



MR. AND MRS.

PRINCE

HOW AN

Extraordinary

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FAMILY MOVED

OUT OF SLAVERY AND INTO *Legend*

GRETCHEN HOLBROOK GERZINA

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Mr. and Mrs. Prince: An African American Courtship and Marriage in Colonial Deerfield

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HJM is pleased to present “Editor’s Choice” – a new feature appearing in each issue where we highlight selections from recent works on Massachusetts history that we feel are especially noteworthy and thought-provoking.

*Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina chairs the English Department at Dartmouth College and is the author of several widely-acclaimed books and biographies. In *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and into Legend* (2008), she merges meticulous detective research with powerful storytelling to recreate the lives of a remarkable African American family. In the process she illuminates the challenges that faced African Americans in the colonial North.*

Born in Africa, Lucy Terry (c. 1725-1821) was captured and taken to Rhode Island when very young and brought as a slave to Deerfield, Massachusetts. Described as magnetic and verbally gifted, her lively nature, intelligence, and fierce determination to succeed impressed many throughout her lifetime. Her husband, Abijah Prince (c. 1705-94), was an entrepreneur and veteran of the French and Indian Wars who had managed to secure his

freedom and later helped Lucy win hers. Together they raised seven children. Buying land in both Vermont and Massachusetts, they were on their way to prosperity when bigoted neighbors tried to run them off. Rather than flee, they asserted their rights in court, which they were forced to do several times. They successfully argued several cases, including one before the Vermont Supreme Court.

Mr. and Mrs. Prince brings to light a family history that has intrigued – but eluded – many previous researchers. In 1896 one local historian wrote: “In the checkered lives of Abijah Prince and Lucy Terry is found a romance going beyond the wildest flights of fancy.” In the following selection, the author demonstrates her skill in telling a compelling story of courtship and marriage from such limited and prosaic primary sources as merchants’ logs.

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Bijah [Abijah Prince] may have been watching Lucy for a while, wondering if he could convince her to give up the home she’d known for so many years – a home where she worked hard but was well cared for – and throw in her lot with a much older man and a hardscrabble life. But what did age matter to her in a time when older men often married younger women? In her eyes, he was an unhopd-for joy: a free black man who loved her and who wanted to marry her and set her up in her own home and who would work to make her free.

Had Lucy been a privileged white girl like Elizabeth Porter Phelps of Northampton, she would have kept a daily journal describing her beau’s visits to her house, the sewing of her trousseau, the financial agreement struck between father and fiancé, the conversations with her female friends, and serious consideration of the dangers of inevitable childbirths. But of course I found none of these for Lucy, even though discussions clearly took place between Bijah and Ebenezer Wells, between Lucy and Abigail Wells, and among the Deerfield slaves.

Even if she had kept such a journal, serious events kept everyone too busy for frivolous occupations. The last, and most famous, of the French and Indian Wars broke out in 1754. Seven years after his military service, Bijah was now nearly fifty, on the verge of being too old to fight, but other men commissioned long ago suddenly found themselves elderly officers on active duty. Deerfield once again saw soldiers stationed everywhere,

and servants like Lucy found their workloads increased in the taverns, inns, and private houses where they were billeted. Ebenezer Wells, once again Ensign Wells, was wounded and underwent a painful operation and series of not very successful treatments. Lucy and Abigail had to tend to him. Slaves found themselves pressed into active military service, often as the replacements for those who didn't wish to go. This was the time when Jonathan Ashley's slave Titus served. He may well have been glad to exchange his life under his severe master for a more dangerous and exciting time.

In order to be closer to Lucy, Bijah left the Hulls and Northampton and took laborer's jobs closer to Deerfield. He worked there during the summer and then went to work nearby in Sunderland, Massachusetts, where his old "Negro network" friend Ralph Way, the strong-willed man who owned land in Hadley, also owned some property, but he was warned out of town late that fall because he wasn't a legal resident. He made sure to take work that kept him close to Deerfield and Lucy.

Even without a journal or letters, from my table at the library in Historic Deerfield I slowly pieced together their courtship and preparations for their life together from local merchants' accounts. I saw how Lucy, so financially cautious, suddenly began to act differently. Unlike the other servants, who so often spent their small occasional earnings on nonessentials from stores such as Elijah Williams's, Lucy rarely bought anything for herself over the years. But almost immediately after Bijah gained his freedom, she began to shop. She bought a fan. She bought pins and chocolate. Abigail Wells gave her permission to work for Ebenezer Hinsdale at his store, and she used part of her earnings to buy five yards of checked cloth. She bought a bit of expensive cambric, enough to make a handkerchief. The following January she had saved up enough to buy seven shillings' worth of imported linen. A bit more cambric. Ribbons. A double-stranded white necklace. More ribbon. A string of beads. A skein of silk thread. A thimble. A mug. Buttons. Five yards of galoon, a narrow gold or silver trimming for clothes. A sheet of drawing paper. She was putting together a trousseau and a hope chest. She bought almost nothing for herself in the twenty years that she'd lived in Deerfield, but now she kept dashing across the street to Elijah Williams's shop. The purchase that delighted me the most, that said the most about who she was, occurred in December 1751 when she bought herself three sheets of paper.

In 1756 Bijah began to make small purchases as well: he bought a knife for himself, and he sometimes stopped in at Elijah's tavern at the end of a day's work to refresh himself with a mug of cider. When he couldn't

find work, he went fishing, earning an impressive seven shillings—the equivalent of more than three days' paid labor—for four large salmon. In April he too began to spruce himself up, buying five and a half yards of shirting fabric that Lucy perhaps sewed up, using her new thimble, and a few weeks later a pair of hose. Men in those days dressed in breeches that fastened just below the knee, with stockings—often striped—over their calves; working men wore long shirts and often wore pewter buckles on their shoes. He too was putting together a new outfit.

This may well have been the first wedding between black people in Deerfield since the time of Parthena and Frank, the couple killed in Elijah's father's house in the 1704 raid, and it caused real excitement and anticipation among the other Deerfield African Americans. You could sense the eagerness and seriousness with which some of the other Deerfield slaves treated an event that they had never experienced. Lucy was one of their favorite people, and at about thirty, she was marrying a free and respected man who had links to other free blacks in the region. It was the closest the frontier slaves would ever get to celebrity among their own people, and they wished to honor it as best they could. Titus, who could sew, bought sewing supplies and a pair of shoe buckles. Ishmael bought a pair of gloves. Caesar, who lived in the Ebenezer Wells house with Lucy, bought a psalm book, more evidence that both he and Lucy had been taught to read and that he, like her, took his religion seriously.

Weddings in those days were quite different from what we might expect from today's elaborate affairs. Brides rarely wore white until the twentieth century, and weddings took place in homes rather than in churches. Ministers performed some marriages, but not most, Saturday wasn't the accepted wedding day, and evening weddings were common. Of African American weddings on the northern frontier we know little, simply because so few ever took place. In the South, where such weddings were largely outside of the law, couples and communities relied on African traditions handed down through generations or kept alive with the importation of new slaves, or they devised their own traditions, such as jumping together over a broom. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Sethe's mid-nineteenth-century Kentucky mistress is amused to hear that her slave wishes to have any ceremony at all; she feels that her permission to let them be a couple is sufficient. In Lucy and Bijah's eighteenth-century Deerfield, steeped as it was in a Puritan-descended ethic, such a partnership would have meant living in sin, so those who wished to live together married.

Bijah and Lucy were married on Monday, May 17, 1756. Elijah Williams, now also justice of the peace, gladly performed the ceremony,

forgoing all fees as a gift to the couple. He had been present at Bijah's military service, his manumission, and now his wedding. Beyond those simple facts recorded in the Deerfield town records, we can only imagine the details of an event that marked a colossal shift in their lives. Bijah had already achieved, in less than ten years, everything he could have dreamed during those long Northfield years of lonely servitude. At an age when many men's lives are set and unchanging, his was about to change completely. He was about to go from being a fifty-year-old bachelor to a married man soon to be the father of six. Lucy, still a slave surrounded by slaves, most of them older than she and with no hope of gaining their freedom, was about to move into her own house with autonomy, her own belongings, and her own determination of her future. She also faced thirteen years of regular childbearing.

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