

In Memory of Susan Freedom

Searching for Gravestones of African
Americans in Western Massachusetts



Bob Drinkwater

Published by Levellers Press, Amherst, MA, 2020

PHOTO ESSAY

African American Gravestones in Western Massachusetts

BOB DRINKWATER



Editor’s Introduction: *This thought-provoking photo essay is excerpted from the author’s recent book, In Memory of Susan Freedom: Searching for Gravestones of African Americans in Western Massachusetts (Amherst, MA: Leveller’s Press, 2020). Drinkwater is an historical archaeologist with an M.A. in anthropology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. For decades he has studied, photographed, and written about eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century gravestones in western Massachusetts. The 180-page book includes photographs of most of the gravestones he discusses, and twenty pages of appendices with statistical data about the African American population of all cities and towns in western Massachusetts, circa 1750–1900.*

Drinkwater writes, “Several years ago, I began to realize that in most New England burying grounds . . . Africans and African Americans are an invisible, seldom discussed presence.” Using a wide variety of sources, Drinkwater researched African-American history in the region. Susan Freedom, of the book’s title, died at the age of nineteen in 1803 and was buried in the Pine Street Section of the Springfield Cemetery. Although her gravestone does not directly state that she was a “slave” or an “enslaved person,” her epitaph provides the careful researcher with clues to her true status: “Tho’ short her life, and humble her station, she faithfully performed all the duties of it.” Reviewer Joseph Carvalho III writes that while

African American gravestones are extremely rare, they “provide silent witness to the long-standing presence of people of color in our region since colonial times.” He continues, “Drinkwater has given these stones a voice, providing us with a well-researched and well-written study of the gravestones and gravesites of those precious few stone memorials.”¹

* * * * *

There are 101 towns and cities in Massachusetts’ four westernmost counties. People of African descent have lived and died in all but a few of them over the course of the past four centuries. There is ample evidence of this in census records, vital records, and a variety of archival sources. Nonetheless, their presence during much of that time has often been underreported, if not ignored, by most local and regional historians. Cemeteries are among the few places where tangible evidence of their presence persists, but even there the evidence is often imperceptible. Many were buried in unmarked or ephemerally marked graves. Gravestones, when present, are often indistinguishable to anyone but those already aware that the deceased were of African descent.²

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as English colonists and their descendants migrated northward along the Connecticut River, then westward to the Housatonic Valley and beyond, enslaved Africans and their descendants accompanied them. Among the captives’ owners were some of the most celebrated citizens of many western Massachusetts communities. Although I have located several gravestones for formerly enslaved African Americans, there appear to be no surviving gravestones for those who died while they were still enslaved. Throughout the region, gravestones for African Americans who died prior to the Civil War seem to be few and far between.³

The following are a few of the 120 or so historic gravestones for people of African descent that I have documented, thus far, in western Massachusetts. These gravestones represent several stages in the development of the monument industry in western Massachusetts. A few of the earliest examples were hand-hewn from local materials by local artisans—these include the stones for Romelus Finemer and Susan Freedom. The stones for Sylva Church and Silas Green may have been cut to shape with water-powered machinery, then the artwork and lettering were done by hand, perhaps by a local carver. Most of the stones, however, are like those for the African Americans buried at the West Cemetery in Amherst—they were commercially produced, then shipped to local dealers, who subsequently inscribed them to the purchaser’s specifications.

In many New England cities and towns, people of color were buried in areas set aside for them in common burying grounds and municipal cemeteries from colonial times well into the nineteenth century. In some instances, African Americans were buried at what was, at the time they died, the edge of the burying ground, but their gravesites were subsequently surrounded by more recently deceased members of the white community as the cemetery was expanded. There are also some instances in which it appears that African Americans were intentionally buried among their white neighbors. The history and the extent of racial segregation in New England cemeteries remain to be adequately investigated. On a few of the gravestones illustrated in this essay, there are words and phrases which identify the deceased as a person of African descent. Most, if not all of these, appear to have been provided by a member of the white community, perhaps an owner or employer of the deceased. Gravestones provided by the family of the deceased seldom (if ever) included these types of overt racial distinctions.⁴

FLOVA (c. 1737–1778), WORCESTER, MA

No surname is provided. The inscription simply states: “In Memory of Flova, a Negro woman Servan[t] to the Hon. Moses Gill Esq., who died in 1778, aged 41 years.” In Colonial New England, a servant was often understood to be a servant for life—i.e., an enslaved person. Moses Gill was a lawyer, a country gentleman, and a Worcester County District Court judge. He served as Lt. Governor then acting Governor of Massachusetts from 1799 until his death in 1800. Flova’s gravestone is in Princeton, a suburb of Worcester. Next to her gravestone are the stones for two of Gill’s “Negro man servants.” In western Massachusetts, there are no known surviving gravestones for enslaved persons who died while they were still enslaved.

ROMELUS FINEMER (c. 1787–1789), SHELBURNE, MA

Romelus Finemer [Romulus Finnemore] was probably born free. On his gravestone, there is no reference to an owner or master, and no reference to his race or social status. He had a surname, and his parents are identified as Mr. Romelus and Mrs. Rozannah. His gravestone is at the Hill Cemetery in Shelburne and seems likely to have been provided by his family. It appears to be the work of Solomon Ashley, a local stonecutter who inscribed identical stones for some of the young children of local white families. Ashley was the son of Rev. Jonathan Ashley of Deerfield, one of several Congregational ministers in the area who are known to have been slave owners.



Gravestone of Flova (c. 1737–1778), Worcester, MA



Gravestone of Romelus Finemer (c. 1787–1789), Shelburne, MA

SUSAN FREEDOM (C. 1784–1803), SPRINGFIELD, MA

Susan Freedom's gravestone stands apart in the back row of the Pine Street section of the Springfield Cemetery. Who was she? Her name suggests that she was a free person, her epitaph implies her social status. According to Thomas Bridgman, who published her epitaph in his 1850 compilation of gravestone inscriptions, Susan was "a colored girl brought up by Col. Worthington." In the Springfield Town Records, she is described as "a mulatto girl . . . formerly a slave of Col. Dwight." No doubt, her gravestone was supplied by one of the families she served. It is identical, in form and style, to the stones which commemorate many members of the local white community. The epitaph reads, "Tho' short her life, and humble her station, she faithfully performed all the duties of it. 'The wise and great could do no more.'"⁵

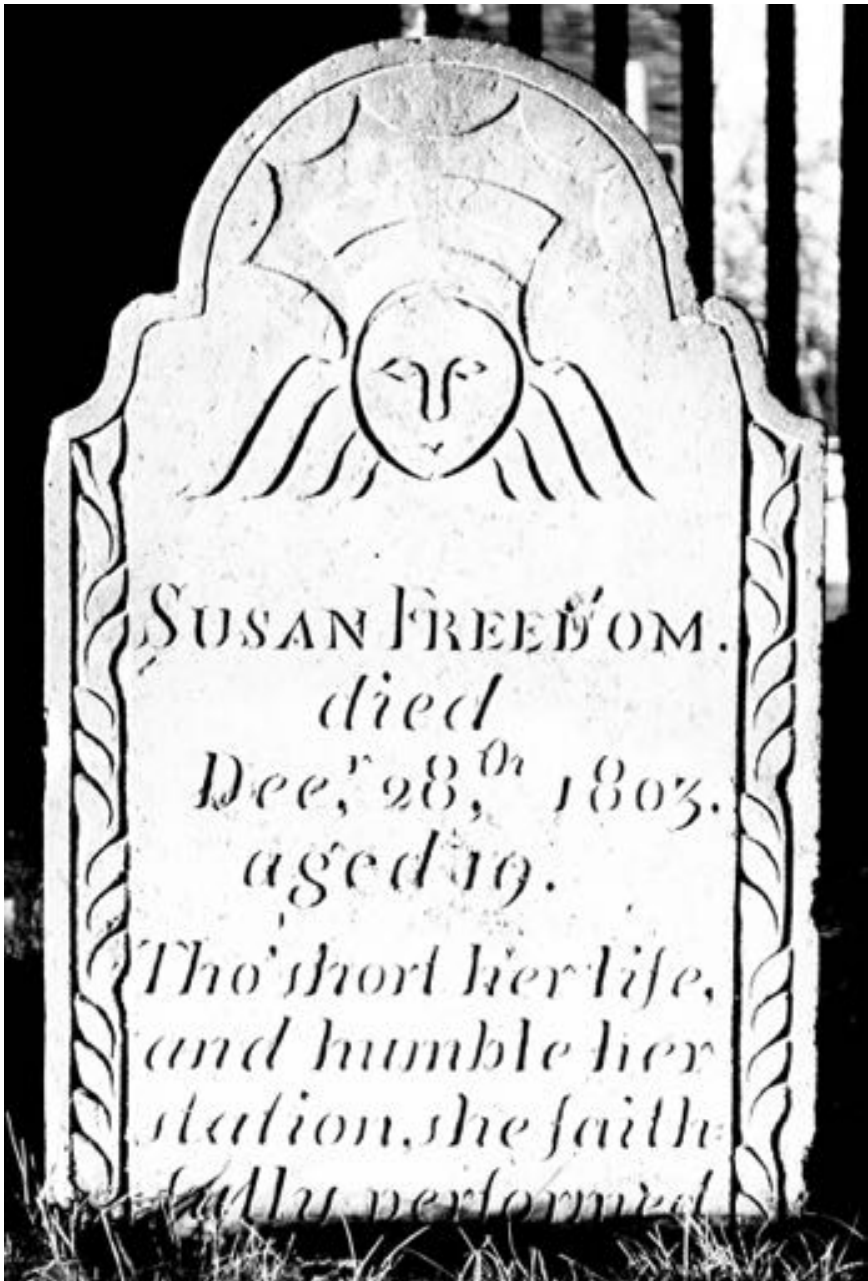
ELIZABETH FREEMAN (C. 1744–1829), STOCKBRIDGE, MA

Elizabeth Freeman (aka "Mumbet" or "Mum Bett") was one of several enslaved African Americans who challenged the legality of their enslavement. In 1781 Freeman, then a slave of Col. John Ashley of Sheffield, sued for her freedom and succeeded. She was represented in court by Theodore Sedgwick of Stockbridge. Her case was one of the series of court cases which prompted the gradual emancipation of enslaved African Americans in Massachusetts. Her marble gravestone is located in the Sedgwick lot (the "Sedgwick Pie") at the Stockbridge Cemetery. Her epitaph was composed by Charles Sedgwick and reads as follows:

ELIZABETH FREEMAN, known by the name of MUMBET, died Dec. 28' 1829. Her supposed age was 85 Years. She was born a slave and remained a slave for nearly thirty years. She could neither read nor write, yet in her own sphere she had no superior nor equal. She neither wasted time nor property. She never violated a trust, nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial, she was the most efficient helper, and the tenderest friend. Good Mother, farewell.

SYLVA CHURCH (C. 1756–1822), NORTHAMPTON, MA

Sylva Church was a domestic servant. She died in 1822 at age 66. On her gravestone, she is described as a "coloured woman who for many years lived in the family of N. Storrs." N. Storrs was Nathan Storrs, a jeweler and clockmaker, and the son-in-law of Maj. Timothy Dwight. Sylva, also known



Gravestone of Susan Freedom (c. 1784–1803), Springfield, MA



Gravestone of Elizabeth Freeman (c. 1744–1829), Stockbridge, MA



Gravestone of Sylva Church (c. 1756–1822), Northampton, MA

as Lil or Lilly, “was bought on Long Island when but 9 years old,” according to one Dwight family historian. The rest of her epitaph reads, “Very few possessed more good qualities than she did[.] She was for many years a member of Mr. Williams[']s Church, and we trust lived agreeable to her profession, and is now inheriting the promises.” Sylva’s slate gravestone and one for Sarah Gray, who may have served the same family, are at the Bridge Street Cemetery in Northampton, just beyond what was then the western edge of the area where Northampton’s founding families were buried.

SILAS GREEN (c. 1795–1871), BERNARDSTON, MA

Silas Green was the son of Peter Green Sr., a Revolutionary War veteran who lived in Colrain. During the 1850s and ’60s, Silas lived in Bernardston. In U.S. Census returns, he is listed as a farmer (1850) and farm laborer (1860). At the time of his death he was described as “very old and unfirm, scarcely able to walk.” He was reportedly murdered by his niece’s husband. Silas outlived his spouse and his siblings. Who provided his gravestone—was it a relative, or a member of the white community? Should the phrase “a much respected colored man” be interpreted as an expression of an entrenched color consciousness (racism) or simply as an expression of personal regard—or both? Silas’s gravestone and that of his wife, Fanny, stand side by side at Center Cemetery in Bernardston.

CHARLES H. THOMPSON (c. 1842–1903), AMHERST, MA

Charles H. Thompson, son of Christopher and Matilda Thompson, was born in Northampton in 1842. Charles, his father, and three other members of this branch of the Thompson family fought in the Civil War—four of them in the 5th Massachusetts Cavalry, one in the 54th Massachusetts Infantry. Prior to enlistment Charles and his father were farm laborers in Amherst. Both returned to Amherst after the war. They and other members of their family are buried at the West Cemetery in Amherst, in an area once set aside for people of color. To the right of Charles’s stone is a small marker for his daughter, Allie, and in the surrounding area are the graves, some with and some without gravestones, of other Black Civil War veterans.

AMHERST COMMUNITY HISTORY MURAL

Several African Americans are portrayed on the Amherst Community History Mural, created by David Fichter on the back wall of a new apartment



Gravestone of Silas Green (c. 1795–1871), Bernardston, MA



Gravestone of Charles H. Thompson (c. 1842–1903), Amherst, MA

building adjoining the West Cemetery. In the cemetery, there are gravestones for two of them: Henry Jackson (c. 1817–1902) (left foreground), and Anna Goodwin (right). It was Henry Jackson who borrowed and drove the horse and buggy during the rescue of Angeline Palmer in May 1840.

Angeline Palmer, an eleven-year-old orphan, had been bound out to a white family in Belchertown. Allegedly, the husband was in financial difficulty and instructed his wife to bring Angeline along on her next trip to the South, and once there, convey her to a slave dealer. Lewis Frazier, her half-brother, learned of this alarming news and informed the Amherst Board of Selectmen, who reportedly discussed the matter but decided to take no action. Frazier and his friends, William Jennings and Henry Jackson, then took it upon themselves to rescue Angeline and transport her to a safe haven. They were subsequently charged, tried, and convicted of abducting Angeline Palmer and spent time at the Hampshire County Jail in Northampton. During their brief confinement, and for many years afterward, the three were regarded as local folk heroes. All three of them are buried at the West Cemetery.⁶

Henry lived next to the Amherst Railway Depot and was employed as a teamster and truckman for many years afterward. The soldier standing behind Henry Jackson is Sanford Jackson, who served in the 54th Massachusetts Cavalry and was killed in action during the siege of Fort Wagner. Anna Goodwin operated a local inn and a boarding house for Massachusetts Agricultural College students for many years. She, her husband Moses, and their daughters were active members of the local church, named the Goodwin Memorial A. M. E. Zion Church in their honor in 1967.

AFRICAN AMERICAN GRAVESTONES, WEST CEMETERY, AMHERST

These are some of the gravestones for African Americans at the West Cemetery in Amherst. They are identical to the headstones and monuments for many of their white neighbors, buried nearby. On these stones, as on most gravestones for African Americans in western Massachusetts, there are no indications that the deceased were of African descent. Pictured, from left to right, from back to front, are the gravestones for William L. Langley (1862–1914), Richard Jackson (c. 1797–1850) and nine children buried by his side, Henry Jackson (1817–1902), and Charles E. Jackson (1863–1891). The gravestone fragment propped against the base of Charles Jackson's stone is for Clarence Barton, a child who died in 1847, aged 16 months. Clarence



Amherst Community History Mural

Henry Jackson, foreground; Anna Goodwin on right.



African American Gravestones, West Cemetery, Amherst

Henry Jackson's gravestone is situated on the far right.

and his parents were probably not Amherst residents, and I have found no evidence that they were of African descent.

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These few gravestones commemorate a tiny fraction of the thousands of African Americans who lived and died in western Massachusetts over the course of the past four centuries. They are gravestones for African Americans, but I wonder if we can properly consider them to be African American gravestones. All of them appear to have been produced by, and several appear to have been commissioned by, members of the white community. They reflect many aspects of the Anglo-American culture in which these African Americans' lives were embedded.

In June 2017, a few months after I had finished the first draft of *In Memory of Susan Freedom*, I visited several Black cemeteries in Alabama. All of these cemeteries were established after the Civil War and all are still in active use. There, I saw many grave markers and monuments made by and for African Americans. Some were simple, amateurish creations, improvised by friends and family members. Others were more expertly fashioned by local artisans, including some who made gravestone facsimiles in cast concrete. Why aren't there any of these types of markers and monuments here in western Massachusetts? In those Alabama cemeteries, some of the most recent markers and monuments were produced by African American monument dealers who catered to the preferences of the local community. Are there any grave markers and monuments made by and for African Americans in western Massachusetts?

HJM

Notes

1. Joseph Carvalho III, quoted in Bob Drinkwater, *In Memory of Susan Freedom: Searching for Gravestones of African Americans in Western Massachusetts*, i.
2. For African American history in Western Massachusetts, see: Joseph Carvalho III, *Black Families in Hampden County, Massachusetts, 1650–1865*, second edition (Boston, MA: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2011); Robert H. Romer, *Slavery in the Connecticut Valley of Massachusetts* (Florence, MA: Levellers Press, 2009); Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Atheneum, 1969);

and James A. Smith, *The History of the Black Population of Amherst, Massachusetts, 1728–1870* (Boston, MA: The New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1999).

3. For more on slavery and African American history in Massachusetts, see the following articles: Joseph Carvalho III, “Uncovering the Stories of Black Families in Springfield and Hampden County, Massachusetts, 1650–1865,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 40, nos. 1&2 (2012): 58–93; Joseph Carvalho III, “Slavery in Westfield: The Documentary Record, 1713–1790,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 74–97; Joseph Carvalho III, “John Brown’s Transformation: The Springfield Years, 1846–49,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 48, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 46–95; Robert T. Brown, “The Payton Family of Westfield: An African American Success Story, 1845–1954,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 48, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 96–125; 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): 108–141; Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, “Mr. and Mrs. Prince: An African American Courtship and Marriage in Colonial Deerfield,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 10–15; Anita C. Danker, “African American Heritage Trails: From Boston to the Berkshires,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 16–32.

4. For additional background, see: Glenn Knoblock, *African American Historic Burial Grounds and Gravesites of New England* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2016); Tom and Brenda Malloy, “Slavery in Colonial Massachusetts as Seen Through Selected Gravestones,” *Markers, The Journal of the Association of Gravestone Studies*, Vol. XI (1994): 112–41.

5. Thomas Bridgman, *Inscriptions on the Gravestones in the Grave Yards of Northampton: and of other towns in the Valley of Connecticut, as Springfield, Amherst, Hadley, Hatfield, Deerfield, &c.* (Northampton, MA: Hopkins, Bridgman and Co., 1850).

6. This escape is recounted in James A. Smith’s *History of the Black Population of Amherst, Massachusetts, 1728–1870*, first edition (Boston, MA: The New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1999).