



Elizabeth Freeman, c. 1744-1829

Elizabeth Freeman, also known as Mum Bett, was the first slave in Massachusetts to file a “freedom suit” and win in court under the 1780 constitution. This watercolor on ivory was painted by Susan Ridley Sedgwick when Freeman was aged seventy, circa 1812. Susan was the wife of Theodore Sedgwick, who defended Elizabeth Freeman in court. The painting is only 7.5 x 5.5 centimeters in size. It is on display at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

Slavery in Westfield:

The Documentary Record, 1713-1790

JOSEPH CARVALHO III



Editor's Introduction: *Today, the existence and importance of slavery in colonial New England is widely recognized by scholars, although popular local histories often continue to overlook the presence of African Americans in their locales. Massachusetts was the first colony to legalize slavery and was a center for the transatlantic slave trade throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island were the three New England states with the largest slave populations. One source estimates that by the mid-1700s, there were as many as one slave for every four white families in these three states, although they were not evenly distributed. Slaves were a significant presence in Boston (10%) and New London (9%) and accounted for as much as 30% of the population in South Kingston, Rhode Island. This article seeks to tell the hitherto untold story of enslaved men and women in one town in western Massachusetts, thereby contributing to a growing literature about slavery in New England's smaller, lesser-known towns. In the colonial era, Westfield was a typical farming community located twelve miles west of Springfield, Massachusetts in the Connecticut River Valley.¹*

For nearly two hundred years, the North maintained a slave regime that was more varied than that of the South but equally profitable. Rather than using slaves primarily as agricultural labor on farms and plantations, Northern slave owners utilized their enslaved labor force to meet the needs of a more complex economy. Owned mostly by ministers, doctors, and the merchant elite, enslaved men and women in the North performed household duties along with skilled jobs. Male slaves could be found working as carpenters, shipwrights, sailmakers, printers, tailors, shoemakers, coopers, blacksmiths, bakers, and weavers, among many other trades. When a slave could perform the labor previously done by the family patriarch, this enabled the household head to develop or expand his profession, craft, or business. As a result, slave labor allowed prominent white families throughout New England to improve both their family status and income.²

Although smaller in numbers than in the South, the unpaid labor of slaves was central to New England's economic development. As one source explains: "The introduction of slave labor into the New England household economy enabled its expansion from small-time farms to large agricultural production, the expansion of local and regional markets, widespread entrepreneurial activity, and the rise of manufactories."³

Northern slavery could be as cruel as southern slavery, and children were regularly bought and sold. Moreover, given their fewer numbers in New England, enslaved African Americans were more isolated and had less of a community of their own. They were often either the only African Americans in a white household or among a very small number of slaves owned by the prominent members of their local community. Ministers, doctors, lawyers, leading businessmen, wealthy merchants, and successful farmers all purchased slaves and benefitted economically from the unpaid labor of generations of enslaved people.

*Scholarship on slavery in New England has had a renaissance in recent years. The earliest work on the subject is George H. Moore's *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (1866). The first modern study of slavery in New England, and still a standard work, is Lorenzo Johnston Greene's *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942). A small sampling of more recent scholarship includes: Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (1998); Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial New England* (2010); C. S. Manegold, *Ten Hills Farm: The Forgotten History of Slavery in the North* (2010); Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (2010); Richard Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (2011); and Christopher Cameron,*

African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement (2014).

In Massachusetts, no legislation was ever passed to abolish slavery until the state legislature ratified the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Instead, slavery was ended through legal challenges, judicial review, and case law. Rather than through the action of a benevolent state legislature, the institution was ended by way of judicial actions litigated on behalf of slaves courageously seeking their own freedom and manumission. In 1780, when the Massachusetts Constitution went into effect, slavery was legal. However, during the years 1781 to 1783, in three related cases known today as “the Quock Walker case,” the Supreme Judicial Court heard arguments contending that slavery was a violation of Christian principles and also a violation of the constitution. Westfield slaves and slave owners played key roles in two cases. One of the earliest “freedom suits” was filed by “Tony Negro” against his owner, Ezra Clapp of Westfield (Tony Negro v. Ezra Clapp). This case is discussed later in this article. Elizabeth Freeman (“Mum Bett”) filed her more well-known freedom suit against John Ashley, a member of a prominent Westfield family.

In a related case from 1781, slaveowner William Jennison was criminally indicted for beating his slave Quock Walker after Walker had tried to escape. Jennison defended himself by arguing that under the law of slavery, he had the legal right to punish his slaves as he saw fit. Chief Justice William Cushing rejected this defense and instructed the jury that Massachusetts had, in effect, abolished slavery through its 1780 constitution, which stated that “[a]ll men are born free and equal” and have certain “unalienable rights” including “defending their lives and liberties.” In its ruling, the Court took an activist stance and applied the principle of judicial review to abolish slavery. In the words of Chief Justice William Cushing: “[S]lavery is in my judgment as effectively abolished as it can be by the granting of rights and privileges [in the constitution] wholly incompatible and repugnant to its existence.”⁴

As slavery was challenged in the last decade of the eighteenth century, slaveholders sometimes resorted to using the term “indentured servant” to maintain their property, as another case from Westfield will demonstrate. However, the 1790 federal census listed no slaves. Massachusetts became a center for the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century, but African Americans continued to be held in various forms of bondage in many New England and Mid-Atlantic states into the 1820s and 1830s as a result of these states’ “gradual emancipation” laws.

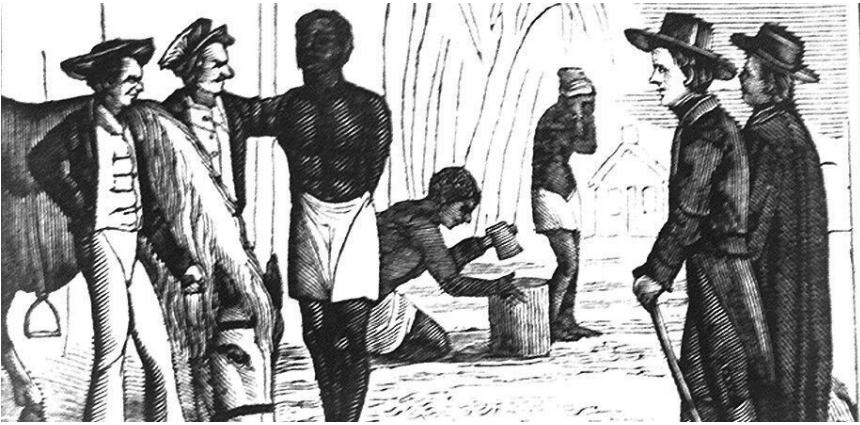
This article explores what can be gleaned of the history of slavery in Westfield and the experiences of enslaved men and women there. As in many towns, the documents are sparse; an individual’s existence often only appeared in the

*few lines of a will, deed, marriage contract, baptismal record, or bill of sale. Town monuments also failed to note their presence. Indeed, Westfield's 1976 Revolutionary War memorial failed to include the names of the many African American soldiers who fought for the nation's freedom. From these fragments, author Joseph Carvalho III has crafted an engaging portrait of slavery in one locale. Carvalho is the former president and executive director of the Springfield Museums Association, and founder of the Lyman and Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History.*⁵

Massachusetts was the first colony to legalize African slavery. In 1641, the Massachusetts General Court passed the “Body of Liberties” act, which gave slavery “the sanctity of Law.”⁶ The Pynchons, the famed founding family of Springfield, were the first to bring slaves to western Massachusetts. However, slavery was not simply a Springfield experience. Although enslaved Africans in Westfield were documented as early as 1713, they most probably existed in the community for many years prior to that date. Unfortunately, the documentary record is extremely sparse. In this article, I have worked to piece together the story of their experiences using the surviving church records, ministers’ journals, census data, and other archival and genealogical sources. The sources are limited and there are many gaps in the documentary record. As often as possible, I have purposely included the names of specific enslaved individuals and extensive genealogical background in order that their lives and contributions to the wealth and development of Westfield are not forgotten to history.

EARLIEST SURVIVING RECORDS

The total number of enslaved Africans and African Americans in eighteenth-century Westfield is impossible to determine. The 1754 Massachusetts Bay Colonial Slave Census ordered by Governor William Shirley and officially titled a “Census of Negro Slaves 16 years of age or upwards” recorded fifteen enslaved men and four women living in Westfield. In the old southern district of Hampshire County towns (which now comprise the communities of today’s Hampden County), there were only thirty-seven men and nine women listed as being held in slavery. Westfield slaves accounted for almost half of that population. It is important to note that this census did not include the many slave children under 16 years of age.⁷



Slavery in Early Massachusetts

On December 12, 1638 a ship returned to Massachusetts Bay from the West Indies carrying cotton, tobacco and the first African slaves. That same year, after the Pequot Indians lost a war with the English, they were also enslaved. However, the defiant Pequots, who knew the territory, made poor slaves. Instead, many were shipped to Bermuda in exchange for African bondsmen. Slaves brought to Massachusetts tended to be those "left over" after West Indian plantation owners had purchased the strongest for field work. In 1717 one New England trader advised his brother that, if he could not get a good price for all his slaves in the West Indies, he should "bring some home; I believe they will sell well." In 1641 the colony adopted a code of laws that made slavery legal. Almost no contemporary images exist of enslaved African Americans in the Bay Colony. This woodblock by a 19th-century artist represents a rather fanciful depiction; slaves in colonial Massachusetts were far more fully and appropriately clothed. Source: www.MassHumanities.org.

Westfield's first record of enslaved people reveals that Captain Joseph Moseley owned a number of slaves, among whom were Ishmael and Joanna. The couple had at least three children who remained slaves of Captain Moseley: Peter, born December 11, 1714; Gersham, born December 9, 1716; and Lidia, born April 28, 1720. The entire family was sold to Edward Burleson of Suffield by Moseley's executors shortly after 1720. Thirteen years later, Ishmael and Joanna succeeded in purchasing their freedom from Burleson on May 28, 1733 for the sum of 100 pounds. The manumission (emancipation or freedom) document states that, "We Peter, or Ishmael Negro and Joanna Negro, who are husband and wife, of the town of Suffield in the County of Hampshire . . . are free and [have] full power to act and do any manner preferred." The phrase "full power to act and do any manner preferred" is both deeply evocative and revealing, as it was precisely such

power that was denied to enslaved men and women. How Peter (also known as Ishmael) and Joanna amassed that sum is unclear, but it may have been incurred as a debt to be repaid in the future.⁸

Another early record is that of John, who was similarly known and designated as “John Negro.” He was owned by Reverend Edward Taylor of Westfield. In the 1720s, one of his many tasks was to “beat the drum for service” on Sundays in order to alert the congregation of pending First Congregational Church of Westfield services. He performed this role until a church bell was purchased for the church in 1728. Reverend Taylor manumitted him around that time. A free man, identified only as John, “Negro of Westfield,” was later mentioned in a deed dated December 1, 1744 as selling land described as “30 acres on a little brook westerly of the field called Hundred Acres” in Westfield. He had co-owned that land with a white neighbor, Nathaniel Ponder.⁹ Wills, deeds, and manumission documents are among the sparse records where one catches glimpses into the existence and lives of enslaved African Americans.

RECORDS FROM THE MID-1700s

By the mid-nineteenth century, a number of Westfield’s leading white families had purchased slaves. These families included the Moseleys, Taylors, Deweys, Kings, Fowlers, Gunns, Sacketts, Parks, Bancrofts, Bulls, Porters, and Ingersolls. They typically owned one to four slaves. However, the largest number of Westfield slaves were owned by the Ashley family, who owned over a dozen.¹⁰

As was common in colonial New England, these families appear to have been at least minimally concerned about religious issues regarding their slaves. For example, Reverend Nehemiah Bull personally baptized his infant slave Phillis on March 25, 1733. She had been born into slavery on November 27, 1732 in Westfield. Adijah Dewey had his slave Prince baptized at the First Church of Westfield on December 28, 1735. Similarly, David King of Westfield brought his “negro girl slave Memd’n” to the First Church of Westfield to be baptized on July 20, 1740, “he covenanting to bring her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”¹¹ The Ashleys regularly had their infant and child slaves baptized at the First Church.¹² For example, the records reveal the following: Jenny, slave of John Ashley, baptized September 27, 1741; Benhadad, baptized 1749 and Felix, baptized 1755, slaves of Rebecca Ashley; and a number baptized by Reverend John Ballantine including Plato, 1731; Floro, 1733; Jabiesh, 1735; Benhadad, 1749; Zilpah, 1753; Phelix, 1755; Tiny, 1775; and Patty, 1777, all slaves of Thomas Ashley of Westfield.¹³

Adult slaves were also baptized by their slave owners. For example, Ensign John Gunn's slave Coffee was baptized as an adult on May 26, 1728 at the First Church of Westfield. Captain John and Elizabeth Gunn's slave Ginney was baptized as a young woman in 1733; Peggy, owned by Elizabeth Noble, was baptized in 1739; and Silbo, owned by Ebenezer Ashley, was baptized in 1741. London, the slave of Quartermaster John Mosely, "ye adult Negro," was baptized July 10, 1742. He was admitted to full communion at the First Church of Westfield on October 3, 1742.¹⁴

Some slave owners allowed their slaves to formally marry, but the children of married slaves were still the property of the slave owners. Peter and Millie were married on April 26, 1721 in perhaps the first official slave marriage in Westfield. Dr. Ashley's slaves Peter and Rose were allowed to marry on May 26, 1748 in Westfield. John Ingersoll of Westfield allowed his slaves Prince and Mol (also known as Tony) to marry on December 22, 1763.¹⁵ Reverend John Ballantine presided over the marriage of Captain Bancroft's slaves Nero and Chloe on March 24, 1763 in Westfield. However, their "wedded bliss" didn't last long as Nero died tragically on December 10, 1764, three months shy of their two-year anniversary.¹⁶

Sometimes Christian funerals of deceased slaves were recorded in Westfield. Slingo, "Mr. Bancroft's negro," died on May 20, 1758, and Reverend John Ballantine presided over his funeral on the following day.¹⁷ On July 15, 1759, Reverend Ballantine "attended funeral of a negro man belonging to Lieut. Moses Dewey." Reverend Ballantine also presided over many other funerals for enslaved African Americans in Westfield. For example, his journal (now held at the Westfield Athenaeum) included the following: "Doct. Ashley's Negro boy" on Mar. 25, 1743; "a negro servant of Lt. David Moseley" on February 7, 1750; David Moseley, Jr.'s slave Boston, who died in 1766 at the age of 14 while "taking off a yoke of Cattle from a cart, ye Cattle run, he fell, ye cart went over him and he expired in a few minutes"; "Submit, a seven-year-old slave boy owned by Dr. Ashley who died on January 4, 1756; Tom, the slave of Samuel Kellogg who died in November of 1760; and an unnamed "negro child of Capt. John Moseley" whose funeral was held on April 6, 1771.¹⁸ Some enslaved people were genuinely mourned by their masters. Eleven-year-old Ceasar, owned by William Sackett, died of "Consumption and dropsy" on January 26, 1759 in Westfield. Reverend Ballantine recorded in his journal that "The lad was dear to this family. They would give much that his life might be spared."¹⁹

All of this underlies the basic fact that after all was said and done, slaves were property and were treated as such. In 1741, Reverend Nehemiah Bull's slave girl Phillis, then nine years old, was listed as property valued at 65

pounds in his probate inventory in 1741 and passed along to his heirs.²⁰ Elizabeth Gunn's slaves had been given to her in her husband's will. Upon her death in 1761, she did not immediately manumit them but rather left their "disposition" to her executors. However, Gunn was concerned about the education of her youngest slaves, which was unusual at that time. She wrote in her will that twelve-year old Seba, described as the "male slave of widow Gunn":

shall be put out to a trade after my decease and be taught to read and write well. To be left discretionary with my executors where they shall think best and then to have his time (manumission).²¹

Similarly, Gunn's slave Chloe, valued at 100 pounds, was given to Dr. Samuel Mather of Westfield "until she arrives at the age of 25 years and then to have her freedom." Elizabeth Gunn's nine-year-old slave Titus was given to Captain John Moseley to own "until he arrives at fourteen years of age and then to be put out at a trade and to be taught to read and write, to be discretionary with my executors where they think best, and then to have his time (manumission)."²² Upon obtaining his freedom, Titus adopted the surname Vespatus and lived the rest of his years in Westfield, marrying Sally Taylor of Williamsburg in 1782.

A few other manumissions occurred during the mid-eighteenth century. David Moseley manumitted his slave Pompey in the early 1750s. Pompey joined a group of white "Separates" who founded a new Baptist congregation in what is today Southwick and co-signed a deed with them dated January 29, 1754:

Jedidiah Dewey, John Noble, George Granger, Ebenezer Bush, Abel Mosely, Isreal Dewey, Moses Kellogg, Pomp Negro, and Nathaniel Coffins who being Incorporated into a Body whom I (Jonathan Fowler) look up and received to be a Church of Christ according to the Gospel . . . (to be) granted land.²³

Once freed, Pompey married Phebe, also a former slave, on May 11, 1760 in Westfield.²⁴ Likewise, William (born circa 1710; also known as Will), formerly owned by Daniel Bagg of Westfield, was manumitted circa 1750 by Bagg. William was listed as a "husbandman of Westfield" in contemporary deeds recording the purchasing land in Westfield.²⁵ After gaining his own freedom, he was able to purchase the freedom of Flora, another slave. They married on Feb. 28, 1760 in Westfield. Will later sold land in Westfield,

Westfield Nov: 7. 1761.

Rec'd of Col: Wm Williams of Pittsfield Fifty pounds in full for a Negro Girl Called Pendar, which I vouch to him & his against the claims & Demands of all persons whatsoever, in behalf of my Husband Wm Day - as Witness my Hand -

Signed by Eunice Day

Slave Bill of Sale, Westfield, November 7, 1761

Document reads: "Rec'd of Col. Wm. Williams of Pittsfield fifty pounds in full for a Negro Girl called Pendar, which I vouch to him & his against the claims & demands of all persons whatsoever, in behalf of my husband Wm. Day - as witness my hand— Signed by Eunice Day." A few years later Col. Williams sold Pendar for 75 pounds. Source: Westfield Athenaeum.

referred to as "Baggsfield," to Bildad Fowler on July 1, 1765. Years later, he sold land in Westfield to John Dewey on April 17, 1789—a year before his death at the age of 80 on May 21, 1790 in Westfield.²⁶

LIFE FOR THE ENSLAVED

African American slaves were assigned a wide range of tasks by their owners. Farm work and tending and harvesting crops were tasks even slave children were required to do. The tasks typically required of male slaves included building stone walls, chopping wood, clearing brush, tending farm animals, and driving teams of oxen. Slave women were also required to work the farm fields and orchards in addition to preparing meals, performing household tasks, spinning flax and wool for making homespun clothing, as well as other tasks such as tending to the household's poultry. If of child-bearing age, an enslaved woman was to bear children to add to the slave owner's human property. African and African American slaves lived lives of hard work and faced many inhumanities, including having no freedom of

choice, being punished without due process, and having children regularly separated from their mothers and given or sold to other slave masters.

Colonial records for many towns in western Massachusetts demonstrate the harsh and inhumane treatment of African slaves. The following examples from Westfield can only give a small glimpse of the cruel practices. John Moseley's slave, London, attempted to escape from slavery on at least two occasions; each time he was apprehended and "publicly admonished." After Moseley died, London was sold to "Ensign Noble" of Westfield. London survived his slave experience and later, as a free man, adopted the surname Wallace. The hard life of the slave Primus, owned by the Gunn Family, is another example of the cruelties of slavery. Primus, or "Primey," the slave of Ensign John Gunn, was baptized at age seven at the First Church on May 26, 1728. Primus was listed in Gunn's will dated March 12, 1748, which stated: "It is my will that in case my Negro man named Primus do not behave himself well and orderly during my wives life she is hereby empowered to sell said Negro and convert the money to her own use and benefit." In Gunn's inventory, Primus was valued at 350 pounds.²⁷ Primus never saw freedom. He served Gunn's wife, Elizabeth, faithfully for the next thirteen years and died on June 16, 1761 at age 40 in Westfield.²⁸

Although Primus was never married, he had a child by a white woman, Agnes (Knox) Brown, who was subsequently divorced by her husband, Nicolas Brown. Agnes gave birth to Primus' child on May 10, 1750 in Westfield. She initially named the boy Billie, but he was taken from her custody and placed under the care of Benoni Sackett of Westfield, who then named him George. Sackett had the child baptized at the First Church in Westfield on September 23, 1750. Primus confessed to being the father and was "forgiven" before the church assembly in September 1750.²⁹

1750s FRENCH & INDIAN WAR

In 1754, on the eve of the French and Indian War, the Massachusetts Bay Colonial Census recorded fifteen adult men and women living in the town as slaves.³⁰ Enslaved African American were drawn into the conflicts of the English settlers and the French colonists and their Native American allies during the eighteenth century. For example, Mingo, referred to as "Negro" of Westfield, served as a Private in Elisha Noble's company of the Hampshire militia from September 15 to December 5, 1755.³¹ He was one of the Massachusetts colonial infantry members sent by Massachusetts Governor William Shirley as part of the British expedition to attack the French stronghold at Fort Saint-Frédéric/Crown Point on the west shore

of Lake Champlain. However, Mingo's military service did not earn him manumission from slavery, and he was subsequently sold to Timothy Bliss of Springfield. Valued at 55 pounds, Mingo appears in the probate records of Bliss' estate among other possessions dated May 1, 1770. He died two years later in 1772.³² Similarly, Ceasar "Negro" (born a slave in Westfield in 1725) served as a private in Captain John Moseley's Westfield militia company of Colonel Dwight's regiment stationed at Fort Edward during the war.³³

In 1767, Westfield's Reverend John Ballentine witnessed an attempt to sell a slave who successfully protested the proposed transaction. Sylva had escaped from her owner, Reverend Ebenezer Gay of Suffield. On November 8, 1763, she sought refuge with Reverend Ballantine's family in Westfield. In order to cut his losses, Reverend Gay negotiated with Elnathan Bush of Sheffield, Massachusetts to sell Sylva to him. Reverend Ballantine wrote:

Mr. Elnathan Bush of Sheffield here to talk about buying Sylva.
Mr. Bush went to Suffield and agreed with [Rev. Gay] but Sylva is
so averse and takes on so bitterly, the bargain is given up.

Reverend Gay made one more unsuccessful attempt to recapture Sylva and bring her back to Suffield on December 23, 1767.

At that time, Gay belonged to a long list of his fellow ministers in the Pioneer Valley who owned slaves: Reverends Robert Breck and Daniel Brewer of Springfield; Reverend James Brigham of Brimfield; Reverend Nehemiah Bull of Westfield; Reverend Jedidiah Smith of Granville; Reverend Samuel Hopkins of West Springfield; Reverend Noah Merrick of Wilbraham; and Reverend Stephen Williams of Longmeadow. In Suffield, which eventually was ceded to Connecticut but was still economically and socially closely connected to the southern Hampshire County townships, Reverends Ebenezer Gay and Ebenezer Devotion both owned slaves as well.³⁴ In his journal, Westfield's Reverend Ballantine cautioned in 1763 that "Masters of Negroes ought to be men of great humanity. They have an arbitrary power, may correct them at pleasure, may separate them from their children, and may send them out of the Country."³⁵

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Some African American slaves were granted their freedom in exchange for their military service during the Revolution. This included "Thomas" and "Frank," who both served three-year terms of service in order to fulfill the community's quota of men serving in the Continental Army. Brigadier General Wareham Parks of Westfield brought his personal slave, Ishmael

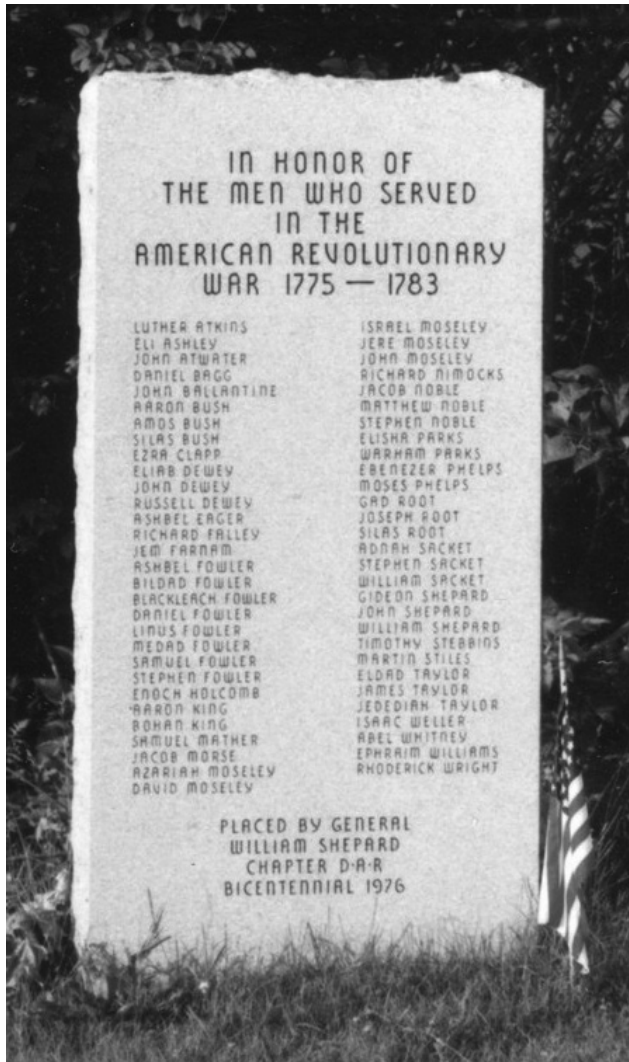
“Peter,” with him while on military service. Ishmael was born into slavery in Westfield on October 7, 1761, the son of Occara and Present, who were slaves in Westfield.³⁶ He was sold to Wareham Parks. Ishmael survived his service to General Parks and the patriot forces and lived out his years in Westfield, dying on November 9, 1786.³⁷

After the victory at Saratoga in 1777, the American forces paraded a number of prisoners through western Massachusetts, passing through Westfield along the way. Baroness Frederika Charlotte von Riedesel was among the captured German contingent. She wrote this revealing account in one of her letters:

Negroes are to be found on most of the farms west of Springfield. The black farmer lives in a little outhouse. . . . The young ones are well fed, especially while they are still calves The Negro is to be looked upon as the servant of a peasant; the Negress does all the coarse housework and the black children wait on the white children. The Negro can take the field in place of his master, and so you do not see a regiment in which there is not a large number of blacks. . . . There are also many families of free blacks who occupy good houses and have means and live entirely in the style of the other inhabitants.³⁸

The famed 4th Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Line was commanded by Westfield’s General William Shepard (who served at the rank of Colonel in the Continental Army). He had a large number of African American troops in his regiment during the American Revolution. Among those who served were: Abraham Babcock of Elnathan Haskell’s Company; Francis Cisco of Captain Leonard’s Company; Fleet/Fleetus Hull of Captain John Wright’s Light Infantry Company; Primus Jackall of Captain Nathaniel C. Allen’s Company; and Abijah White of Captain Caleb Keep’s Company.³⁹ Gillam (Gilham) Ashley of Westfield, formerly owned by the Ashley family, was listed among men from Hampshire County serving in the militia for nine months beginning July 17, 1778. He later enlisted in the Continental Army on February 3, 1779 and served until February 1782. On a muster roll dated February 23, 1780, he was listed as being nineteen years old.⁴⁰

No summer soldiers, these men saw arduous service under Colonel Shepard during the war. Francis Cisco fought in the “Second Battle of Saratoga,” or the Battle of Bemis Heights, on October 17, 1777 and wintered at Valley Forge with his Regiment. Born around 1755, Fleet/Fleetus Hull enlisted in William Shepard’s 4th Massachusetts Regiment on September 1,



Memorial for Westfield Soldiers

During the 1976 bicentennial year, the William Shepard Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a monument at the entrance to Westfield's historic Mechanic Street Cemetery. It appears to list the names of all those from Westfield who participated in the Revolutionary War. However, the town's African American soldiers were not included. Abijah White, Primas Jackall, Francis Cisco, Fleet/Fleetus Hull, Gillam/Gilham Ashley, and Abraham Babcock all served under Westfield officers. They were either from Westfield or were credited to Westfield to meet its troop quota. Other African Americans also served.

Military File for Fleet Hull, served 1777-82

1777 and remained for three years. He served in numerous companies within that regiment during that time. Re-enlisting subsequent to September 30, 1779, Fleetus was last listed on a muster roll in February of 1782, dated at "York Hutts." During his term of service, his units traveled to Providence in 1778-79, where he was transferred to Captain John Wright's Light Infantry Company, of Colonel Shepard's 4th Regiment Massachusetts. He also appeared on muster rolls dated at North Kingston, Bud's Highlands, West Point, Dobb's Ferry, Windsor, and York Hutts. After the War, Hull was issued a land warrant of 100 acres by the War Department on January 28, 1790. Unfortunately, the record does not show where the grant was located.⁴¹ Abijah White served as early as July 1, 1777 as a "servant" to Captain Caleb Keep. He was soon afterwards elevated to "private" in Captain Keep's Company of Shepard's 4th Massachusetts Regiment. White was wounded in the fighting at Saratoga and was with his regiment at Valley Forge, where he recuperated during the bitter winter of 1777-1778.⁴²

POST-INDEPENDENCE EMANCIPATION

As we have seen, Westfield Church records, minister's records, town vital records, probate records, and deed transactions reveal the longstanding practice of slaveholding in Westfield up to the Revolution and the enactment of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. The new state constitution did not mention the word slavery nor did it recognize the institution, but this was not immediately understood by most Massachusetts slaveholders, including Westfield's Ezra Clapp.⁴³ One of the earliest "freedom suits," begun after the enactment of the 1780 State Constitution, was filed in court by Tony, a 59-year-old former slave living in Westfield, against his owner, Ezra Clapp of Westfield (*Tony Negro v. Ezra Clapp*). In 1781, Ezra Clapp had tried to re-enslave Tony. Tony then sued Clapp for "unlawful imprisonment" in the Hampshire County Inferior Court of Commons Pleas in Northampton. Tony won his case, and Clapp was required to pay him two pounds (the court was still using British monetary units).⁴⁴ This was only one month after the celebrated "Mum Bett" (Elizabeth Freeman) freedom case of *Brom and Bett v. John Ashley Esq.* was heard at the Inferior Court of Common Pleas in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.⁴⁵ Tony lived out the remainder of his life in freedom, dying a free man in Westfield on May 5, 1802 at the age of eighty.⁴⁶ In this case, a Westfield slave successfully challenged his owner; his case reverberated across the Commonwealth and helped make judicial history.

With their newfound freedom, former slaves were finally able to marry partners of their own choosing. Former slaves from Westfield, Pomp Cuff and Phebe Hadad were married by the minister of the First Church of Westfield on August 2, 1782.⁴⁷ African Americans freed from the strictures of the slave system were also free to marry someone outside of their own closed community where formerly slave owners had to approve liaisons and sometimes slave marriages. Now free to choose his own wife, Revolutionary War veteran Primus Hill of Westfield fell in love with Elizabeth Dundow of distant Sandisfield.⁴⁸ They registered their intentions to marry in Westfield on December 23, 1781—shortly after the conclusion of the *Tony Negro v. Ezra Clapp* case in September. Similarly, at the age of thirty-six, another former slave, Susannah Brown of Westfield, was finally free to marry her betrothed, the recently-freed Freeman Hills of Windsor, Connecticut in Westfield in 1785. Sadly, Susannah had only six years to enjoy her freedom and marriage; she passed away in Westfield in 1791 the age of 42.⁴⁹

Once freed, almost all former slaves were simply left to their own devices. The younger and healthier sought work as day laborers, seasonal farm workers, or “squatters” eking out a living fishing, hunting, and hand-crafting items to sell in much the same fashion as local Native Americans after King Philip’s War in the seventeenth century. In fact, some former slaves were welcomed among the Congamucks, a mixed-race community living along the shores of the Congamond Lakes in Southwick. Other former slaves simply stayed with their former owners as day laborers until they were too old to work and then became “town charges” as paupers.⁵⁰ Former Westfield slave Cato Williams, born circa 1744, lived to be freed in the 1780s but lived a life as “a transient black” as recorded in the town records. He remained indigent and poverty-stricken when he died in Westfield at the age of 84 on January 16, 1828.⁵¹ Some slaves did not live long enough to become paupers and died shortly after being freed; for example, Maie was born a slave in 1765 and only lived a few years as a free woman before dying at the age of 23 on September 17, 1788 in Westfield.⁵²

Many were simply propertyless and often incurred unpayable debts. Jockton, a French and Indian War veteran (formerly owned by Sergeant Luther Fowler of Westfield), was sued by Phineas Perkins of Southwick for nonpayment of a debt. Perkins was awarded two pounds ten shillings’ worth of corn and wheat by the subsequent court ruling on July 14, 1782 in the case of *Phineas Perkins vs. Jock Negro*.⁵³ Years before, in 1768, Jockton had already run afoul of his white owners when he was “whipt 29 lashes for severely abusing Captain Mosely.”⁵⁴ Prince, previously owned by John Ingersoll of Westfield, moved to Southwick to begin his life in freedom with his wife



The Colonel John Ashley House Museum, Sheffield

The Ashley House tells the intertwined stories of the Ashleys and the enslaved African Americans who lived there in the 18th century. Colonel John Ashley built the house in 1735 after moving to the area from Westfield. He spent the next decades accumulating wealth and land. By the time of his death in 1802, Ashley owned more than 3,000 acres. He supported the American Revolution, heading a committee that wrote the fiery “Sheffield Resolves,” a petition against British tyranny and manifesto for individual rights, in 1773. Despite this, he was a slaveholder. His financial success was based in part on the labor of five enslaved African Americans. Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett), was inspired by the Revolutionary-era rhetoric she heard around her as well as her own desire for freedom. In 1781, she sued Colonel Ashley for her freedom and won. Her victory laid the groundwork for the emancipation of enslaved people across the Commonwealth. The house is managed by the Trustees of the Reservation. The grounds and walking trails are open year-round; the house is open for tours in the summer.

Mol. Similar to many former slaves with little savings or “equity,” he soon found himself in arrears to the tax collector of the town and was listed as a delinquent taxpayer for the town of Southwick on September 3, 1780, owing three pounds, one shilling, and seven pence.⁵⁵

This poverty was often visited upon the next generation of African Americans who were the children of these impoverished former slaves. Lucy,

daughter of Plato and Flora—slaves of John Bancroft of Westfield—married William Hector Goman in Lanesboro in June of 1804. Lucy had lived in Westfield with her parents until 1803. Lucy and Hector did not fare well economically in Lanesboro and by 1819 were listed as paupers. The town of Lanesboro objected to having to assume the entire cost of their care and sued the town of Westfield in the Supreme Judicial Court of Berkshire County.⁵⁶

Some more fortunate freed slaves carved out a life for themselves and their families in the community they had once served as slaves. Occara, previously owned by William Sackett of Westfield, was seventy-five years old when he was freed. Years before, his owner had allowed Occara to officially marry his wife, Present, with the blessing of the local minister on March 8, 1753 in Westfield. While owned by Sackett, Occara and Present had had several children: Agnis, born on March 30, 1755; Thamar, born in August of 1756; Peter, born on December 25, 1758; and Ishmael (who was later sold to General Wareham Parks), born on October 17, 1761. Freed in the 1780s, Occara and his family set up their own household in Southwick and were listed in the U.S. Census for Southwick in 1790 and for Westfield in 1800. They lived in the vicinity of fellow former Westfield slaves Benhadad Buck and his family, Adam and his wife Flora, Brister and family, and Titus Vespatus and his family. Occara died on January 15, 1806 at the age of ninety, while Present lived to be ninety-one (she died on April 30, 1814 in Westfield).⁵⁷

The African American Newberry family of Westfield was one of the more successful families. They eventually owned their own farms and were able to venture into non-agricultural trades.⁵⁸ The descendants of these Westfield African Americans eventually blended into the network of African American families living and farming on both sides of the Connecticut River, in the neighboring towns of northwestern Connecticut and in the neighboring Berkshire Hills.⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

In the earliest decades of the nineteenth century, African Americans were often hired by white farmers in Hampden County as day laborers. Those black families who were fortunate enough to own substantial farm lots became independent yeoman farmers. From 1810 to 1840, Westfield African American yeoman farmers developed connections with other black families living within two discernable regional groups of adjacent farming communities: 1) Blandford, Granville, Tolland, and Chester, Massachusetts, extending over the state border to Granby, Barkhamsted, and Hartland, Connecticut; and 2) West Springfield (including the parts of the town known

as Agawam, Feeding Hills, and Ireland Parish/Holyoke), and Southwick, Massachusetts and, across the state border, Enfield, Windsor Locks, and Windsor, Connecticut. The civil and church records of these towns document the extensive intermarrying of the black farming families who lived within these two groups of towns.⁶⁰

Over time, these family connections became very strong indeed. During the 1840s through the 1860s, the African American farming families from the west side of the Connecticut River began to intermarry with farming families from the east side of the river. These were the families with the oldest Massachusetts and New England roots. This ultimately created a strong support system and sense of extended family within this important group of “black Yankees.” They formed an informal subculture of “old line” New England black families with its own self-image and identity. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, author of *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and into Legend*, referred to this “Negro Network” as a “set of contacts and close relationships with other black people . . . who had found a way to establish position and property for themselves in western Massachusetts.”⁶¹

HJM

Notes

1. For other local studies, see Robert H. Romer, *Slavery in the Connecticut Valley of Massachusetts* (Florence, MA: Leveller's Press, 2009); Christopher M. Spraker, “The Lost History of Slaves and Slave Owners in Billerica, Massachusetts, 1655-1790,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 42, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 108-41; and Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).
2. For more on how the North benefitted from slavery, see Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank, *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* (NY: Ballantine Books, 2005).
3. Medford Historical Society website www.medfordhistorical.org/medford-history/africa-to-medford/slaves-in-new-england/ (accessed 1-22-19).
4. Quoted in John D. Cushing, “The Cushing Court and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts: More Notes on the Quock Walker Case,” *American Journal of Legal History* 5, no. 2 (1961): 119. See also Arthur Zilversmit, “Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1968): 614-624.

5. Other studies of slavery in New England include: William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Robert K. Fitts, *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise: Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth-Century Narragansett, Rhode Island* (New York: Garland, 1998); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Allegra di Bonaventura, *For Adam's Sake: A Family Saga in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 2013); and Wendy Anne Warren, "Enslaved Africans in New England, 1638-1700" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2008).
6. Edwin Powers, *Crime and Punishment in Early Massachusetts, 1620-1692: A Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 93-4 and Imani Kazini, "Black Springfield: A Historical Study," *Contributions in Black Studies* 1 (1977): 1-14.
7. "Census of Negro Slaves of 16 years of age or upwards . . . in Massachusetts, 1754," microfiche, Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts.
8. Book F, p. 390, May 28, 1733, Hampden County Registry of Deeds, Springfield District Courthouse, Springfield, MA (hereafter referred to as HCRD); see also Joseph Carvalho III, *Black Families in Hampden County, Massachusetts, 1650-1865*, second edition (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2011), 316-321. Note that the odd phrasing "We Peter, or Ishmael Negro and Joanna Negro, who are husband and wife" hints that "Ishmael" may have preferred the name "Peter" and was hereby implicitly claiming his right to a name of his own choosing and preference.
9. Book 4, p. 84, December 1, 1744, HCRD; Clifton Johnson, *Hampden County, 1636-1936*, Vol. 2 (Hampden, MA: American Historical Society, Inc., 1936), 741.
10. Carvalho, 270-295.
11. Baptisms, 1733, 1735, and 1740, Records of the First Church of Westfield (hereafter referred to as FCW), microfiche, Archives, Westfield Athenaeum, Westfield, MA.
12. See "Westfield Family Histories," p. 59, Archives, Westfield Athenaeum, Westfield, MA; see also Journal of Reverend John Ballantine, 1732, 1733, 1735, and 1740, Archives, Westfield Athenaeum.
13. "Westfield Family Histories," p. 59; Journal of Reverend John Ballantine, 1732, 1733, 1735, 1740.
14. Baptisms, 1728, 1733, 1739, 1741, and 1742, FCW.
15. Marriages, 1721, Westfield Town Vital Records (hereafter referred to as WTVR), microfilm, Westfield Athenaeum; Marriages, 1748, 1763, FCW.
16. Journal of Reverend John Ballantine, 1763 and 1764.
17. Ibid., May 21, 1758.
18. Ibid., July 15, 1759; March 25, 1743; February 6, 1750; 1766; January 4, 1756; November, 1760; April 6, 1771.
19. Ibid., January 26, 1759.

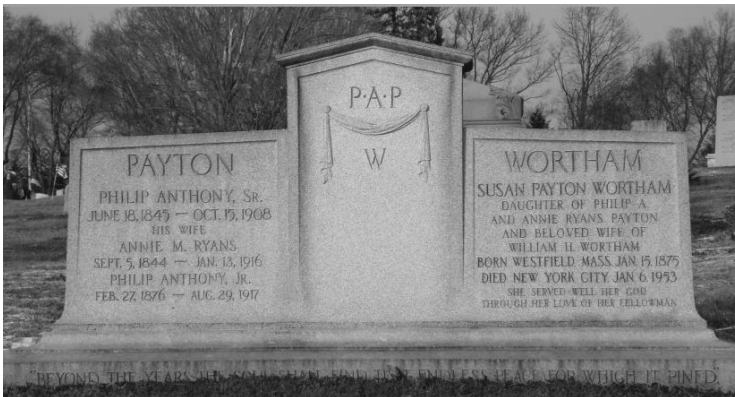
20. Inventory of Nehemiah Bull of Westfield, October 13, 1741, Box 22, Case 16, Hampshire County Registry of Probate (hereafter referred to as HCRP), Northampton, MA.
21. Will of Elizabeth Gunn of Westfield, July 9, 1761, Box 65, Case 27, HCRP.
22. Ibid.
23. Book X, p. 194, January 29, 1754, HCRD.
24. Marriages, 1760, WTVR.
25. Book 3, p. 411, HCRD; Book Z, p. 316 (1756) & p. 317 (1753), HCRD.
26. Vol. 3, p. 41 (1765), HCRD & Vol. 29, p. 407 (1789), HCRD.
27. Will of John Gunn, March 12, 1748, Box 65, Case 28, HCRP.
28. Journal of Reverend Ballantine, June 16, 1761; Deaths, 1761, FCW.
29. "Domestic Relations, 1643-1774," pp. 349-52, Vol. 9 of the "Massachusetts Archives," Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, MA; FCW.
30. "Census of Negro Slaves of 16 years of age or upwards."
31. David K. Goss and David Zarowin, eds., *Massachusetts Officers and Soldiers in the French and Indian Wars, 1755-56* (Boston, MA: Society of Colonial Wars in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts/New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1985).
32. Distribution of the estate of Timothy Bliss, of Springfield, May 1, 1770, Box 17, Case 1, HCRP; Deaths, 1772, First Church of Springfield, Archives, Lyman and Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History, Springfield, MA.
33. "An Account of Substance Money for Capt. John Moseley's men for the Crown Point Expedition, 1756," Vol. 94, p. 424; and "A Return of Capt. Moseley's Co. of Col. Dwight's Regt. Camp of Fort Edwards July 26, 1756," Vol. 94, p. 323; See also Muster Roll on p. 142 of Vol. 95, microfiche of Muster Rolls of the Colonial Wars, Massachusetts State Archives.
34. Romer, 140, 168-72.
35. Journal of Reverend John Ballantine, November 8, 1763; February 9, 1767; December 23, 1767.
36. Births, 1761, WTVR; Harold Norton Jones, "Slavery in Colonial Westfield," typescript, Westfield Athenaeum.
37. Deaths, 1786, FCW.
38. Harold Norton Jones, "Slavery in Colonial Westfield," typescript, Westfield Athenaeum; Michael Camerota, "Westfield's Black Community," *Historical Journal of Western Massachusetts* 5 (Spring 1976): 17-27.
39. "African Americans from Hampshire County Towns Formerly Part of Old Hampshire County known to have served in the American Revolution" in Carvalho, 316-321; Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the American Revolution* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961); W.B. Hargrove, "The Negro Soldier in the American Revolution," *Journal of Negro History* 1 (1916): 110-137.

40. "Ashley," in *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the American Revolution*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1898).
41. *Massachusetts Soldiers, and Sailors of the American Revolution*, Vol. 5 , 785, and Vol. 8, p. 478; Revolutionary War Land Warrant No. 4357, National Archives, Washington, D.C..
42. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the American Revolution*, Vol. 17, 40, 667.
43. Romer, 206-222.
44. *Tony Negro v. Ezra Clapp*, Case No. 30, September 1781, Vol. 13, pp. 204, 216, Inferior Court of Common Pleas Records, Hampshire County Commissioners Office, Northampton, MA.
45. Transcript of Case No. 1, *Brom & Bett vs. John Ashley Esq.*, Book 4A, p. 55, Inferior Court of Common Pleas, Berkshire County, Great Barrington, MA, 1781, transcribed by Brady Barrows at Berkshire County Courthouse, 1998.
46. Deaths, 1802, FCW.
47. Marriage Records, 1782, FCW.
48. He served from the winter of 1775 until October 26, 1780. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the American Revolution*, Vol. 7, 896; Revolutionary War Pension Application No. S43677, National Archives, Washington, D.C..
49. Marriage Records, 1785, WTVR; Deaths, 1791, FCW. In Connecticut, slavery was legal until 1782.
50. Carvalho, 6, 109-110, 203; see also "Down around Congamond—Trek to Lakes Yields Fund of Lore," *Springfield Sunday Republican*, Aug. 31, 1924, p. 4A.
51. Deaths, 1828, FCW.
52. Deaths, 1788, FCW.
53. *Phineas Perkins vs. Jock Negro*, June 14, 1782, Case No. 124, Hampshire County Court of Sessions Records, Vol. 15, p. 33, Hampshire County Commissioner's Office, Northampton.
54. Diary of Reverend John Ballantine, January 23, 1768.
55. Southwick Town Record. Typescript by Gilbert Arnold, p. 17.
56. *Inhabitants of Lanesborough vs. Inhabitants of Westfield*, Supreme Judicial Court for the County of Berkshire, September 1819 at Lenox, Massachusetts; see also Dudley A. Tyng, *Massachusetts Reports* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1864) Col. 16, 74-75.
57. "Westfield Family History," 59; Marriages, 1753 and Deaths, 1806, 1814, WTVR; U.S. Federal Census, 1790 for Southwick & 1800 for Westfield.
58. Carvalho, 173-4.
59. *Ibid.*, 12-14.
60. *Ibid.*, passim.
61. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and into Legend* (New York: Amistad, 2008), 51. The most successful African American family in Westfield and a pillar of the black community after the Civil War were recent migrants to the north. Philip A. Payton, born a slave in Washington, D.C. in 1845, migrated to Westfield in 1872. He

established a barber shop that became a center for the community. Three of his four children earned college degrees. A third son, Phillip A. Payton Jr., born in Westfield in 1876, moved to New York City and became a real estate developer, becoming known as the “Father of Harlem.” His story is profiled in Kevin McGruder’s *Race and Real Estate: Conflict and Cooperation in Harlem, 1890-1920* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015).

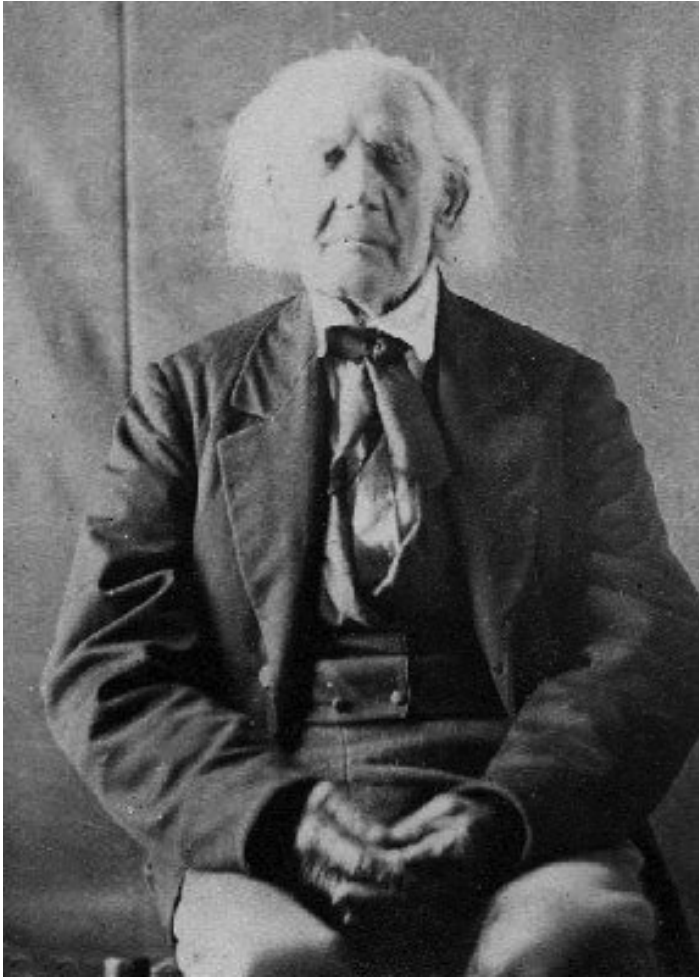


Payton Ad, Westfield City Directory, 1878-79



Payton Family Gravestone

Westfield's most successful nineteenth-century African American family. Philip A. Payton was born a slave in 1845 and migrated to Westfield in 1872. He established a barber shop that became a center for the community. Three of his four children earned college degrees. Philip A. Payton Jr. became known as the "Father of Harlem." Pine Hill Cemetery. Photo by James Bianco.



Samuel Downing (1761-1867)
American Revolutionary War Veteran

In 1864, Reverend E.B. Hillard and two photographers embarked on a trip through New England to photograph and interview the six known surviving Revolutionary War veterans. All were over one hundred years old at the time. The photos were printed in a book titled *The Last Men of the Revolution*. Samuel Downing, born in Newburyport, MA in 1761, had enlisted at the age of sixteen. Claiming indigent status, in 1820 he began receiving a pension under the 1818 Pension Act. Because he lived in New York at the time, his name can be found in the New York pension list of 1820. His name appears on various pension lists for the next forty years. The far more liberal 1832 Pension Act gave full pay for life to both officers and enlisted men who had served for two years or more and partial pay for service of six months or more.