

Contributions of African-Americans to the Ending of Slavery in Massachusetts

Robert E. Gettings

マサチューセッツ州の奴隷制度廃止における アフリカ系アメリカ人の貢献

ロバート E. ゲティングス

要 約

マサチューセッツ州では1638年にアフリカ人を対象とした奴隷制度がはじまり、1790年頃までに徐々に廃止された。当年（1790年）の米国情勢調査によるとマサチューセッツ州には奴隷はいないと報告されている。しかしその時代に生きた人々や歴史家の間では奴隷制度が廃止されるに至った経過に関する同意が見られない。歴史家達は奴隷制度の廃止の主力となったのは裁判所、革命的思想、慈善的な白人であったと指摘する。アフリカ系アメリカ人自身は主要な貢献者として認められていない。しかし近年の研究によるとアフリカ系アメリカ人は奴隷制度のもとで受身的な立場に留まらず、逃亡や自由を求めて主人を告訴したり、さらには武力闘争などの様々な方法で抵抗していた事が指摘されている。アフリカ系アメリカ人は奴隷制度に対する挑戦を行ったのみならず、マサチューセッツ州における奴隷制度廃止の過程に明らかな影響力を持った。

Abstract

African slavery began in Massachusetts in 1638 and ended 1790. The U. S. Census of that year suddenly reported no slaves in the state. The process by which slavery ended is unclear. There was no consensus among contemporaries or among historians as to how it ended. Historians have pointed to the courts, revolutionary ideology, and benevolent whites as the main forces that brought about the end of slavery. African-Americans, themselves, have not been credited as significant actors in the process. Recent studies, however, have demonstrated that African-Americans were not passive under slavery, but resisted in a variety of ways. African-Americans challenged the institution of slavery and these challenges did have an effect on the the demise of slavery in the Commonwealth.

African labor was imported to the British North American colonies in the early seventeenth century. English colonials attempted to reconcile the repugnant aspects of slavery to their society's dominant religious and cultural values. By the end of the seventeenth century, each of the British colonies had developed its own "black code" as the legal basis of slavery. These codes were based, in part, on the economics of slavery and on the particular conflicts that arose between English and Africans in each colony (Wiecek, 1977; Elkins & McKittrick, 1957).

By the 1760s, at the time of the American Revolution, several interrelated developments in Western culture, especially in the culture of British Protestantism, led to the rise of anti-slavery sentiment throughout in the British Empire (Bailyn, 1967; MacLeod, 1974; Davis, 1975). Concepts of "slavery to sin" and "slavery to political tyranny" became more and more associated in the popular mind with African slavery.

No one had set out to question the meaning of chattel slavery, but by 1776 it had come under severe attack by writers following out the logic of Revolutionary thought. The connection, for those who could see it, was obvious. "Slavery" was a central concept in eighteenth-century political discourse. As the absolute political evil, it appears in every statement of political principle, in every discussion of constitutionalism or legal rights, in every exhortation to resistance. (Bailyn, 1967, p. 232)

Fundamentally, the very presence of Africans in the Empire, the existence of the African slave trade, the periodic insurrections of slaves, and the bizarre cruelties which came to be accepted as normal parts of plantation life had an effect on the decisions which whites made concerning slavery. Anti-slavery sentiment in the empire developed in a dialectical relationship between British middle class humanitarians and Africans involved in rebellion (Richardson, 1987).

What of the case of Massachusetts? Can we find evidence of a dialectical relationship between British-American middle class humanitarians and Massachusetts slaves involved in rebellion? African slaves left little written or material evidence. Evidence for the existence of slave rebellion must come from the laws and records of the white elite that they rebelled against.

In a study based on court records and newspapers, Towner examined forms of rebellion by servants of all races. He distinguished between legal protests, such as suing one's master, and those that were illegal, such as unruly behavior or running away. Of 506 cases of African-American servant protest up until 1750, he identified only 3% as legal protest, 53% as unruly behavior, and 44% as running away. It is interesting to note that African-Americans constituted one third of the runaways but were never more than 2.2% of the population at any time (Towner, 1962; Twombly, 1973).

Contributions of African-Americans to the Ending of Slavery in Massachusetts

African-Americans, slave and free, in colonial Boston, took part in rebellion along with the general public or expressed social protest in rioting. In 1747, the House of Representatives described the three day long riots over impressment as a "tumultuous rioting assembling of armed Seamen, Servants, Negroes, and others... tending to the Destruction of all Government and Order (Lemisch, 1969, p. 387). John Adams described the rioting crowd in the Boston Massacre as "a motley rable of saucy boys, negroes and molatoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jack tarrs." (Wroth & Zobel, 1968, III: 266)

African-Americans also joined with each other, free and slave, in defiance of colonial law. Evidence from the earliest days of slavery points out the existence of separate African-American criteria for social status, the continuance of African cultural expectations, and the formation of a cohesive African-American community in Massachusetts. African and British cultural forms blended to form a African-American folk culture which encompassed distinctive forms of dress, dance, music, medicine, cuisine, architecture, oral narrative, humor, gambling, and sport (Moore, 1866; Pierson, 1988; Twombly, 1967).

African-Americans, both free and slave, were legally prohibited from gathering together, but clandestine social gatherings took place in a kind of "alley society" which formed in colonial Massachusetts:

Newspaper accounts of a warehouse fire [in 1738] ... disclosed that "a parcel of Negroes" had met "to make merry," bringing with them "fowls," bread, sugar, and rum — ingredients, it is supposed, for hot toddies and home style chicken. ... Two years later, a Boston owner searching for his missing slave in Roxbury, entered a noisy tavern late at night to find "about a Dozen black Gentry, He's and She's, in a Room, in a very merry Humour, singing and dancing, having a Violin, and a Store of Wine and Punch before them." (Twombly, 1967, p. 54)

Boston's town meeting complained of "Negro and Indian Servants" gathering together in drinking, gaming and stealing, as well as enticing white servants to join them. One master advertised the sale of his slave who was "'of a good and natural Temper and Disposition' before being led astray by 'the Company of a Rascally Club of Negroes'". Such gatherings eroded labor efficiency and might possibly lead slaves to rebel as in New York in 1742 (Twombly, 1967, p. 26-27).

Apart from "alley society" a small African-American leadership group was also growing in Boston. In 1774, Prince Hall, a free immigrant from Barbados, started a Boston lodge of African-American Freemasons. After he was denied admission to a lodge of white freemasons of the whig party, Hall and several other blacks were accepted by the British Army. When the British evacuated Boston, Hall and the others met in an independent lodge chartered as African Lodge No. 459, in 1787 (Williams, 1980; Horton & Horton, 1979).

It is interesting to note that Prince Hall was also one of the major figures in other movements among African-Americans in Boston and Massachusetts. He was a leader in the petition campaign against slavery. Hall also served as a lay Methodist minister and was instrumental in organizing an African-American religious organization in Boston. He led a delegation of black Freemasons who requested General George Washington to allow the enlistment of African-American troops in the Revolutionary Army (Cass, 1957).

In the 1770s, African-American petitioners took the case against slavery to the governor, governor's council and legislature of Massachusetts to request a law to abolish slavery. They were aware of the trans-Atlantic anti-slavery movement, and had a sense of support abroad, as well as at home. In 1773, they took note that God:

... hath lately put it into the Hearts of Multitudes on both Sides of the Water, to bear our Burthens, some of whom are Men of great Note and Influence; who have pleaded our Case with Arguments which we hope will have their weight with this Honorable Court. ("Province of the Massachusetts Bay . . .," 1773)

The petitioners lobbied for the passage of a law to outlaw slavery using their connections with middle-class white elites. A letter to representatives, published as a broadside, was signed, "In behalf of our fellow slaves in this province, and by order of their Committee" ("Sir, the efforts made . . .," 1773). Samuel Dexter, a member of the Council, the upper appointed house of the legislature, was chosen by one group of African-Americans to receive a petition, because he was "against the slave-trade, and was their friend." (Dexter, 1795) Samuel Adams, at the request of a group of African-Americans, wrote to John Pickering, Jr., a member of the House, in behalf of "the Negroes whose petition lies on file . . . [who] earnestly wish you would compleat a Plan for their Relief." (Adams, 1774)

The press was also used. Phillis Wheatley produced a variety of poems and letters which were published in Massachusetts papers. Letters and petitions in favor of emancipation, such as that from the "Sons of Africa" were published in the *Massachusetts Spy* or the *Boston Weekly News-Letter*. The first American slave narrative was published in Boston in 1760, *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (Wheatley, 1988; Moore, 1866; Hammon, 1760).

Laws to limit or abolish slavery were put forward but, in each case, the proposed legislation was either defeated, stalled because of differences between the two branches of the legislature, or passed on to remain unsigned by the royal governor. There was popular support for emancipation. There was also popular support for the status quo. Many lawmakers owned slaves. After the colonies formed the Continental Congress, direct confrontation on the issue of slavery with southern delegates was feared by Massachusetts

delegates. Some of the leaders of Massachusetts showed their support for emancipation by accepting and voting for bills which would restrict slavery. Others showed their support for the status quo by not allowing these bills to pass into law (Moore, 1866).

As the war entered its early period, the presence of the contending armies in New England provided new opportunities for slaves. African-Americans in Massachusetts actively took advantage of the opportunities that the Revolution brought them. Some gained their freedom through military service for either the British or the colonials. Some pretended to be free and enlisted. Some joined the navy or the crew of a privateer. Others took advantage of the disruption in their local communities and ran away (Quarles, 1961).

With military service came a change of attitude for many African-Americans. In 1780 Felix Cuff of Waltham, Massachusetts, after returning from fighting, induced a number of slaves to run away and join him in living on the outskirts of town. They managed to evade capture, even repulsing a party of young white men under a Lieutenant Hastings who came to deliver them back to their masters. Following the attack by Hastings, Cuff proceeded to town and prosecuted Hastings for riot (Porter, 1943).

Individual African-Americans used the courts, as did Cuff, to attack slavery. In 1765, Jenny Slew of Ipswich sued John Whipple and received her freedom and four pounds in damages. Other suits followed with favorable outcomes: *Oliver v. Sale* (1765), *Caesar v. Greenleaf* (1773) and the *Cabel Dodge cases* (1774). John Adams was involved in a similar case, possibly that of *Newport v. Billing*, in Springfield in 1768. In 1769, James brought suit against his master, Richard Lechmere of Cambridge, for holding him in bondage. Money was raised by the African-American community to provide counsel. He was freed by the court (Moore, 1866; Twombly, 1973; Daniels, 1969).

In 1783, two cases seem to have set a precedent on the question of slavery, those of Quock Walker and Elizabeth Freeman, or Mum Bet. There is some doubt as to the nature of these cases and the decisions made by the jury. The cases may have used the new constitution of Massachusetts as the basis of rulings to free the slaves in question. The Massachusetts constitution of 1780 stated that all men were created equal. There is no evidence, however, that the members of the constitutional convention intended to abolish slavery although the courts may have applied it in order to free individual slaves. The courts of Virginia and Pennsylvania, whose constitutions had similar clauses, did not apply them to slavery.

Both cases, however, illustrate the social networks which aided African-Americans who wished to leave slavery. The Quock Walker case involved a suit for trespass and damages against Nathaniel Jennison, Walker's former master, who had assaulted and imprisoned Walker in an attempt to take him from employment as a free man. In prosecuting the case, Walker had the support of his new white employers with whom he had grown up

as a child. The case was finally argued before the Supreme Court of Massachusetts in April of 1783 and Walker was set free. (O'Brien, 1960)

In 1791, Mum Bett left her master's house after long having heard discussions of the equality of man at the dinner table where she served the food. She then went to a lawyer who was a family connection of her master and asked his help in a suit for freedom. Her master refused, but eventually the courts ordered her set free. Her master paid court costs and damages. Later Mum Bett changed her name to Elizabeth Freeman (Zilversmit, 1968; Daniels, 1969).

Both cases followed a pattern. First the slave left, or ran away from the white master. After the initial action of running away on the slave's part, the individual slave or other African-Americans acting on the slave's behalf looked for support from white middle-class patrons. The slave then petitioned the court for protection or redress of grievances. The plaintiffs were awarded freedom and damages by the court.

If these cases ended slavery in Massachusetts most contemporaries were unaware of this fact. They went unreported in the newspapers of the time. Masters continued to advertise for runaways, sold their slaves or passed them on to their heirs, and benefited from their services. Massachusetts merchants continued their involvement in the international slave trade.

The courts responded to the initiative of individual slaves who had left their masters. In this sense, running away takes on significance both as a way for an individual to be freed and as one possible cause of the end of slavery in Massachusetts. African-Americans ran away from their masters in increasing numbers in the late 1700s. As popular feeling shifted towards liberty, this trend increased (MacEacheren, 1970).

In 1795, Jeremy Belknap (1795) attempting to document the reasons for the ending of slavery in Massachusetts requested information from leading citizens throughout the state. Samuel Dexter, one of his correspondants, stated that:

Soon after the establishment of the Constitution of Massachusetts, one negro after another deserted from the service of those who had been their owners, till a considerable number had revolted. (Dexter, 1795)

Thomas Pemberton, another correspondant, attributed emancipation to a stirring up of the people "more thoroughly to investigate the rights of man."

The equal right of every man to freedom was asserted. It arrested the attention of the people of colour among us. The more knowing ones propagated the doctrine among the black slaves. (Pemberton, 1795)

By 1790 the African-American population of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was free. Emancipation had somehow come about between 1780 and 1790, but how did slavery end in Massachusetts? By the 1760s, the social supports for slavery were deteriorating under pressure of the slave protest described by Towner and the ideological abhorrence of slavery in the Revolutionary era described by Bailyn and Brion. Individual African-Americans such as Phillis Wheatley, Prince Hall, Quock Walker and Mum Bett engaged in the fight for personal and political liberty. These individuals, those who wrote, signed petitions or sued their masters for freedom, chipped away at the social conventions which supported race slavery in Massachusetts, conscious of the general repulsion against slavery which was growing throughout the British Empire.

Somehow, amidst all these events slavery ended. Most historians have suggested that it was ended by the courts. It seems clear, however, that this is too simplistic a statement. Slavery ended in Massachusetts as the result of influences as great as the struggle for liberty in the British Empire and as small as one individual's decision to run away from a situation he or she no longer chose to tolerate. It ended because for most people in Massachusetts slavery was only an irritant not important enough to bother about, but for a few people in Massachusetts, African-Americans, slavery was the most important and repugnant reality in the world.

Historians have usually not credited African-Americans as major actors in emancipation. However, any consideration of the end of slavery in Massachusetts must take the long history of African-American resistance to slavery and the reality and activity of individual African-Americans into account. Despite their small numbers, African-Americans used their resources as Africans and as Americans to gain personal emancipation and to influence public opinion so that emancipation could become a reality by the time of the federal census of 1790.

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