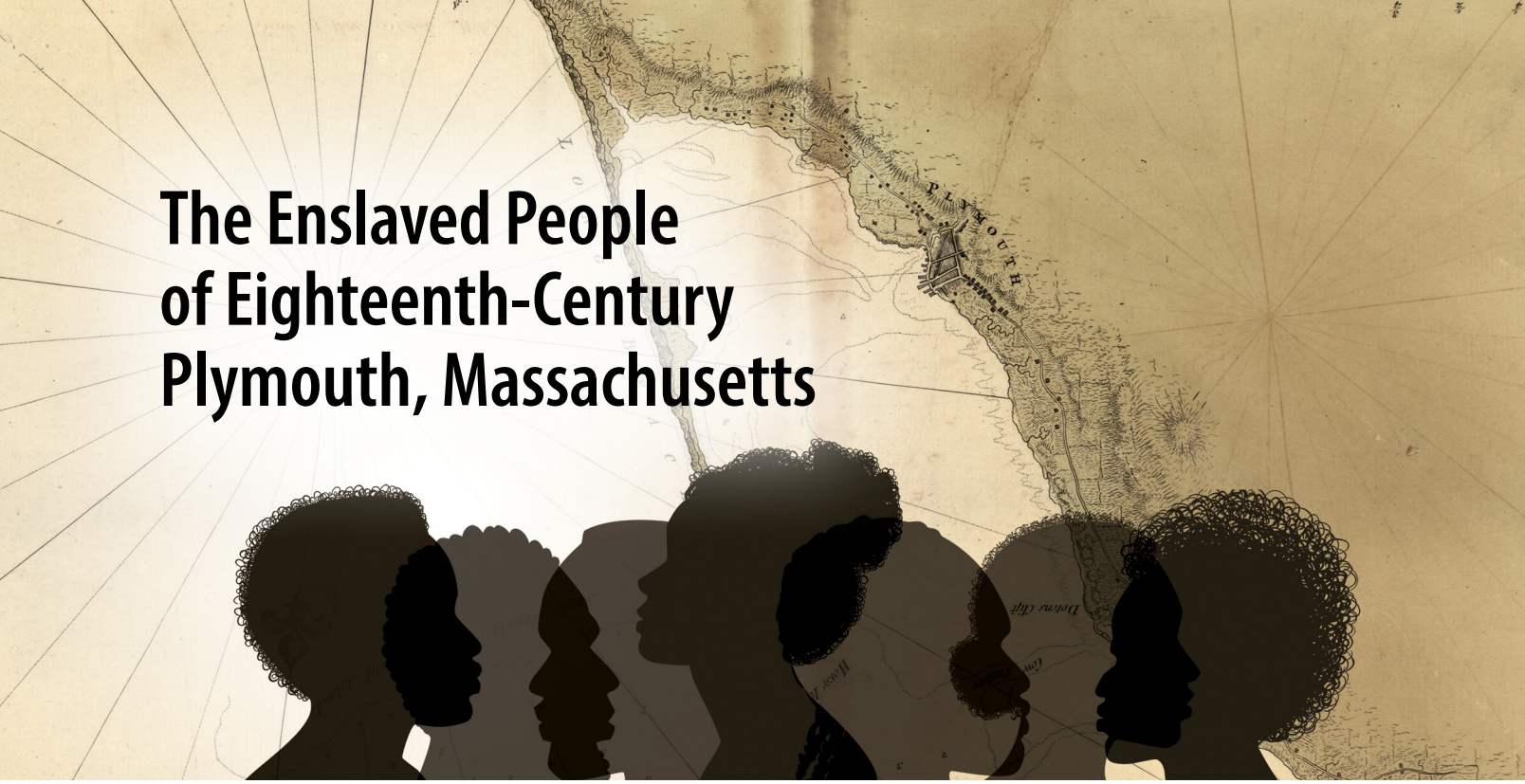
The Enslaved People of Eighteenth-Century Plymouth, Massachusetts



Above: Detail of Joseph F. W. Des Barres, *Chart of Plymouth Bay* (London, ca. 1770), Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/77693976.

The population of colonial Plymouth is well documented, the town's multitude of records seemingly thoroughly mined for historical and genealogical purposes. One population, however, has been overlooked—enslaved Black men, women, and children. Their numbers were not large, but they were a visible presence in the town, which had an overall population of approximately 1,000 in 1690 and 2,380 in 1783.[1]

The sometimes-ambiguous nature of the scanty documentation, the small size of the enslaved population, and the almost absolute surety that there were enslaved people in Plymouth who remain completely undocumented renders any demographic statements highly problematic. A conservative analysis, however, positively identifies ninety-two enslaved people living in Plymouth between 1688 and 1788. An additional forty-eight enslaved people—many of whose names are unknown—have been tentatively identified. Fifty-eight Plymouth residents were positively identified as enslavers, with another seventeen Plymouth residents identified as probable enslavers.

Information about these enslaved Black people is scattered and incomplete, and the most definitive documentation is generally focused not on the enslaved, but on the men (and, occasionally, women) who enslaved them. A 1771 property inventory ordered for taxation purposes by the government of Massachusetts Bay included a category for "all Indian, negro or mulatto servants for life, from fourteen to forty-five years of age."[2] Out of the 566 taxpayers in the town of Plymouth at that time, seventeen of them enslaved a total of twenty "servants for life," not including those under age 14 or over 45. The tax inventory recorded the names of all the enslavers and none of the enslaved.[3]

Probate documents can be more enlightening, although these also focus on (deceased) enslavers. A search of the Plymouth County Probate Index identified 443 residents of the town of Plymouth who filed wills or inventories before 1788. A review of these 443 sets of probate documents identified thirty-six people enslaving a total of fifty-six Black men, women, and children. The enslaved people are cited in both wills and inventories—not always by name, but, in the case of inventories, almost invariably assigned a monetary value. These documents, however, may represent only some of a household's enslaved people at a very specific moment in time; those who were sold, given to family members, died before a will was written, or died before the court ordered an inventory, remain unknown.



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All too often, documentation centered on enslavers leads to a focus on them. This emphasis obscures the people who form the larger part of the equation, namely the enslaved.

The enslaved are also overlooked because the evidence for their presence in Plymouth is not always straightforward. Both the Plymouth vital records and the records of Plymouth's First Church include entries for "Negros," with no surnames given. These individuals are generally referred to as "servants of," or as "belonging to" a specific individual. Only occasionally in the vital records (and never in the church records) are people identified as "slaves." A very small number of these men and women listed without surnames may have been free and not enslaved.

Even the most complete documents omit crucial details—such as names. Between 1725 and 1753, Josiah Cotton of Plymouth kept a journal in which he entered a fairly detailed account of each year as it concluded. He wrote on January 21, 1731, that "I had also a Negro Man who proved so disorderly that I was forced to part with him," before asking God to "grant to us better success in our purchase made this year of Dutchess, & Quominah two Negros of our Daughter Phillips," and later, on January 1739, noting both "the purchase of Negro woman that was formerly our son-in-law Phillips' & Pulcifer's," as well as his father-in-law's loss "by death" of "old Sampson a Negroman thatt was formerly also our son Phillips."[4]

Some ten years later, Cotton noted that, "We were also disappointed in our expectations of a good bargain in our negro maid, whom after we had kept about 10 months we sold to Mr. Murdock & T. Foster, who sent her to N. Carolina."[5] As extraordinary as it is to have an account of several enslaved people inhabiting a single Plymouth household over time, the unnamed disorderly man, the newly purchased "Negro woman," and the woman sold and sent south, could be among the enslaved people who are found in other documentation from the 1730s onwards or, equally, entirely unique individuals; "Old Sampson" appears by name only in Cotton's memoirs.

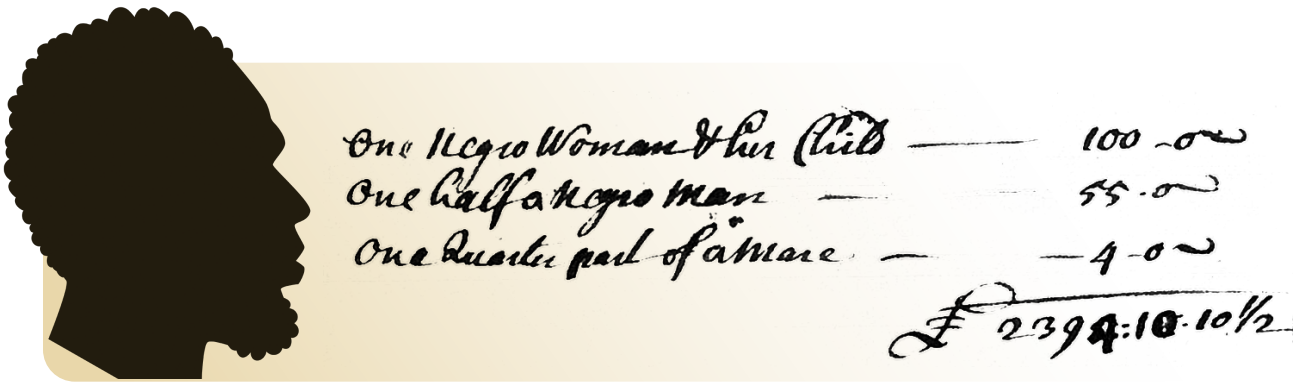
The earliest indisputable evidence for the presence of enslaved Black people in the town of Plymouth is a February 20, 1687/8, bill of sale, which records Joseph Bartlett, in return for a "certain youth named Nedd and three pounds of money," selling Ephraim Morton,

> . . . a certain Negro youth being a perpetual slave whose name is Toney to have and to hold the said Negro servant from the day of the date hereof . . . avouching myself, at the time of the said exchange, to be the very true and proper owner of said Negro . . .

This is the only bill of sale for a person entered into the records of the town.[6]

Bills of sale were generally regarded as independent business documents, and their survival is rare and random. One example is an August 11, 1738, bill of sale recording Thomas Spooner of Plymouth purchasing a 22-year-old girl named Jean for £105, as "a slave during her natural life . . . " from Jonathan Bourne of Sandwich, who declared that he knew of no physical disabilities, ailments, or weaknesses of Jean's, "excepting her being with child."[7] Jean is, possibly, the unnamed "Negro girl of Thomas Spooner Jr." who died June 11, 1760.[8]

As contractual arrangements, sales of enslaved people were expected to be straightforward and honest. When they were not, redress could be sought in the courts. In May 1731, Josiah Sturtevant of Plymouth sued Isaac Howland of Tiverton, Rhode Island, for fraud, claiming that Howland had, on November 12, 1729, sold him for £95 "a certain Negro boy named Primas," warranting the boy to be in good health when, in fact, the boy was sickly and died within three months. The jury found Howland not guilty of fraud.[9]



Record from the estate inventory of Abiel Pulcifer, February 24, 1736/37. *Massachusetts, Plymouth County, Probate Records, 1633–1967*, FamilySearch.org.

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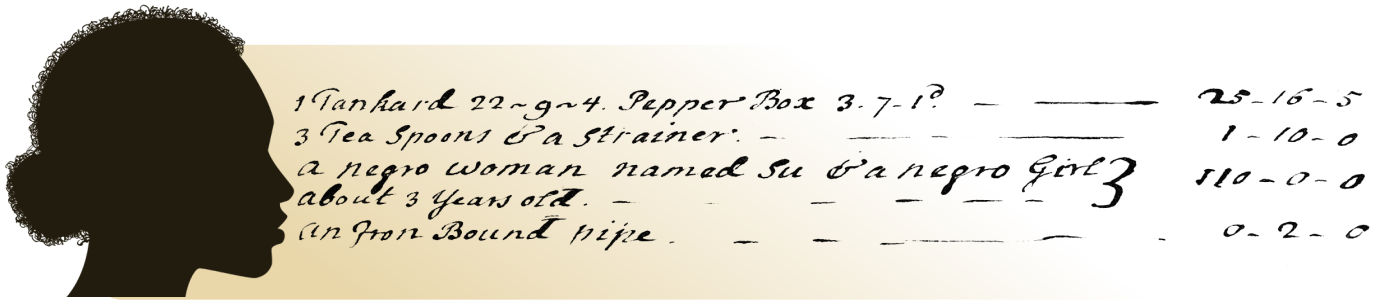

Record from the estate inventory of Tomson Phillips, March 18, 1731/32. *Massachusetts, Plymouth County, Probate Records, 1633–1967*, FamilySearch.org.

A few inventories indirectly document commercial transactions relating to enslaved people. The inventory of the estate of Thomas Byles, submitted May 3, 1733, included "Said Byles' proportionable part of a Negro girl in Mr. Ebenezer Doggett's hands, £15 2s. 2d., the whole of said girl being appraised at £48."[10] Similarly, the inventory of the estate of Abiel Pulcifer, taken February 24, 1736/7, included not only "One Negro woman & her child," valued at £100, but also "one half a Negro man," valued at £55.[11]

For those in more affluent circumstances, financial arrangements could be complex. A bill of sale executed November 27, 1729, between merchant Isaac Lothrop and mariner Tompson Phillips records Lothrop selling Phillips "half a Negro boy named Euro, aged about fourteen." In return, Phillips sold Lothrop "half a Negro man named Johnno, aged about twenty-five years, and has but one leg." It was agreed that Phillips would take Euro on Phillips's next voyage to Jamaica, and sell him there. As payment, Phillips would purchase and ship Lothrop the types of goods that would bring the most profit in Plymouth. Lothrop, in turn, agreed to keep "said Negro man Johnno and . . . teach [him] the art or trade of a cordwainer." After a year, Phillips could, if he chose, reclaim Johnno, buying out Lothrop's share for £40.[12]

Phillips, in his will, written October 7, 1725, bequeathed his "lands, servants, Negros, vessels, money, goods, wares, debts, effect, things, chattels & Dues whatsoever being & lying in Middletown in the Colony of Connecticut in New England aforesaid or at said Jamaica in the West Indies or the Bay of Honduras or elsewhere," to his wife, Hannah, and named her and her father, Josiah Cotton [of Plymouth], executors.[13] By March 18, 1731/2, however, when the inventory of Phillips's estate was submitted, the only enslaved persons listed were "a Negro woman named Su and a Negro girl about 3 years old," valued together at £110.[14] Although the 1729 bill of sale allowed Phillips to buy Johnno after a year, Johnno remained with Lothrop. Lothrop's estate inventory, taken May 18, 1744, listed "One negroman named Johnno," valued at £12 10s.[15]

Sales are also, occasionally, documented in the probate records themselves. The inventory of the estate of Gideon White, taken February 1, 1780, listed "a Negro girl named Mari," valued at £200; on October 10, 1783, widow Joanna White, administrator of her husband's estate, submitted an accounting of items that had lessened the value of the estate. Included was £5 lost to the estate "by sale of a Negro girl," indicating that, at some time between February 1780 and October 1783, Joanna had sold the girl Mari for £195—£5 less than her appraised value. Joanna also asked to be reimbursed £1 9s. for "sundry apparel for the Negro girl by agreement with the purchaser."[16]

Inventories of the estates of the deceased were generally carried out by uninvolved parties, who may not have known the names of the enslaved individuals in a particular household. It was not unusual for these enslaved individuals to be listed anonymously, while still meticulously assigned a value. Occasionally, though, even when enslaved people were known to a document's author, their disposition remained impersonal and remote, as when Josiah Finney wrote his will on January 2, 1723, bequeathing an unamed "Negro man" to Finney's son John.[17] Sometimes, however, enslaved persons were named in wills, providing unequivocal evidence, even if momentary, of an individual's life (and enslaved status) in Plymouth. In his October 28, 1707, will, Nathaniel Warren bequeathed a "Negro girl Pegg" to his wife; a "Negro girl" valued at £20 was listed in Warren's estate inventory taken December 14, 1707.[18]

As remote and dispassionate as these legal records can be, sometimes a glimpse of the family history of enslaved people can be found by combining probate records with church or vital records. The inventory of the estate of Plymouth merchant John Watson, taken March 12, 1732/3, included "One Negro man Cuffe," valued at £90; and "One Negro woman Flora well-clothed," at £85.[19] At Watson's death, he left a widow, Priscilla. Priscilla Watson married, second, on January 28, 1732/3, Isaac Lothrop, Jr.[20] John Watson's "Negro

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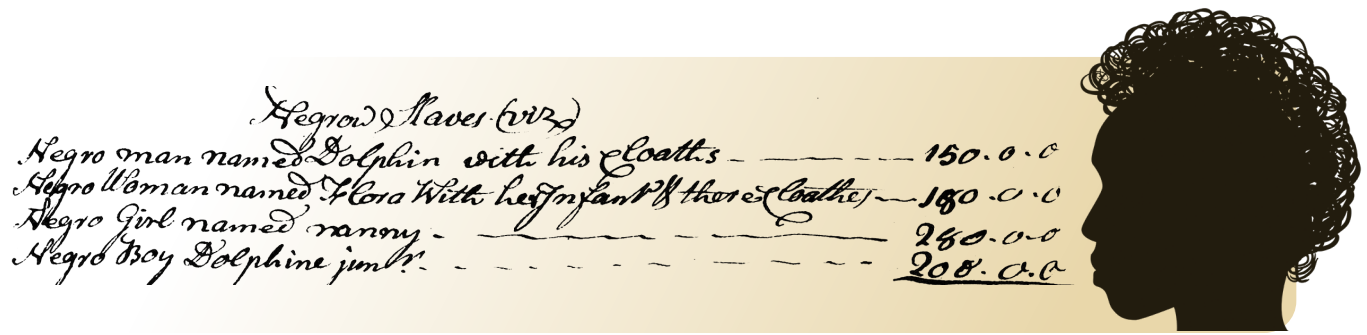
man Cuffe" legally became, at Watson's death, the property of his widow Priscilla Watson; at Priscilla's second marriage, Cuffe became the property of her second husband, Isaac Lothrop. On May 18, 1732, Cuffe, now "Negro man servant to Mr. Isaac Lothrop Jr.," published intentions with Nanne, "negro woman servant to Mr. Samuel Bartlett," marrying on June 5, 1732.[21]

A similarly circuitous path was imposed upon Flora, who was enslaved initially by John Watson. Flora is named in Watson's 1732/3 estate inventory as "Negro woman Flora." On November 6, 1731—after Watson's death, but before his estate inventory—Flora was named as a "Negro woman servant belonging to Mrs. Priscilla Watson," in her published intentions with Dolphin, a "Negro man servant belonging to Nathaniel Thomas Jr." The couple married November 29, 1731.[22] By October 3, 1736, when Flora's children, Dan and Nanne, were baptized, Priscilla Watson having married Isaac Lothrop, Jr., Flora was described as "a Negro woman belonging to Mr. Isaac Lothrop Jr."[23] By the time that Flora's husband, Dolphin, was baptized on December 20, 1741, he was also recorded as belonging to Isaac Lothrop, Jr.[24] The inventory of Isaac Lothrop's estate, taken November 2, 1751, listed a "Negro man named Dolphin with his clothes," valued at £150; a "Negro woman named Flora with her infant & their clothes," at £180; a "Negro girl named Nanny," at £280; and a "Negro boy Dolphin Junior," at £200."[25] The family does not appear again in the records.

Another network of documentation centers around Dr. Lazarus LeBaron. At the Plymouth Court of Common Pleas begun March 1737/8, Godfrey Mackswaney sued Ruth Sergeant, an unmarried minor girl, for £100 for malicious slander; she had claimed that he had committed "fornications with a Negro woman" named Hagar, "a Negro Servant to Dr. LeBaron for life." Sergeant stated that Mackswaney had been seen "in close hug with Hagar with his hand a round her neck . . . and that he the Plaintiff lay with her meaning that he had carnal knowledge of her said Hagar's body in the street in Plymouth aforesaid between the house of Robert Brown, Esquire, and Mr. Barnabas Hedge in Plymouth."[26] In addition to Hagar, LeBaron is documented as having enslaved, between 1753 and 1766, several children, including a "boy named Plymouth."[27] LeBaron was named in the 1771 Massachusetts Tax Inventory; he had one "servant for life" between the ages of 15 and 45. The inventory of LeBaron's estate, submitted April 21, 1774, included "One Negro Boy Named Nero 7 years old," and "One ditto named Ginna [Guinea] 5 years old," each valued at £26 13s. 4d.[28]

A small number of these enslaved persons are recorded as having broken the law. A "Negro man named Guiney" [Guinea] was listed in Nicholas Drew's May 1, 1738, probate documents. Estate administrator Joshua Drew assigned Guinea a value of £130.[29] Then, in March 1739/40, "Guiney a Negro Slave of Joshua Drew" was charged at the Plymouth Court of General Sessions with having, on May 10, 1739, broken into the part of Drew's house in which Rebecca, wife of Jonathan Devenant, was living and "wickedly attempted to debauch the said Rebecca . . . whereby said Rebecca was grievously affrighted and put in great fear and terror of her life, and other enormities." Guinea pleaded guilty and was sentenced to be "whipped twenty five stripes on his naked body at the cart's tail in the open street."[30] Three years later, on July 25, 1742, Guinea, a "negro man belonging to Mr Joshua Drew," was baptized. He published intentions November 14, 1747, with "Hager, Negro belonging to the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Leonard," and, on December 10, 1747, the couple married.[31]

Scipeo, a man enslaved by Thomas Torrey, appeared as an accessory in another criminal case. At the Plymouth Court of Common Pleas session of May 1753, Torrey brought charges against one Ruben Harlow of Plymouth, claiming that Harlow "did entice & seduce Scipeo, a man servant to the said Thomas, to supply . . . the said Ruben, with meat, drink, washing, and lodging in a secret & clandestine way" at Torrey's house in Plymouth, at Torrey's expense and without his knowledge,


Negro Slaves (viz)
Negro man named Dolphin with his Cloaths — 150.0.0
Negro Woman named Flora With her Infant & there Cloathes — 180.0.0
Negro Girl named nanny — 280.0.0
Negro Boy Dolphine junr — 200.0.0

Record from the estate inventory of Isaac Lothrop Jr., November 2, 1751. *Massachusetts, Plymouth County, Probate Records, 1633–1967*, FamilySearch.org.

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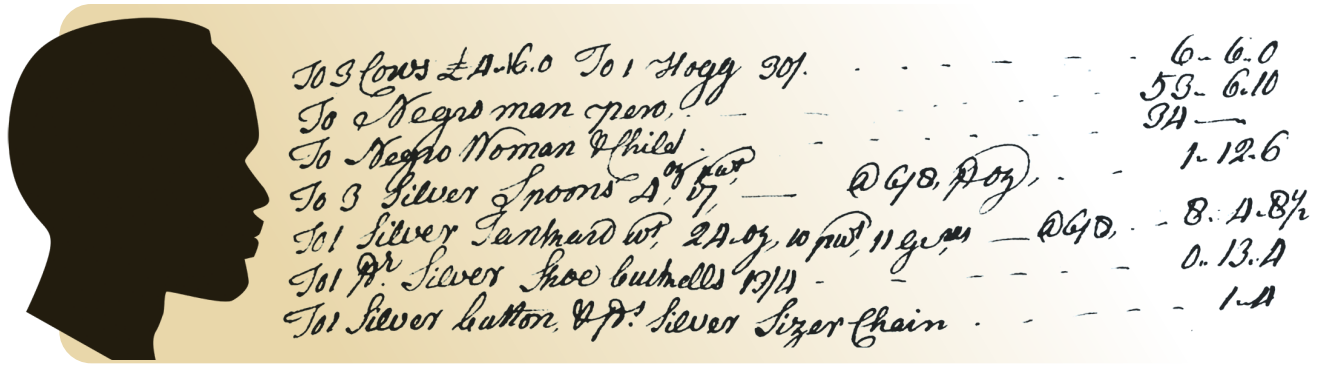


Record from the estate inventory of John Murdoch, October 29, 1756. *Massachusetts, Plymouth County, Probate Records, 1633–1967*, FamilySearch.org.

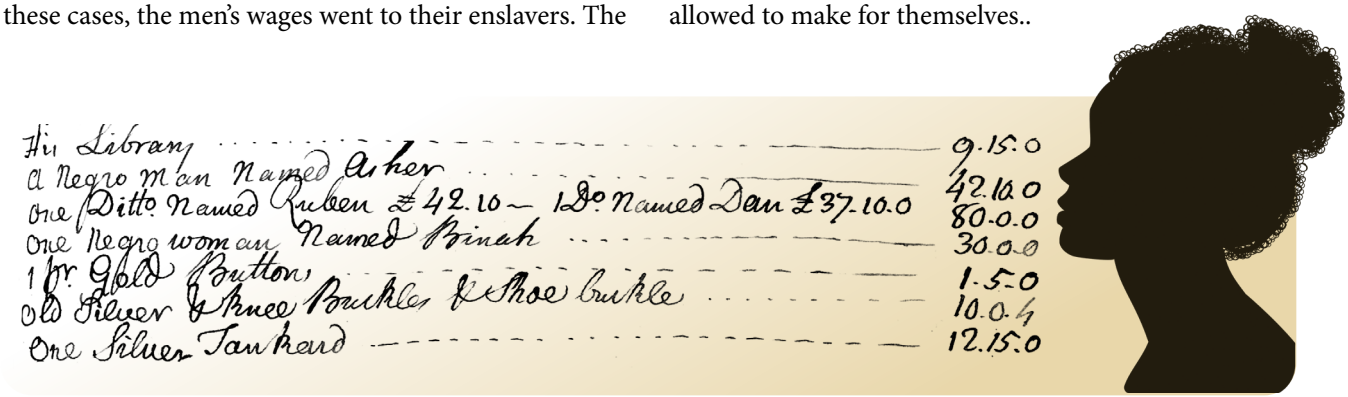
for four months, and to allow Harlow to take goods and money to the amount of £5. In addition, Torrey complained that, because of Harlow's bad influence, Scipeo "is so corrupted that he has committed several thefts, for which he is now in prison in our gaol in Plymouth," depriving Torrey of Scipeo's service and putting Torrey to great costs. Torrey requested damages of £40; the jury found in his favor but awarded him only £7.[32]

Most of the enslaved Black people named or enumerated in the records lived quietly, some working in Plymouth homes, providing services that, as Joanna Mellish writes, not only "had economic value per se," but that allowed white males to devote their energies to more lucrative pursuits, "thus increasing productivity and easing the transition from a household-based to a market-based economy," and allowed white females to more easily and efficiently fulfill their essential and often onerous "household production" duties, without the economic drain and potential unreliability of hired household help.[33]

Some enslaved men, like Scipio, were hired out as hands on board ships: "Scipio, Negro man" having earned £50 14s. 4d. in "wages on board the sloop *William*, a vessel belonging to Isaac Lothrop, Esq."[34] Some, like Johnno the cordwainer, worked in local individual trades. Others were sent to labor in larger local industries. In all these cases, the men's wages went to their enslavers. The inventory of the estate of Nathaniel Goodwin, submitted May 12, 1772, included "1 Negro man named Prince," valued at £60, and "One ditto ditto Pompey," at £50[35]; an accounting submitted October 4, 1773, included "work done by S. Cooper, R. Williams, Prince & Pompey at the R[ope]Walk," valued at £26 11s. 4d."[36]

A few enslaved people, such as Pompey, remained in Plymouth into the 1800s. William T. Davis, writing in 1906, remembered Pompey, whom he described as "once a slave of General Nathaniel Goodwin" [son of his first enslaver] and, according to his recollections, "the last of the old slaves living in Plymouth."[37] "Pompey African servant of the late General N. Goodwin supposed to be 80 years old," died December 24, 1831.[38]

Throughout these estate, probate, and court records, in diaries and private papers, and in the birth, marriage, and death records kept by the church and town of Plymouth, a drumbeat of names was recorded, including Cuffe, Nanne, Jo, Phebe, Jack, Mariah, Tobe, James, Dick, Bess, Ruben, Patience, Hannah, Boston, Eseck, Rose, Pomp, Bristol, Jim, Primus, Silas, Venus, Juba, Caesar, Scipio, Candace, Elisha, Bess, London, Jane, Nero, Violet, Gad, Flora, Dutch, Pero, Asher, Century, Jenne, and Hannah, as well as a long list of unnamed dead. Often the choice to marry was the only consequential decision these enslaved men and women were allowed to make for themselves..



Record from the estate inventory of Nathaniel Thomas [Jr.], December 10, 1745. *Massachusetts, Plymouth County, Probate Records, 1633–1967*, FamilySearch.org.

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Although largely invisible in the records, these enslaved people were very visible to their fellow residents of Plymouth. Documenting their existence, however, is difficult, and creating a sense of their personal lives is even more challenging. The information presented here is just a beginning. We can hope that additional research in sources such as untranscribed church records, and in business documents and personal papers held in archives and in private collections, will bring yet more truth and shed more light on this forgotten, and too often anonymous, population. ◆

NOTES

All primary source evidence is quoted with modernized spelling and punctuation.

1 William T. Davis, *History of the Town of Plymouth* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Co., 1885), 172.

2 Only one enslaved Indian has been identified in Plymouth records, "One Spanish Indian Woman Binah," valued at £60, in the inventory of the estate of John Watson, taken 12 March 1732/3; *Massachusetts, Plymouth County, Probate Records, 1633–1967* [PCPR], FamilySearch.org/search/collection/2018320, 6:298–317. All other enslaved people were designated as "Negro."

3 "1771 Interactive Massachusetts Tax Inventory," sites.fas.harvard.edu/~hsb41/masstax/masstax.cgi. In 1754, Governor William Shirley ordered that each town undertake an enumeration of all enslaved persons, both male and female, over the age of sixteen; for unknown reasons, the records of many towns, including Plymouth, are not preserved.

4 Josiah Cotton, "Josiah Cotton Memoirs, 1726–1756" (microfilm reel 398, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston), 203, 270.

5 Ibid., 276.

6 *Records of the Town of Plymouth*, 3 vols. (Plymouth, Mass.: Avery & Doten, 1889, 1892, 1903), 2:150–51.

7 Website of Pilgrim Hall Museum, pilgrimhall.org/pdf/1738_Bill_of_Sale_for_Jean.pdf.

8 *Plymouth Church Records, 1620–1859, Part 1* [PChR] in Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, vol. 22 (Boston, Mass.: 1920), 390.

9 Plymouth County, Massachusetts, Court of Common Pleas; *Court Records, 1702–1859*, FamilySearch.org/search/catalog/300827, 4:339.

10 PCPR [note 2], 6:353–54.

11 Ibid., 7:278–281.

12 Website of Pilgrim Hall Museum, pilgrimhall.org/pdf/1729_Lothrop_Phillips_Document.pdf.

13 PCPR [note 2], 6:88–89. Cotton refused administration.

14 Ibid., 6:155–56. The distinction between those enslaved and those indentured is clear in the probate records; enslaved persons, always designated as "Negro," are simply assigned a valuation, while the indentured are named as "servants" and the valuation is given specifically for their "time"; see, for instance, the inventory of Nathaniel Warren, in PCPR [note 2], 2:132–43.

15 Ibid., 9:263–66.

16 Ibid., 28:16–17, 334–35.

17 Ibid., 5:219–20, 221–22.

18 Ibid., 2:140–41, 142–43.

19 Ibid., 6:298–317.

20 Plymouth Vital Records [PVR], 97, in *Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1620–1850*, AmericanAncestors.org.

21 Ibid., 161; 98. At their marriage Cuffe and Nanne were described not as servants, but as "belonging to…"

22 Ibid., 171; 97.

23 PChR [note 8], 1:440.

24 Ibid., 2:411.

25 PCPR [note 2], 12:404–409.

26 Plymouth County, Court of Common Pleas [note 9], 6:390–91. The jury found for Sargent and ordered Mackswaney to pay her £6 02s. 06p. to recover her court costs.

27 PVR [note 20], 156; website of Pilgrim Hall Museum, pilgrimhall.org/pdf/1753_Bill_of_Sale_for_Plymouth.pdf; PChR [note 8], 1:393, 395.

28 PCPR [note 2], 21:610–12.

29 Ibid., 7:395–96.

30 Plymouth County, Massachusetts, Court of General Sessions of the Peace; *Court Records, 1686–1817*, FamilySearch.org/search/catalog/300736, vol. 1730–1749:131.

31 PChR [note 8], 2:511; PVR [note 20], 157, 155.

32 Plymouth County, Court of Common Pleas [note 9], 10:385–96.

33 Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 8; Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 71–72.

34 PCPR [note 2], 9:123–24; Plymouth, Mass., "Notarial records, 1741–1830," FamilySearch.org, DGS #8204662, image #28.

35 PCPR [note 2], 21:112–26.

36 Ibid., 21:330–33.

37 William T. Davis, *Plymouth Memories of an Octogenarian* (Plymouth, Mass.: Bittinger Brothers, 1906), 127.

38 PChR [note 8], 2:677.

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