscribers - March 4th 1744 - as followeth -

L. S. D.

To a Negro Girl named Lydia	100-00-00
To a Silver Tanker appraised at	36-00-00
To a Dish with Grants	03-00-00
To three old Chairs	01-02-00
To a Table in the North Chamber	01-05-00
To two oval Tables	05-15-00
To some other Tables	00-18-00
To a long Table & a square Table	00-16-00
To several Chairs	01-11-00
To a large looking glass	01-15-00
To Chain Bents	00-08-00
To 2 pair of Hicliards	03-13-00
To several Water plates	03-05-00
To water plates & basons	02-07-00
To old water	03-07-00
To other water vessels	00-15-00
To Brass Kettle & other Brass	01-05-00
	00-18-00

The probate records of Jonathan Bowers (1674 – 1744) include “a negro girl named Lydia” [indicated by arrow above]. Listed among household items including silverware, tables, and chairs, Lydia (1730 – 1779) was valued at £100 at the time of Bowers’ death.

that most of those who originally received land grants to settle at Billerica were first-generation Puritan colonists, the same pious individuals who often stressed moral tenets like “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”²⁹ In fact, several of Billerica’s earliest settlers either brought slaves with them to town or purchased one or more soon thereafter; this created a complex milieu of cultural interaction given the active Native American presence in the area.³⁰ Many of the families who would later be connected to slavery in Billerica and beyond also arrived early in the town’s history. The Tompson, Rogers, Walker, Stearns, Kidder, Kittredge, Farmer, Trull, Tay, and Hunt families, each of whom owned slaves at one time or another, all first settled during the seventeenth century.³¹

The key here lies in understanding that although Massachusetts Puritans extended some religious freedoms to enslaved Africans and Native Americans (for instance many slaves were either converted to Christianity or baptized at birth and were also allowed to attend church services), they did so in the hope of eternal salvation for their servants and in the name of the Puritan christianizing mission.³² What was never intended was any notion of racial equality for free or bonded Africans and Indians. Though pious in their community and family-centered religious beliefs, almost all of the colony’s white citizens believed in the inherent inferiority, and the “enslaveability” of darker-skinned races.³³

With that in mind, historian Elise Lemire found that one of the determining factors for slave ownership in Concord, Massachusetts, was family background. Essentially, the closer the familial ties to the region’s upper classes (the Puritan elite and later the gentry), the more likely it was for a family to be slave owners. The same appears to be true for Billerica. While a statistical minority in the town, the overwhelming majority of slaveholders—including all of the early slave owners and the majority of later ones—were either well connected or were descendents of wealthy and influential family members throughout the colony. Many had fathers, uncles, brothers, and/or cousins who had attended Harvard, were deacons, reverends, lawyers, doctors, colonels, etc.

For example, slave owner Simon Crosby was the son of Simon Crosby Sr. (1608-1639), a wealthy landowner and influential Puritan both in England and Massachusetts, and was the stepson of the influential Reverend William Tompson (1598-1666) (the great-grandfather of William mentioned in the introduction) of Braintree. He was also the younger brother of Harvard graduate Thomas Crosby (1634-1702).³⁴ The Reverend Samuel Whiting was himself a graduate of Harvard, and had attended alongside yet another William Tompson (1629-1700) of Braintree, the brother of Joseph Tompson,

our earlier William's grandfather. Similarly, Job Lane was a wealthy and influential landowner in both England and Malden before he settled in Billerica. These connections placed many early slaveholders in immediate positions of weight and influence within Billerica's political and social circles, and in most instances provided assurance for the prosperity of their families for generations to come.³⁵

Later slaveholders, those arriving during the first half of the eighteenth century, also had similar connections. The Blanchards, Bowers, Dows, Munroes, Ruggles, and Stickneys of Billerica were all descended from other influential families in Massachusetts and England, and each had at least one family member who owned slaves or a descendent in Billerica who one day would. Jonathan Bowers is a perfect example. Born in Chelmsford in 1674, Jonathan had several brothers: one attended Harvard; another married the cousin of Harvard's president, Henry Dunster; and a third was "a leading citizen" in Chelmsford. Having secured wealth as a farmer and coming from an influential family, Jonathan Bowers moved to Billerica around 1720. Once there, he was quickly appointed a town selectman and a representative to the General Court in 1717. At the time of his death in 1745, he owned at least two slaves, one of whom, Lydia, was mentioned earlier.³⁶

In addition, many Billerica families participated in the creation of a second web of connection in which slave ownership itself was a common thread. Brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, and cousins of slave owners commonly married individuals in other prominent families, many of whom were either slave owners themselves or were related to a local slave owner in Billerica and elsewhere.

Once again, William Tompson serves as an interesting example. He was historically connected to slavery through his father Benjamin, the original owner of Caesar, and his grandfather Joseph (1640-1732), half brother of Simon Crosby. William's sister Abigail (1722-1771) married Josiah Bowers, the son of Jonathan Bowers and a slave owner himself. Another sister, Dorothy (1736-1759), married Solomon Kidder (1732-1776), whose cousin Thomas was also a slave owner in Billerica in 1752. Beyond that, 1757 saw the marriage of William to Sarah White (1728 b.), the daughter of William White Esquire, a wealthy merchant and landowner from Haverhill.³⁷ Thus, in one example we have the connection of four prominent Billerica slaveholding families—the Bowers, Crosby, Kidder, and Tompson families—and another affluent family in Middlesex County.

These white families gave birth to multiple generations whose lives were positively impacted by slavery and by the wealth and status it helped to create and perpetuate. In some cases their descendants also became slave owners,

and in doing so, helped spread the web of connection outside of Billerica's borders into Middlesex County and beyond. When portions of Billerica broke away to form the towns of Tewksbury, Bedford, and Wilmington in the eighteenth century, the descendents of several prominent families left town, in some cases becoming wealthy slave owners in their new homes.

Consider Tewksbury, where members of the Hunt, Kidder, Kittredge, Rogers, Stickney, and Trull families, all originally from Billerica, owned slaves. Specifically, Timothy Rogers (1717-1796), who was the brother of the prominent Billerica slave owner Zebediah Rogers (1720-1803) and husband of Rebecca French (1723-1750), the French's being another prominent Billerica family, owned several slaves in Tewksbury after having moved there. The town's vital records refer to Timothy's son, Timothy Jr. (1745-1814), owning slaves as well.³⁸

Some descendents of these families also brought slaves with them to other parts of New England. For instance, Josiah Crosby (1730-1793), great-grandson of Simon, apparently purchased or received a slave in Boston sometime prior to his departure for Milford, New Hampshire in 1753. Likewise, Reverend Josiah Stearns, originally from Billerica, brought a slave with him to Epping, New Hampshire in 1758.³⁹

This is not to imply that Billerica was the epicenter of slavery in Massachusetts, or even Middlesex County, far from it. It was, however, part of an expansive network of influential slaveholders throughout the colony. Hence, wealthy individuals who arrived in town throughout the eighteenth century often had prior connections to slave ownership. For example, John Carleton, a miller whose land was valued in the top five percent of townsmen in 1771, was descended from a wealthy slave owning family in Bradford, Massachusetts.⁴⁰ While certainly not the only link between upwardly mobile people in Billerica, the ownership of slaves was, in all likelihood, understood as an important one for families with aspirations.

By purchasing slaves, Billerica owners created a cultural and ethnic minority in the town whose experiences were intertwined with their own. Enslaved people engaged in cultural and family connections to the extent that their bondage would allow. Being bound to the lives of their owners meant, however, that for many slaves these connections were a double-edged sword, fraught with joy as well as heartache. Thus, it is important to understand, as well as we can, their experiences as they relate to what we know about the slave owners of Billerica.

The simplest ways for slaves to forge family connections were probably through marriage and childbearing, which produce both happiness and sorrow. In most documented cases, enslaved individuals married other

slaves, either belonging to the same master or, just as often, not. Interestingly, marriages of the latter kind connected slave owners to one another in yet another way. As an illustration, we know that Phillis, “the servant of Ebenezer Jones of Wilmington,” was married to Titus (a Billerica slave) on November 24, 1768. While traditionally thought of as happy occasions, these unions also had the potential to break individuals away from what little family they knew. For instance, Lydia Somerset (likely the same Lydia we have mentioned twice before) was purchased by Amos Fortune (1710–1801) in 1778, a freed slave living in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, and the two were married shortly thereafter.⁴¹ While now free, Lydia may have left a number of daughters behind at the Bowers’ farm. After having paid £50 for the 58-year-old Lydia’s freedom, it is unlikely that either Amos or Lydia could have afforded to purchase or care for one of her daughters.⁴²

Childbirth was also often dreaded by female slaves. In many instances infants and children were regarded as an economic burden by owners and quickly sold. Children were also frequently left in wills or simply given to the various children of slave owners as inheritance and gifts, providing them with the means to fulfill the potential befitting their family status. Take for example, Hannah Bowers (1679-1765) “sold unto Lot Colby, of Rumford” a “mulatto negro boy named Salem” in 1761.⁴³ It is easy to imagine that the sale of a child may have brought about a profound sense of loss for those remaining. Thus, as slave owners in Billerica solidified and spread their web of family connection, they also continually broke down similar connections for their slaves.

But what of the purported family-like relationships between slaves and their masters that some past historians have presented as common in colonial New England?⁴⁴ To take a case in point, the freeing of a slave known only as Simon by Samuel Whiting at a Billerica selectmen meeting in 1693 is the best-known example of an owner manumitting a slave in the town’s history. Unfortunately, it took Simon some sixteen years to receive a seventeen-acre grant of land from the town. Upon his death shortly thereafter, Simon, “in consideration of the respect I have and do bear to my Master’s family” willed his land and what little possessions he owned to the children of Samuel Whiting. After 31 years of labor, the former slave had little choice but to give his possessions to the only individuals he knew. Separated from his true family by five decades and the Atlantic Ocean, at least part of Simon died alone.⁴⁵ The Whiting children, on the other hand, went on to occupy influential civic and government positions in Billerica and elsewhere.

Some slaves in Billerica, as mentioned before, chose to flee from their masters rather than remain in captivity. We can only speculate what drove

William, in 1738; and Caesar, in 1774, to run for their lives; however, as Elise Lemire points out, “it was the rare owner who could check the absolute power that was his by legal right.”⁴⁶ While it is certainly speculative, and perhaps unfair, to insinuate that either William Tompson or Nicholas Sprague abused their slaves, something drove these individuals to run for their lives. Perhaps it was the elusive desire for freedom after years, and in Caesar’s case, decades of forced labor.

In sum, the lives of slaves and slave owners in Billerica were entangled in a series of important family connections. While these connections were more often than not detrimental for the enslaved, they helped to link prominent Billerica individuals and families in a web of personal and economic relationships within the town and beyond. To put it succinctly, in addition to possessing a degree of economic independence and valuable free time, slave owners in Billerica also possessed the family background required to pursue positions of influence within their community.

PEOPLE IN HIGH PLACES: THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS OF SLAVE OWNERSHIP

There remains a striking reality that while every important person in early Billerica was certainly not a slave owner, nearly every slave owner was a person of importance. Billerica slave owners were farmers who also served as town selectmen, representatives to the general court, town clerks, justices of the peace, ministers, military leaders, and various other positions. Beyond economic opportunities, slaves clearly provided many of their owners with the time and prestige necessary to climb the town’s political and social ladder.

In their recent studies, both Joanne Melish and Elise Lemire have argued that owning slaves corresponded not simply with wealth or the pursuit of a profession outside of husbandry, but rather with the pursuit of an honorific title: “mister,” a military title, or “esquire.” For instance, in her pioneering study, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (2009), Lemire points out that, of Concord’s fifteen slave owners in 1772, ten had an honorific title. She also concludes that everyone in Concord who possessed such a title owned at least one slave.⁴⁷ This makes sense, as the transition taking place within the New England economy also prompted an increasing number of its colonists to mimic the social standards of England. Among individuals of middling rank with higher aspirations, this manifested itself as a drive toward positions of power and influence within local government, as well as the desire for landed titles. Essentially, they wanted to become New English gentry. Although not every person with a

title in eighteenth-century Billerica owned slaves, the majority of slaveholders possessed titles. Overall, then, this thesis matches the experience of Billerica slave owners quite closely.⁴⁸

Aside from their role as laborers, many slaves in New England also positively impacted their owners' lives as objects of conspicuous consumption. This was certainly true in the hierarchical society of Puritan Massachusetts, where functions such as one's graduation rank at Harvard, or holding an officer's position in a local militia were predominantly determined by wealth and family status. Owning human beings could be, quite literally, a living embodiment of power and prestige for men focused on presenting themselves as affluent, accomplished, and fit to lead.

Even the naming of slaves illustrates this status symbol. By dubbing his young slave "Caesar," Benjamin Tompson declared to his community that he was an educated man, someone who might have read classic Greek and Roman literature. Other slave names in Billerica suggest similar things about their owners. For example, Cato, Diana, Enos, Eunice, Lydia, Peter, and Pompey each have classic or biblical associations.⁴⁹ It is important to note, however, that recent scholars have rightly criticized past historians for labeling slaves in New England as little more than status symbols.⁵⁰ The key here is in understanding that *both* roles, producer and status symbol, enhanced the lives of slave owners in significant ways.

By utilizing the myriad benefits that slave ownership could provide, many Billerica owners rose to the top of the town's political and social circles. With regard to local government, the most accessible position was town selectman, with five representatives for nearly every year of the colonial period. In total, some 95 individuals became Billerica selectmen between 1655 and 1783, when slavery was outlawed in Massachusetts; at *least* ten of them owned slaves. While ten out of 95 is a clear minority, those ten slave-owning selectmen held office for a long period of time. In fact, in the 120 years from 1660, the first year there were town selectmen, to 1780, there were just 33 years in which no selectman was a past or present slave owner. If we extend the comparison to the children and grandchildren of slave owners, the next groups most likely to directly benefit from the labor and prestige of family slaves, the numbers more than double. In this sense, nearly every year from the town's founding until the demise of slavery saw at least one town selectman who either owned a slave or benefited from a family member who possessed at least one.⁵¹

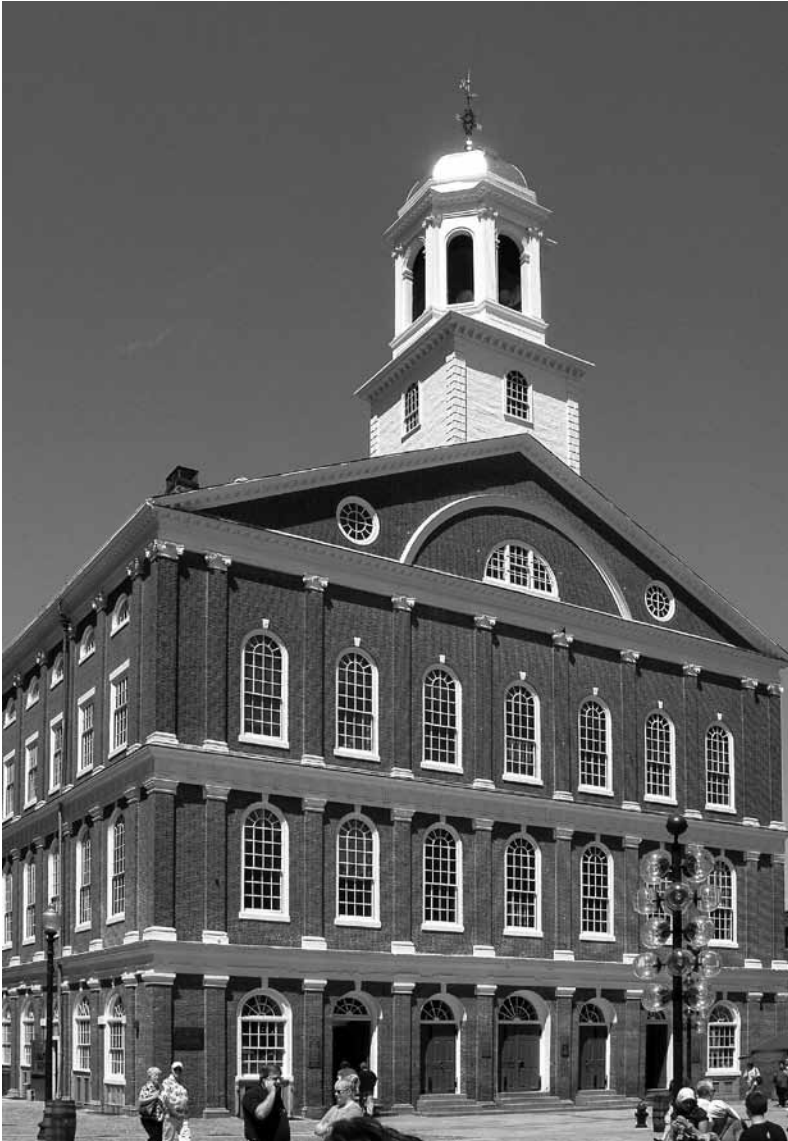
Representatives to the Massachusetts General Court, a slightly more prestigious appointment than selectman, also included a fair number of slave owners in Billerica. In total, seven of the 27 representatives (26%) chosen

during the colonial period owned slaves. Once again, most came from the town's top families, including Job Lane, Jonathan Danforth, Simon Crosby, John Lane, Benjamin Tompson, Thomas Kidder, and William Tompson.⁵² These individuals also represented Billerica during some of the Colony's critical moments. For example, Job Lane was representative immediately following King Phillip's War in 1676, while Simon Crosby served directly after King William's War in 1698. Captain John Lane held the position during Queen Anne's War in 1707, and William Tompson was present during both the onset of the Revolution and the ratification of the United States Constitution.⁵³

Beyond official political offices, slave owners often secured other political and civic appointments as well. For instance, Josiah Bowers (selectman from 1769-1770) was one of three individuals appointed to a committee to encourage Billerica citizens not to purchase items "from those persons that still continue to import goods from Great-Britain." He and Zebediah Rogers were also appointed to a committee of townsmen in 1775 ordered to "prevent and Discountenance all Disorders, Mobs, and Tumultuous Assemblys in the said Town." William Crosby, the wealthy grandson of Simon, was neither a selectman nor a town representative. He was, however, appointed as a highway surveyor for several years in the 1730s and as a tithing-man two years before his death.⁵⁴ To be sure, such appointments were not bestowed upon individuals solely because they held slaves; however, owning human beings tended to link one to power and prestige.

Slavery was also common among Billerica's religious leaders. Like others pursuing secondary professions, the life of a colonial Massachusetts minister could be extraordinarily time-consuming. After all, they too had farms to run in addition to their civic and religious duties. As we have seen, the town's first minister, Samuel Whiting, was also among Billerica's first slave owners. The second minister, Samuel Ruggles, owned a slave as well. Although his successor, John Chandler (1723-1762), had no slaves of his own, several of his family members in Andover and Rowley, Massachusetts, did.⁵⁵

Regarding religion, the sale of pews in the meetinghouse provides telling evidence of the correlation between slave ownership and social standing. Pews were generally sold to raise money for the church or to finance civil projects like the construction of a new meetinghouse. They were also regarded—and taxed—as property. The more expensive pews, those closest to the minister, were usually offered first to the most wealthy and prominent individuals in a community. It should come as little surprise that almost all of the original pew owners came from families connected to slavery. When a new meetinghouse was constructed around 1740, at least eight of the 22



Slavery and Faneuil Hall

Most of the prominent New England merchants had ties to the slave trade and made vast fortunes from it. Peter Faneuil (1700 –1743) inherited a huge fortune, which had been made from the slave trade, and he increased his wealth through further slave trade involvement. His gift of Faneuil Hall to Boston is evidence of the wealth he made from the slave trade.

individuals given the opportunity to purchase a pew were associated with present or future slaveholding or came from families who owned slaves.⁵⁶ Therefore, when the eighteenth-century citizens of Billerica arrived each week for their Sunday services, they sat in a meetinghouse in which the ministers and many prominent members of the community were intimately connected to slavery.

As argued earlier, the real impact of slavery in Billerica was not on who sat where in the meetinghouse, but how slaves helped ensure the sustained success of prominent families over generations. Some children of slave owners chose to purchase or keep slaves themselves, while others simply benefited from the wealth and prestige of their families. As graduates from Harvard and Yale, doctors, lawyers, politicians, and leading citizens in Billerica and other towns, they would embody the Yankee middle and upper classes of New England during the decades following the American Revolution.

As a final example, the William Crosby family neatly summarizes slavery's impact in Billerica. William, born in 1697, was the son of Joseph Crosby (1669-1736) and the grandson of Simon Crosby, one of Billerica's original slave owners. As one of twelve children, William received two very important things from his father: the connections that came with the Crosby family name and a sizable parcel of land. He also purchased additional property from at least six other Billerica citizens between 1721 and 1730, thus becoming one of the town's largest landowners. With the need for additional hands to maintain his extensive land holdings, William Crosby utilized the labor of at least three slaves. Related to his accumulated wealth, Crosby received the title of Mister, an honor reserved for prominent individuals who did not possess an honorary or military title. Upon his death in 1754, Crosby bequeathed to his children gifts similar to those he had received from his father, Joseph: land, money, influence, and two slaves.⁵⁷ Benefiting from the prestige and wealth left to them by their father, his three sons Jesseniah, Hezekiah, and Seth became leading citizens in Billerica and beyond, eventually producing powerful children of their own. Hezekiah (1732-1817), for example, had a son named William (1770-1852) who graduated from Harvard in 1794 and became a Massachusetts Senator representing the District of Maine. This William also had a son named William George Crosby (1805-1881) who became the twenty-third governor of the State of Maine and bore the namesake of his great grandfather.⁵⁸

Governor William Crosby, like other Billerica descendents, was the product of several generations of influential family members, many of whom benefited from slave labor in gathering their family fortunes and amassing their networks of influence. Though one could argue that the slave owners

in question could have achieved similar success without owning bondsmen, it is a moot point. The historical fact is that they did own them and they benefited handsomely from their labor.

THE FORGOTTEN ONES

Today the reminders of slavery in Billerica lay quietly hidden; present yet conveniently out of plain sight. Essentially, one needs to know where to look in order to find them. An afternoon drive through the town might take visitors past Whiting Street, Rogers Lane, Crosby Drive, and Ruggles Street. A closer inspection might turn up markers dedicated to the Danforth and Ruggles homesteads, as well as the first meetinghouse where Samuel Whiting preached. If one were to enter town via the Bedford border along Route 4, they would pass a quaint-looking historic house museum: the Billerica home of Job Lane's grandson. Each site pays homage to an important individual, family, or building in Billerica.⁵⁹ Yet, in each case, part of who those people and places were has been lost or obscured; perhaps once done intentionally, perhaps not, but as of today, simply forgotten. Understanding why requires us to once again step back in time.

POSTSCRIPT

By the eve of the American Revolution, less than a year after Caesar ran away from William Tompson, a gradual change had begun to take place, particularly in the North, with regard to the acceptance of slavery as an institution. Revolutionary rhetoric, which commonly portrayed the English crown as imposing a type of slavery on its American colonies, was not inapplicable to the plight of enslaved Africans. Furthermore, opposition to slavery on moral grounds had begun to gain some moderate momentum among the general public for some time. These ideas were not lost on elected officials, resulting in the ability of some slaves to not only fight in the Revolution, but for others to petition the Massachusetts legislature for their freedom during the course of the war.⁶⁰ The Massachusetts General Court also ruled in a series of 1783 court cases over the status of a former slave named Quock Walker, that forced bondage had indirectly been outlawed by the Declaration of Rights found in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. As a result of this judicial decision, slavery, as well as engaging in the slave trade, had effectively ended in the colony. However, it is important to note that, unlike Connecticut and Rhode Island, which passed laws explicitly enforcing gradual emancipation in 1784, slavery in Massachusetts was not explicitly outlawed by the Quock Walker decision.⁶¹

As a result, when the first federal census was ordered in 1790 there was still a column for slaves; however, the number that came back in Massachusetts was zero. Still, there were at least five newly freed African Americans in Billerica, all listed as living in the homes of their former masters.⁶² Like Simon 100 years earlier, these former slaves were freed but not free. Though no longer bound by law, in all likelihood they lacked the funds necessary to live on their own—if the town would grant them land to begin with—and therefore continued to live in the homes of their former owners, most likely as servants.

A process of coping with a new population of *free* African Americans had begun for both blacks and whites throughout the region. Part of this process would result in New Englanders having to reconcile themselves with colonial slavery and persistent racism. Throughout New England this was accomplished by creative history writing, the crafting of a past without slavery or at least one in which slavery's impact on the development of the region was grossly minimized.

Billerica was no different. The first attempt at a town history, *An Historical Memoir of Billerica*, written in 1816 by John Farmer, contains no reference to Africans, enslaved or free, in Billerica. The absence of Africans from Farmer's text is significant for several reasons. To begin with, Farmer's work was cited extensively by individuals for later synopses and texts on Billerica's history. Beyond that, the composition of the text reinforces the thesis of some historians, like Joanne Melish in *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (1998) who have argued that for many whites in New England, the very process of emancipation had been undertaken, in part, to "restore New England to an idealized original state as an orderly, homogeneous, white society."⁶³ Later publications, like a short book celebrating the town's bicentennial in 1855, as well as a 1876 *Centennial Oration* for the United States, made reference to Billerica's abolitionist spirit but little or none to slavery itself.⁶⁴ Even Hazen's extensive *History of Billerica, Massachusetts* (1883), though it contains mention of slavery, presents it as an offhand occurrence.

As the twentieth century progressed, some Billerica residents began to recognize the existence of slavery during the town's colonial past. In 1957, Dr. A. Warren Stearns published a pamphlet titled *Slavery in Billerica*, which recounted information from the 1754 Massachusetts Slave Census, as well as Hazen's book. However, it would appear as though Stearns' pamphlet was destined, unfortunately, for obscurity in Cold War era Billerica. It was impossible to locate a copy of this pamphlet for this project. A newspaper article in the Billerica *Minuteman* also did as much in 1983 by briefly

illustrating the existence of slavery and later African-American heritage in the town.⁶⁵ Thus, the existence of colonial slavery in Billerica has been at least acknowledged by a small percentage of its citizens, though many may simply not know the institution existed in the town at all. Like other areas of New England, however, slavery is still generally thought of—when it is recognized—with a distinct caveat: that it was an afterthought of the town’s founding fathers, something born of consumerism, paternal in its nature, and certainly that it had little effect on the economic, political, and social rise of individuals and families in town.

What is clear is that slavery did, in fact, impact these aspects of Billerica’s development quite significantly in three specific ways. First, slaves provided aspiring individuals with much sought labor, thereby ensuring economic production on the farm while their masters engaged in an array of new professional opportunities in the booming New England economy. Second, slaves helped link prominent families together in a web of personal connections whose primary function was to provide individuals with the social influence necessary for them to succeed. Third, by utilizing both of these advantages, many Billerica slave owners had success in climbing local, as well as colonial, political and social ladders.

Equally important, the evidence has suggested that Billerica did not exist in a vacuum with regard to slavery. In fact, quite the opposite seems to be true: Billerica’s citizens were part of a wider community of slaveholding individuals within their county, colony, and beyond. What is fascinating, then, is that, with the exception of Elise Lemire’s *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (2009), few historical studies have been conducted on these lesser-known communities, which is striking because a quick glance at the vital records and town histories for Tewksbury, Bedford, Wilmington, Chelmsford, and so forth indicates stories similar to that of Billerica’s are waiting to be told.

Notes

1. *Boston Gazette*, May 9, 1774. While some ads spell William's last name as Thompson, Henry Allen Hazen points out in the *History of Billerica, Massachusetts* that the proper spelling is actually Tompson, as Thompson refers to a different family with no one named William living in Billerica. For the sake of clarity I will use the spelling Tompson when referring to his family as well. (Although they are part of one book, the main text of Rev. Henry Allen Hazen's *History of Billerica* and its final section titled, *Genealogical Register*, contain separate page numbering. As a result I will differentiate between the two sections in these notes.) For more on William Tompson's social standing and political influence see the genealogical information in Henry Allen Hazen, "Genealogical Register," in *History of Billerica Massachusetts* (Boston: A. Williams and Co, 1883), 148-149. Also see Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 304-307. Tompson's many land holdings and status as a moneylender are evident in Probate Record Number 22526, Middlesex County Probate Records, Massachusetts Archives, Boston, MA. He is also referenced as a wealthy moneylender in Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198-199. Upon his father Benjamin's death in 1753, William received a "negro boy named Caesar." It seems likely that this is the same Caesar that ran away in 1774; however, this is speculative. For more see the will of Benjamin Tompson in Probate Record Number 22431, Middlesex County Probate Records, Massachusetts Archives.

2. See Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 170-171; Brown, *History of the Town of Bedford*, 32; Pride, *Tewksbury, A Short History*, 62. Joanne Pope Melish provides an interesting overview of the myth of a "free" New England in her introduction to *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998). She suggests that the erasure of black slaves from New England's history during the nineteenth century was part of a larger effort to "eliminate free people of color in New England," (10). On the formation of a national memory of the Civil War that minimized slavery's impact on the conflict see David W. Blight's seminal work, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001).

3. The distinction between the slave trade and slavery is important because it distinguishes merchants directly engaged in the slave trade from those using slaves for labor. This is not to insinuate that they are mutually exclusive, just that each (trade and slavery) impacted the New England economy in unique ways. On the slave trade in New England see Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981).

4. For a foundational text on the interconnectedness of slavery and British capitalism see Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (University of North Carolina Press, 1944). Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1942). Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973).

5. William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), quotes from pages 14 and 15.

6. It should be made clear that I do not disagree with the thesis proposed by Greene, Piersen, and others concerning the concentration of Africans (enslaved and free) in these costal areas and their impacts on the New England economy; the numbers speak for themselves. Many of these arguments were, however, looking for the clearest example of slavery's impact in the region in an attempt to discredit the prevailing doctrine that there was "no economic justification" for slavery in New England. For an example of this argument see Jackson Turner Main, *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 177. I am arguing that as a partial result of this, there have been until quite recently far fewer in-depth studies focusing on New England's rural areas, partially limiting the quality of analysis on slavery in those communities.

7. Other recent historians, like Melish in *Disowning Slavery*, have proposed the notion of the importance of slavery in the economic and political development of rural towns in New England. For a succinct overview of this thesis see Bernard Bailyn, "Slavery and Population Growth in Colonial New England," In *Engines of Enterprise: An Economic History of New England*, ed. Peter Temin. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 253-260. While borrowing ideas from historians like Melish and Bailyn, Lemire's book is perhaps the most in-depth case study of this thesis, and certainly on the history of slavery for a town in Middlesex County. See Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

8. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 16-23. The first slaves to arrive in Massachusetts did so in 1638, onboard the Salem ship *Desire*. For a brief, yet haunting interpretation of life as one of the Massachusetts slaves of 1638 see Wendy Anne Warren, "The Cause of Her Grief: The Rape of a Slave in Early New England," *Journal of American History* (March 2007). On Indian slavery and servitude in early New England see Margaret Ellen Newell, "The Changing Nature of Indian Slavery in New England, 1670-1720," in *Reinterpreting New England Indians and the Colonial Experience*, ed. Colin G. Calloway and Neal Salisbury (2003: Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts). For an overview of labor demands as well as an in-depth study of servitude in Puritan Massachusetts see William Lawrence Towner, *A Good Master Well Served: Masters and Servants in Colonial Massachusetts, 1620-1750* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

9. Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle*, 6-7. Coughtry argues that Rhode Island's dominance of the North American slave trade in the eighteenth century resulted mostly from the fact that the colony had no real staple export, due to limited land availability and poor land quality. Therefore, Rhode Island merchants devised a way by which to turn sugar into a staple export by distilling highly desirable spirits such as rum. The numbers do not lie. No fewer than 943 slaving voyages originated from Rhode Island during the years 1630-1860, making it the unquestioned leader in the

North American slave trade by a margin of more than three-to-one over the colony with the second highest number: South Carolina with 220 voyages. Massachusetts ranked third, however, with no fewer than 186 slaving voyages originating from the colony during the aforementioned years. The statistical information here is based on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, compiled by historian David Eltis and others. “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database,” 2009, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces>

10. Bailyn, “Slavery and Population Growth,” 255.

11. “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.” Of the 23 ships that had Massachusetts as their primary destination for the sale of slaves, roughly three arrived between 1638 and 1700.

12. Pierson, *Black Yankees*, 7, 14. Pierson notes that three-quarters of slaves brought to or purchased in New England were probably born in Africa. He bases these numbers on the fact that most slaving voyages purchased their human cargo either along the African west coast, or from the West Indies where the majority of individuals for sale had also been born on the African continent

13. Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 1-8. The information for these early Billerica slaves and owners is found in *Ibid*, 171; *Vital Records of Billerica*, 211, 405; Elbridge Henry Goss, *The History of Melrose, County of Middlesex, Massachusetts* (Melrose: City of Melrose, 1902), 457; Abram English Brown, *History of the Town of Bedford, Middlesex County, Massachusetts* (Bedford: Published by author, 1891), 31; Lane Family Papers, document number 38A and 38B, Bedford Historical Society, Bedford, MA. Nathaniel Paige apparently owned an African servant during at least the 1680s and beyond. One early twentieth-century text refers to this servant as a slave; however, this is not conclusive. For more see Cuyler Reynolds and William Richard Cutter, *Genealogical and Family History of Southern New York and the Hudson River Valley: Vol. III* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1914), 1362. Also see Sharon Lawrence McDonald, *The Bedford Flag Unfurled* (Bedford: published in cooperation with the Bedford Free Public Library, 2000), 20.

14. McManus and Greene point out that, like those arriving during the eighteenth century, many seventeenth-century slaves were used as personal or household servants as well as field laborers. For more see McManus, *Black Bondage*, 6-8, and Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 106-108.

15. Pierson, *Black Yankees*, 13. The author takes exception to the argument of past historians, including Lorenzo Greene, that the physical and psychological toll of northern slavery would have been less than that of southern slavery.

16. The rising number of slaves in Billerica during the eighteenth century closely mirrors the overall trend in New England during the same period. As far as ships arriving with slaves for sale in Massachusetts, the peak in activity seems to have occurred between 1737 and 1762 (twenty ships carrying at least one slave). “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.”

17. To my knowledge, the full list of Billerica slave owners is as follows: Simon Blanchard, Hannah Bowers, Jonathan Bowers, Josiah Bowers, Simon Crosby, William

Crosby, Jonathan Danforth, Nathaniel Davidson, Ebenezer Dows, Thomas Farmer, Peter Hunt, Thomas Kidder, James Kittredge, Jeremiah Kittredge, Job Lane, John Lane, John Lane Jr., James Lane, Joseph Munroe, John Nickles, Nathaniel Paige, Timonthy Rogers, Zebediah Rogers, Samuel Ruggles, Nicholas Sprague, David Stickney, Nathaniel Tay, Benjamin Tompson, William Tompson, Samue Trull, Jacob Walker, and Samuel Whiting.

18. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 94; “Massachusetts Slave Census,” last modified October 18, 2009, http://www.primaryresearch.org/pr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=552:the-1754-slave-census&catid=111&Itemid=34. The Massachusetts Slave Census of 1754 listed a total of 2,674 slaves in the colony. It is important to point out, however, that the figure of eight Billerica slaves does not provide a full picture of slavery in the town, as only individuals over the age of sixteen were counted. For instance, there is evidence of five slave births in the years 1749-1753 alone. For more see *Vital Records of Billerica Massachusetts to the Year 1850*, 211. Also, the 1754 probate inventory of William Crosby found in Probate Record Number 5383, Middlesex County Probate Records, Massachusetts Archives, lists “one negro boy in the 14th year of his age.” While speculative, it is likely there were other slaves not listed due to their age as well. Beyond this, the Massachusetts census of 1765 counted 14 “negroes” (8 male and 6 female) among Billerica’s total population of 1,334 persons. It is possible that some of these individuals were indentured servants; however, there is no record of any free, land-owning blacks living in the town during this period. This data can be found in J. H. Benton, Jr., *Early Census Making in Massachusetts, 1643-1765* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1905), 78-79.

19. Historians have tended to argue over whether the “anglicanization” of New England and the consumer revolution in North America began in the eighteenth century, or perhaps as early as the mid-to-late seventeenth century. On the consumer revolution taking place within the North American British colonies see T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). In his recent study, Mark Valeri contends that the shifts in consumer habits, as well as the rise of a market economy in Massachusetts, were aided by a gradual acceptance and support of commerce (including slave trading) on religious grounds by leading Puritan ministers and merchants. For more see Mark Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

20. Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 36-39. Though Brown never attempts to connect the new flow of information to slavery in New England, it would appear to be an easy connection to make. In an essay on slave-for-sale ads, for instance, Robert Desrochers interestingly links the expansion of newspapers with expanded slaveholding in communities throughout Massachusetts. For more see Robert E. Desrochers, Jr., “Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3 (July 2002).

21. Over the past several decades, economic historians of New England have regarded this period of increased labor outside the home as the beginning stages of a regional transformation to a market-based economy. For example see Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992) and Winifred Barr Rothenberg, *From Market-Places to a Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

22. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 102-103. Greene argues that “Negroes accordingly were taught and followed whatever calling their owners pursued, whether farming, lumbering, trading, fishing, whaling, manufacturing, or privateering.”; *Boston Evening Post*, November 17, 1735.

23. Desrochers, “Slave-For-Sale Advertisements,” 630-634. Desrochers compiled all of the slave-for-sale advertisements found in the *Boston Gazette* from 1704-1781 in an attempt to determine, among other things, the type of skills slaves were commonly advertised to possess. He found that roughly 45% of all male and 75% of all female slaves advertised for sale in the *Boston Gazette* during this period were marketed towards farm and household labor. This is indicative of the growing demand for slave labor in communities like Billerica.

24. *Boston Gazette*, May 9, 1774; Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 14.

25. Melish, 8. Once again, the idea that the labor of slaves, alongside other servants, allowed their masters the time and means to pursue other opportunities is the key to understanding their economic impact in places like Billerica.

26. Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, ed., *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation List of 1771* (Camden, ME: Picton Press, 1998), 172-178; *Essex Journal*, June 7, 1776; *Boston Gazette*, June 4, 1787.

27. Melish, 20.

28. Lydia is referred to as the personal servant of Hannah Bowers in several publications including *Vital Records of Billerica, Massachusetts*, 208 and Crosby, *Simon Crosby the Emigrant*, 108. In his will dated 1753, William Crosby leaves his “negro man Robin” to his three sons. That this is the same slave referenced one year later in his probate inventory is uncertain, though it is likely. For more see Probate Record Number 2289 and 5383, Middlesex County Probate Records, Massachusetts Archives. Also see Hazen, “Genealogical Register,” 127.

29. On the formation of English and American racial identity see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro: 1550-1812* (Williamsburg, VA: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). In it the author argues that blackness carried connotations of evil in Elizabethan England (and perhaps long before) that were eventually associated with, among other things, skin color. Also, there was a tendency for some early historians to write off the existence of slavery in parts of colonial New England, certainly in Massachusetts, based on the family-centered values of its Puritan inhabitants; however, slavery was legalized in Massachusetts as early as 1641. The Massachusetts Body of Liberties of 1641 limits slavery to “lawful captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly selle themselves or are

sold to us.” Quoted in Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts*, 12. This is quoted in Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), 4.

30. Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 1-8, 24-29. The praying Indian village of Wamesit was located within the boundaries of both Billerica and Chelmsford until its desertion during King Phillip’s War. Though Hazen paints a generally rosy picture of colonist-Indian relations in Billerica, it is a fact that Billerica was attacked during King Phillip’s War.

31. *Vital Records of Billerica*, 211, 405; *Vital Records of Tewksbury Massachusetts to the End of the Year 1849*, 94, 245; Goss, *The History of Melrose*, 457.

32. Rather than being revolted by slavery, Cotton Mather argued for owners to Christianize their slaves in order to, on the one hand, fulfill the Puritan mission of bringing religiously erring persons into the fold of their brand of Protestantism, while also making them grateful, and thus, more effective servants through religious conversion. For more see Mather, *The Negro Christianized*. Interestingly, Billerica selectmen passed a law as early as 1674 stating that all “parents and masters shall send such their children and servants to ye Reverend Mr. Samuel Whiting” for religious instruction. *Records of Billerica, Massachusetts, From 9:9 mo., 1658 to 1676*. (Billerica, Mass.: Town of Billerica, 1658-1676), 41.

33. On the formation and expansion of a notion of racial superiority over Indians as well as Africans by early New Englanders in the wake of King Phillip’s War see Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Phillips War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998). For a recent study on the ways in which New England Puritans interpreted and used religion to help construct the racial identities and hierarchy that Lepore discusses see Richard A. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Melish notes that not all persons of color were seen as destined for slavery by white New Englanders. After all, there were a number of free and indentured (but not enslaved) Africans in the region during the colonial period. She argues, however, that white colonists used terms like “negro” and “black” to denote the “enslaveability” of these individuals based on environmental and racial traits, something that could rarely if ever be extended to whites. For more see Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 37-41.

34. Lemire, *Black Walden*, 17-18, 187; Eleanor Davis Crosby, *Simon Crosby the Emigrant: His English Ancestry, and some of his American Descendants* (Boston: Geo. H. Ellis Co.), 48-49, 62-71.

35. Hazen, *Genealogical Register*, 88-89, 155-156. Job Lane apparently inherited a large estate in England as a result of his second marriage. For more see Lane Family Papers, Bedford Historical Society.

36. Hazen, *Genealogical Register*, 12, 14, 41, 98, 144; Probate Record Number 2289, Middlesex County Probate Records, Massachusetts Archives. The probate inventory of Jonathan Bowers mentions Lydia and “one negro man already disposed of by the heirs.”

37. Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 14, 27; Pruitt, *Tax Valuation List*, 173; *Vital Record of Billerica*, 211; Daniel Appleton White and Annie Frances Richards, *The Descendants of William White, of Haverhill, Mass* (1889), 14.

38. Edward W. Pride, *Tewksbury, A Short History* (Cambridge Mass.: Riverside Press, 1888), 14, 61-62; Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 217-225 and *Genealogical Register*, 124-125. According to the genealogical information provided by Hazen, Timothy Rogers is most likely the brother of Zebediah Rogers. It is possible, though unlikely due to birth dates, that he could also be the nephew of Zebediah. For the sake of my argument, either one illustrates a similar extension and connection of slave holding families throughout the region. See also *Vital Records of Tewksbury*, 94, 245-246.

39. George Allen Ramsdell and William P. Colburn, *The History of Milford* (Concord, N.H.: The Rumford Press, 1901.); George B. Spaulding, *Historical Discourse Delivered on the Piscataqua Association of Ministers, At the North Church, Portsmouth, N. H., October 26, 1881* (Dover N.H.: Morning Star Job Printing Office, 1882), 53.

40. We can be sure that John Carleton's brother Thomas owned a slave in Bradford, Massachusetts. John was also the descendent of a wealthy family in England as well. For more see *Vital Records of Bradford, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849*, (Topsfield, Mass.: Topsfield Historical Society), 127; Henry Sweetser Burrage and Albert Roscoe Stubbs, *Genealogical and Family History of the State of Maine, Volume 4*, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1909), 1877; Bruce H. Harrison, *The Family Forest: Descendents of Lady Joan Beaufort* (Kamuela, Hawaii: 2005), 1039.

41. *Vital Records of Billerica*, 208, 316, 336. Originally Lydia York, she apparently married Saul Sumsett in 1777, thus receiving this last name. Lydia Somerset married Amos Fortune one year later. It is also possible that this individual could be the daughter of Lydia York, also named Lydia, born in 1754. Amos Fortune was born in 1710, while the first Lydia York of Billerica was born in 1730, increasing the likelihood that it was these two individuals who married in 1778. For more see Peter Lamber, *Amos Fortune: The Man and His Legacy* (New Hampshire: Amos Fortune Forum, 2000). In another example, the freedom of Flora, a slave owned by John and Ester Nickles, was paid for by Penelope Vassall of Cambridge, whose slave Tony was apparently her father. Samuel Adams Drake, *The History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat Publishers, 1880), 263.

42. *Vital Records of Billerica*, 208. There is only one family with the last name York mentioned in both the vital records and Hazen's town history. Lydia was the daughter of Pompey and Dillo (most likely slaves themselves) and gave birth to at least three children that we know of: Nelly in 1752, Lydia in 1754, and Anne in 1756. She also had a brother, Samson, born in 1732 and a sister, Eunice, in 1734. Why these births do not appear in the section of the records for "negroes" is curious.

43. According to the records, Jenny gave birth to Lois in 1749 and Nimri in 1751. Phebe gave birth to Dinah in 1753. *Vital Records of Billerica*, 211; Anna Bowers Muzzey, *Reminiscences and Memorials of Men of the Revolution and Their Families*, (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1883), 292.

44. See Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 170-171; Brown, *History of the Town of Bedford*, 32; Pride, *Tewksbury, A Short History*, 62.
45. *Records of Billerica, Massachusetts, Volume 2. From 1685 to 1726* (Billerica, Mass.: Town of Billerica, 1685-1726), 130; Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 171.
46. Lemire, *Black Walden*, 49.
47. *Ibid.*, 17-21; Lemire, *Black Walden*, 187.
48. Part of the drive for land and titles among New Englanders was tied into the refinement and consumer revolutions taking place in the region during the eighteenth century. For more see Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, and Brown, *Knowledge is Power*. Furthermore, Brendan McConville argues that these attempts by individuals and families to consolidate power and prestige in Colonial America during the eighteenth century were born from a devotion to British royalism, empire, and social hierarchy. For more see Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
49. On the naming of slaves see Lemire, *Black Walden*, 27. On the popularity and importance of classic literature in eighteenth-century New England see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1967; *Vital Records of Billerica*, 211.
50. Main, *Society and Economy*, 130.
51. Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 305-306. The selectmen who we know owned at least one slave were Jonathan Danforth, Simon Crosby, Job Lane, John Lane, Benjamin Tompson, Jonathan Bowers, Thomas Kidder, Jacob Walker, William Tompson, and Josiah Bowers. As mentioned before, there is a relatively high probability that this list under-represents the actual numbers. For instance, Edward Farmer was a town selectman in 1703, 1706, and 1707. He also died in 1727. Interestingly, there is mention of his son Thomas selling an enslaved boy named Mingo one year after his father's death in 1728. Though admittedly speculative, there is at least the possibility that this boy was left to Thomas at the elder Farmer's death. For more see *Ibid.*, 49. Also see Fredrick William Coburn, *The History of Lowell and its People* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1902), 61-62.
52. Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 304-305. When compared against the list of selectmen, the representatives of Billerica to the general court seem to be made up exclusively of the town's top families in terms of social and political influence. As mentioned in section three, several parents and grandparents of slave owners appear on this list as well, including: Joseph Tompson, John Blanchard, and Joseph Walker. It has been my argument all along that the slave owning offspring of these parents utilized their family's influence in a time and place where slavery was becoming a popular method of providing much needed labor, as well as other boosts to social standing.
53. *Essex Journal*, June 7, 1776; *Boston Gazette*, June 4, 1787.
54. *New York Journal*. December 14, 1769; Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 233; Crosby, *Simon Crosby the Emigrant*, 104-105.
55. Hazen, *Genealogical Register*, 24, 127, 155. For instance, John Chandler's brother James was the minister in Rowley, Massachusetts, where he owned multiple slaves.

He also had another brother named Timothy who owned slaves in Andover. For more see *Vital Records of Rowley, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849* (Rowley, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1928), 237. Also see George Chandler, *The Descendants of William and Annis Chandler Who Settle in Roxbury, Mass. 1637* (Worcester, Mass.: Press of Charles Hamilton) 51-52.

56. Hazen, *History of Billerica*, 175-177. As of 1712 there were apparently ten pews in the existing meetinghouse. Of the owners, we know that Samuel Whiting, Simon Crosby, and Samuel Ruggles (at the time assisting the minister) each owned slaves at one time. Job Lane Jr., Nathaniel Paige Jr., and Joseph Crosby were the sons or grandsons of slave owners, while Samuel Hunt and Joseph Tompson were the parent and/or grandparent of slave owners. For the second meetinghouse, Jonathan Bowers, William Crosby, Benjamin Tompson, and Jacob Walker all owned slaves at some point. Furthermore, Simon Crosby (probably Jr.), William Stickney, John Stearns, and Oliver Farmer were each closely related to a slave owner.

57. Crosby, *Simon Crosby the Emigrant*, 92-120; Probate Record Number 5383 and 5386, Middlesex County Probate Records, Massachusetts Archives. As mentioned before, the will of William Crosby makes reference to two slaves: Jenny and Robin. The *Vital Records of Billerica* also lists Phebe as belonging to William Crosby. Beyond this, William's probate inventory reflects his status as a large land owner, as there are seventeen separate entries for real-estate totaling over £8,000.

58. Hazen, *Genealogical Register*, 27-30; "Govenors of Maine, 1820-," Maine State Law and Legislative Reference Library, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://www.maine.gov/legis/lawlib/govs.htm>.

59. The Job Lane House is located in present-day Bedford; however, it was constructed in 1713, prior to Bedford breaking away from Billerica.

60. Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 51-60. Perhaps one of the most famous cases of an African petitioning for their freedom is that of Belinda, the former slave of Isaac Royal Jr., in 1783. For more see Mangold, *Ten Hills Farm*, 234-236.

61. For more on the Quock Walker case see A. Leon Higinbotham, *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process, the Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 91-99; Gary Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Emily Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts," *The New England Quarterly* Vol. 75, No. 1 (Mar. 2002), 24-51. Several historians have argued that there is evidence that not all Massachusetts slaveholders were quick to comply with emancipation. On the Massachusetts census of 1790, there was a column for slaves; however, every town listed zero. Some former slaves appear on the census in the households of their former masters under "other free persons," a point discussed later in this article. In *Disowning Slavery*, Joanne Melish argues that some slave owners in MA may have either left their slaves (who they refused to free) off of the state census or moved out of state to Connecticut or Rhode Island.

62. "Middlesex County, MA 1790 U.S. Census," U.S. Census.org, Last modified 2004. <http://ftp.us-census.org/pub/usgenweb/census/ma/middlesex/1790/billerica.txt>.
63. John Farmer, *An Historical Memoir of Billerica* (Amherst N.H.: R. Boylston, 1816); Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 163-164.
64. Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Incorporation of Billerica, Massachusetts, May 29th, 1855. Billerica, Mass.: Town of Billerica, 1855; Rev. Elias Nason, Billerica, A Centennial Oration by the Rev. Elias Nason, July 4, 1876 (Lowell: Marden and Rowell, 1876), 14. The only reference to slavery made in this publication likens Samuel Whiting to William Lloyd Garrison for freeing Simon in 1693.
65. Dr. A. Warren Stearns, *Slavery in Billerica* (1957). It was impossible to locate a copy of this pamphlet for this project. Its existence is referenced in Ed Wyckoff's article "Local Blacks Have a Rich Past," *Billerica Minuteman*, February 17, 1983.