

Higher Education and Slavery in Western Massachusetts

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Editor's note: A scholar at Amherst College has shown that in the early years of the nation, slavery was widespread in western Massachusetts and just as accepted there as it was in the South. And in Massachusetts, many of the early slave owners were graduates of Harvard and Yale. Students at Williams and Amherst formed the area's first antislavery societies.

THE CONNECTICUT RIVER Valley of western Massachusetts is best known now for its picturesque villages, its rich farm lands, and its history as the northwestern frontier of the colonial settlements of New England in the 1700s. Also, of course, the area is known for its distinguished institutions of higher learning such as Amherst, Smith, and Mount Holyoke colleges, and the main campus of the University of Massachusetts. What is scarcely known at all, even to those of us who have lived here all our lives, is that in the eighteenth century slavery was widespread here. Many, if not most, of the “important people” of the Connecticut Valley — many of them graduates of Yale and Harvard — owned African slaves. Slavery was just as “acceptable” here as it was in the South.

Most of those who know that there were slaves in the Connecticut Valley think that the numbers were so small that it was unimportant, that it must have been socially unacceptable, and that those few who owned slaves must have been operating on the margins of white society. What is astonishing is the size of the enslaved population and the number of prominent people who owned slaves. For example, in the mid-1700s in the town of Deerfield, on the main street there lived a total population of about 300, of whom 21 were enslaved African Americans. The slaves, who belonged to 12 different families, made up 7 percent of the total population. Of the handsome houses on Deerfield's main street that have survived from colonial times, it is highly probable that some of them were built, in part, by slaves. Undoubtedly, enslaved blacks played a very significant role in many western Massachusetts towns, not just Deerfield.

While judges, military leaders, and successful businessmen owned slaves, it is revealing to consider, in particular, the ministers. During the 1700s there was rarely more than one

minister in a town, and almost by definition the minister was one of the most important men, if not *the* most important man, in town. Most of the Connecticut Valley ministers owned slaves. John Williams (a 1683 graduate of Harvard), Deerfield's first permanent minister, owned two slaves who were killed during the famous 1704 raid on Deerfield by the French and American Indians. Williams was captured during the attack. Upon his release, Williams became minister at

Deerfield again and purchased more slaves. His son Stephen, also released from captivity, graduated from Harvard in the Class of 1713 and became minister at Longmeadow, where he too became a slave owner.

Jonathan Ashley, a 1730 graduate of Yale, was Williams' successor as Deerfield's minister. He served in that capacity for nearly half a century from 1732 until his death in 1780. For nearly all that time, he owned two or three black slaves. There was Jenny, who was probably born in Africa and purchased by Ashley in Boston about 1738, together with her baby, Cato. Both Cato and Jenny lived with the Ashley family for the rest of their lives, most of that time as slaves. And there was also a third slave, Titus, whom Ashley bought in 1750 from the minister at New Salem, Samuel Kendall, a 1731 Harvard graduate.

Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, a member of the Yale Class of 1720, famous for his often-quoted 1741 sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” was a slave owner. And there were many other slave-owning ministers. It seems that nearly every minister who could afford it owned black slaves. The accompanying table shows the 20 slave-owning ministers I have identified from the Connecticut Valley of Massachusetts. In purchasing slaves, these ministers — all of whom had been educated at either Harvard or Yale — were only following the example set by Harvard presidents.



Increase Mather, president of Harvard from 1685 to 1701, owned slaves, as did Benjamin Wadsworth, president of Harvard from 1725 to 1737. And later, at Yale, Ezra Stiles, president from 1778 to 1795, and Timothy Dwight, president from 1795 to 1817, were slave owners.

A Gentler Form of Slavery?

Was slavery in the North fundamentally different from slavery in the South? Was it a “gentler” kind of slavery? Sometimes slaves do appear on property lists as “servants,” sometimes as “servants for life,” but often as “Negroes” and sometimes simply as “slaves.” But they were not “just members of the family.” They did not choose to come here. For them, there was no light of freedom at the end of the tunnel. They were listed as property along with the furniture and the cows and horses. They could be and were sold apart from their children, and their children automatically became slaves like their parents.

Here is a bill of sale from 1750, which ought to convince anyone that northern slaves really were slaves.

For and in consideration of the sum of two hundred and twenty-five pounds old tenor, to me Ephraim Williams Jr. well and truly paid by Israel Williams of Hatfield, I do hereby assign, sell and convey to him *a certain negro boy named Prince aged about nine years, a servant for life*, and do hold him and his heirs against the claims of any person whatsoever as witness my hand this 25th day of September anno Domini 1750.

- Ephraim Williams, Jr.

If one reads that bill of sale quickly, one might think that it is merely a lot of standard legal jargon conveying a piece of property. And of course it *was* “only a piece of property” — it just so happens that the property in question was “a nine-year-old Negro boy.”

Ephraim Williams, signer of that bill of sale, is a familiar name in higher education circles. Williams died at an early age, in a 1755 battle with the French and Indians at Lake George. In his will he left some money that eventually led to the founding of Williams College in 1793. It is not widely known (nor often publicized in Williamstown) that his will also contains the following passage: “I give and bequeath to my beloved brothers my homestead at Stockbridge, with all the buildings and appurtenances thereunto belonging, with all the stock of Cattle and Negro servants now upon the place.”

Slave-Owning Ministers From the Connecticut Valley of Western Massachusetts

Minister	Town	Tenure	Alma Mater
Jonathan Ashley	Deerfield	1732-1780	Yale, 1730
Edward Billing	Belchertown	1740-1752	
	and Greenfield	1754-1760	Harvard, 1731
Robert Breck	Springfield	1736-1784	Harvard, 1730
Daniel Brewer	Springfield	1694-1733	Harvard, 1687
Nehemiah Bull	Westfield	1726-1741	Yale, 1723
Isaac Chauncey	Hadley	1696-1745	Harvard, 1693
Ebenezer Devotion	Suffield*	1710-1741	Harvard, 1707
Benjamin Doolittle	Northfield	1718-1749	Yale, 1716
Jonathan Edwards	Northampton	1727-1750	Yale, 1720
Ebenezer Gay	Suffield*	1742-1793	Harvard, 1737
Samuel Hopkins	W. Springfield	1720-1755	Yale, 1718
Samuel Kendall	New Salem	1742-1776	Harvard, 1731
Noah Merrick	Wilbraham	1741-1776	Yale, 1731
Roger Newton	Greenfield	1761-1816	Yale, 1758
David Parsons	Amherst	1739-1781	Harvard, 1729
John Russell	Hadley	1659-1692	Harvard, 1645
Chester Williams	Hadley	1741-1753	Yale, 1735
John Williams	Deerfield	1688-1729	Harvard, 1683
Stephen Williams	Longmeadow	1716-1782	Harvard, 1713
William Williams	Hatfield	1686-1741	Harvard, 1683

*Suffield, now part of Connecticut, was a part of Massachusetts until about 1750.

We know frustratingly little about the *lives* of enslaved African Americans in western Massachusetts. We have a few clues from the available documents, however. In the entire group of 21 slaves in Deerfield in 1752, there is only a single surname (that of Lucy Terry). And consider the repetition of first names that were given to the slaves: two Tituses and five Cesars lived on this street in 1752. (This assignment of classical names was common among slave owners.) Even more telling than the lack of surnames are the names we do not know at all. Samuel Dickinson, a prosperous citizen of Deerfield, owned three slaves. We know that Dickinson owned slaves only because, in the midst of his lengthy probate inventory (the list of his property made at the time of his death), we find:

...pr Saddle Baggs 12/, Horse Collar 3/6, Negro Wench & 2 Children £30, 2 Bushels & 3 pecks Wheat 11, ...

There are his slaves, right in there with the saddle bags and the horse collar, not even dignified by being identified with their names.

Reverend Ashley’s slave Jenny at least merited mention by name, in the only surviving document from Ashley’s life-

time in which she is mentioned, his 1780 will, in the memorable sentence:

I give, devise & bequeath to my beloved Wife Dorothy Ashley my Riding Chair, my Grey Mare, two Cows & ten Sheep, also my Easy Chair, all the Silver Utensils which She brought with her at our Marriage, my Negro Woman Servant Jenny, and also one half of all my Household Furniture to be to my said Wife to her Use & Behoof forever ...

Indeed, the almost total absence of family letters in which slaves are even referred to is itself revealing of their position in the community. Before 1800, even *deaths* of blacks were not listed in the town or church records. Ashley's slave Jenny outlived Ashley by 28 years, and when she died in 1808, having lived with the Ashley family for 70 years, her death was recorded: "Jenny, a black woman, killed by a fall, 90." No one knows where she was buried.

We also know that some of the slaves were baptized and that they occasionally made small purchases at village stores. From Reverend Ashley's account book, we learn that Ashley, himself a farmer as well as a minister, frequently rented Cato and Titus to other Deerfield farmers. Interestingly, one of the Deerfield farmers to whom Ashley rented his slaves was Abijah Prince, Deerfield's one free black. Prince is listed in Ashley's account book as "Abijah Negro."

Anti-Slavery Societies on College Campuses

The first Anti-Slavery Society in Massachusetts was founded at Williams College in 1823. At the Fourth of July celebration in 1827 a member of the society gave an address, and a "Hymn to the Liberated Slave" was sung. (Celebrations on that day were shared with the Temperance Society. This collaboration between opponents of slavery and alcohol was quite common at this time.) Anti-Slavery groups in the 1800s were badly split between those who favored "colonization," solving the problem of slavery by "returning" freed slaves to Africa, and those who, like William Lloyd Garrison, favored immediate abolition and were opposed to colonization. The wording of the "Hymn" sung at Williams in 1827 makes it clear that at least the author of that hymn endorsed colonization:

We are bound for the land of our fathers afar,
And the blue wilds of ocean exulting we roam —
For hope tells of kindred that watch for us there,
And glad bosoms bounding to welcome us home.

The Williams College Anti-Slavery Society participated in annual Fourth of July celebrations at least until 1831. How long the society lasted after that year and what its activities were — these are, unfortunately, matters on which no information has survived.

At Mount Holyoke College (founded in 1837 as the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary), there is no record of any formal anti-slavery organization. Shortly after the college was founded, a man said to be an "admirer" of the institution urged that it be "as freely open for the reception of colored young ladies as ... for others." The trustees, however, refused the plea, and it was not until 1883 that Mount Holyoke had a black alumna. During the decades leading up to the Civil War, there is no evidence that the faculty did anything to encourage anti-slavery activities. As is often the case, though, the students seemed to be ahead of the faculty, with increasing levels of protest and anti-slavery agitation after passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854.

Amherst College was founded in 1821. Amherst students formed an Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Amherst at this time in fact had *two* societies dedicated to ending slavery, one way or another. The Anti-Slavery Society, sympathetic to Garrison who advocated immediate abolition, was regarded as extremely radical by the faculty and a majority of the student body. The second society was called the "Amherst College and Amherst Colonization Society." By the fall of 1834, the Anti-Slavery Society comprised approximately one third of the Amherst students, but they were forced to disband after President Humphrey informed them that "the Society was alienating Christian brethren, retarding and otherwise injuring the cause of religion in College, and threatening in many ways the prosperity of the Institution."

Evenhandedly, the president also insisted that the Colonization Society disband, though — with townspeople and faculty as well as students being members — it seems likely that in fact he was only asking them to cease their on-campus activity. Three years later the college's Anti-Slavery Society was back; the request to form such a society was "cheerfully granted" by the faculty, though the president and the majority of the faculty remained firm in their opposition to the radical views of Garrison.

The Amherst students seem, not surprisingly, to have had some difficulty deciding precisely where they stood on these issues. Though in its earlier incarnation the college Anti-



Slavery Society had described itself as an auxiliary of Garrison's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, this time it allied itself with the *American Anti-Slavery Society* and explicitly decided not to subscribe to Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*. By this time, Garrison was vigorously criticizing New England churches, and this undoubtedly helped to persuade the Amherst students to keep their distance. The students' views remained relatively radical, however, as they adopted the affirmative in answer to questions such as, "Is slave holding always a sin?" and, "Is it the duty of Christian churches to exclude slave holders from their communion and slaveholding ministers from their pulpits?" while choosing the negative in response to the question, "Can an abolitionist consistently belong to a Colonization Society?" On the question, "Does the Constitution of the United States, properly interpreted, sanction slavery?" the group was evenly divided. Surely anti-slavery activity and debate must have continued at Amherst, especially after passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, but unfortunately the records from the years after 1841 have not survived.



the 1830s and the ministers who would not allow abolitionists to meet in their churches).

Astriking example I have discovered of New Englanders' deliberate amnesia on the subject of slavery is to be found in the comparison of a passage in Carpenter and Morehouse's 1896 *History of Amherst* with the original document on which it is supposedly based. Carpenter and Morehouse print what purports to be a portion of a 1759 Amherst tax valuation list. It shows columns for "Polls [i.e., adult white males], Horses, Oxen, Cows, Hogs, Sheep, Personal Estate, Houses and Lands, and Real Estate." Because of what I had seen of other tax lists from the 1700s, it seemed to me that there was something missing from the Carpenter and Morehouse version. Sure enough, when I finally discovered the original document, it was just what had been reproduced in the 1896 book *except* that the original contained one additional column, between "Sheep" and "Personal Estate": "Negro." The omission of that one column

cannot possibly have been an accident! There are many histories of towns from this area that were published in the late 1800s. In most cases, little or no mention is made of the existence of slavery in colonial times. (George Sheldon's 1895 *History of Deerfield* is an honorable exception, with an 18-page section on "Negro Slavery.") But the Amherst history is the only one I have found that contains an apparently deliberate falsification of an historical document.

Western Massachusetts is very different now from the way it was 250 years ago. It is hard to imagine that black slavery was widespread here in colonial times. No monuments or markers in the burying grounds or on the streets of towns such as Deerfield exist to remind us of this part of our history, nor do most schoolchildren ever hear about it. But it is important to remember that slavery was not just a regional phenomenon, that at the time of our nation's founding, it was just as accepted in Massachusetts as it was in South Carolina. All Americans are still living with the legacy of this dreadful institution.

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"In the eighteenth century, the presidents of both Harvard and Yale owned slaves."

Although there was at least some anti-slavery agitation at all three of the western Massachusetts colleges (Williams, Mount Holyoke, and Amherst), few if any — students or faculty — seemed ready to welcome freed slaves into American society as equals. And the underlying view of the colonizationists seemed to be that everyone, black and white, would be better off if the blacks were liberated and promptly sent to Africa.

Although slavery was *never* legislated out of existence in Massachusetts, it did gradually come to an end in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. And then it seems that we in Massachusetts set about "forgetting" as rapidly as possible that the "peculiar institution" of slavery had ever existed here. We like to remember the "good things," such as the "Underground Railroad" and the life of William Lloyd Garrison (forgetting the Boston mobs that attacked him in