

INTRODUCING

Plymouth County, Massachusetts Freeperson Families in 1790

Plymouth's *Mayflower* white families have been well-studied, but the lives of the Black men, women, and children enslaved by those families and their descendants are vastly under-represented in historical research. A native of the area myself, I have spent over two decades researching enslaved and free Black Revolutionary War soldiers of Plymouth County. As veterans, these men returned from the war, supported the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts, and contributed to the difficult work of building an early American republic where the promise that "all men are created equal" was not guaranteed.

Plymouth County, Massachusetts Freeperson Families in 1790 provides biographies of the twenty-eight Black and Native families headed by a homeowner enumerated in the first federal census. These men were veterans, farmers, blacksmiths, business owners, teachers, ministers, seamen, musicians, and common laborers. Once obscured, their lives and those of their wives and children are newly illuminated. A selection of family sketches, adapted from the book, are presented here.

James Easton (1754–1830) and Sarah Dunbar (1756–1833)

James Easton was a grandson of one of Plymouth's earliest enslaved couples, Richard and Mingo Gundaway, who were manumitted in 1711. In 1732, Richard and Mingo leased, and were later gifted, ninety acres from the Titicut Indians in the Titicut reservation in present-day Lakeville. Sarah Dunbar was born in 1756 to free Black parents, Sampson Dunbar and Patience Crouch of Randolph. James Easton served in the Revolutionary War and purchased property afterwards for his family following their 1783 marriage.

Atypically, by 1790, the Easton and Dunbar families had been free Black homeowners for several generations, which helped provide the financial stability to launch James Easton's early career. James purchased a Brockton forge and trading company with white co-owners and, in 1814, founded his own forge and trading company with his sons. He became Plymouth County's wealthiest Black businessman and was viewed by both Black and white associates as a genius.

However, Easton's brilliance and business acumen did not prevent racism in their local community. Family members were physically dragged out of their house of worship, the Fourth Church of Christ of North Bridgewater (now Brockton), after attempting to desegregate it by sitting in the "white" pews" in 1789 and 1800. In 1812, the Easton family legally purchased a pew from a white church member on the main floor in the East Stoughton (now Avon) Baptist Church and sat there, rather than in the "negro pew." Outraged white parishioners proceeded to terrorize the Eastons and destroy their pew. Easton discovered "that the seats had been



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removed. They, accordingly, sat down as well as they could on the flooring. The next Sunday, nothing but the ground being left for their accommodation, the party were obliged to stand up during the service. The enemy, finding that these repeated inconveniences were unavailing, covered the place with pitch and tar … [the Eastons] never entered the church again."[1]

The Eastons also pursued their activism through other avenues. Sarah Dunbar was educated by her stepmother, a Black teacher, and Sarah likely taught her own children to read and write. By the early 1800s, Massachusetts towns typically maintained small one-room school buildings. Plymouth area schools were often integrated, although many poor Black children could not regularly attend.

The Easton family's experiences of racism led to disillusionment regarding the quality of their children's education and caused James to create a school for young Black men on the site of his forge, which operated for fourteen years.

Cuffee Wright (1753–1796) and Anna Cordner (1750–aft. 1810)

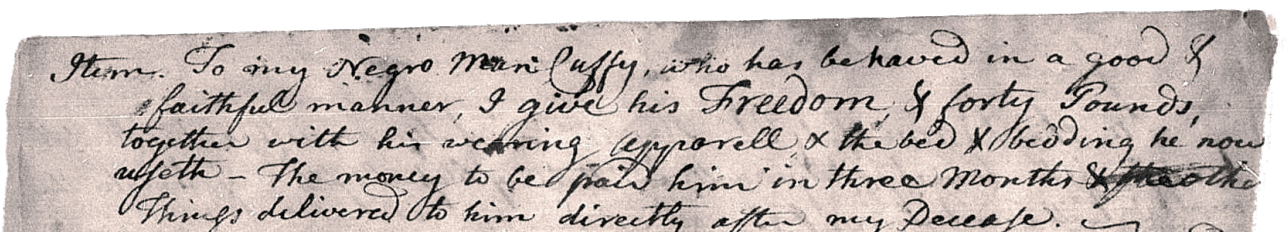
Cuffee Wright was enslaved as a child by Middleborough minister Rev. Sylvanus Conant, who taught him to read and write. Massachusetts slaves were rarely provided educational opportunities or allowed to become literate. Ministers were a small category of enslavers who might allow enslaved people to read the Bible as a part of religious instruction, although writing was still rarely authorized. However, at age nineteen, Wright personally authored a unique document that showed he likely had spent many hours practicing his penmanship. In 1773, Wright joined Conant's church with a "relation," or statement of faith, that he wrote himself.

Rev. Conant was a Patriot agitator during the Revolutionary War and Wright participated in many of the protests by Middleborough's Patriots against the Loyalist Oliver family. In 1777, Conant became ill with smallpox and died, freeing Wright in his will. In 1778, as soon as his freedom was granted, Wright married Anna Cordner in Brockton. Wright enlisted in the war immediately after the wedding. After the war was over, he purchased a house in Middleborough and later helped to care for Anna's elderly father.

Formerly enslaved people entered a new legal world in Massachusetts following the Revolution: an expansion of civil rights allowed Wright to become a taxpaying homeowner but, as a Black man, he was not allowed to vote in Massachusetts elections, despite having just fought in a war on the side that had adopted "no taxation without representation" as its motto.

Cuffee and Anna Wright both wrote relations for the Middleborough Congregational Church and joined as full members. Black and Native membership in Congregational churches was common at the time, although these members were typically required to sit in segregated pews at the back of the church. The relations written by the Wrights, now a part of the "New England's Hidden Histories" project at the Congregational Library in Boston, are rare documents, written in their own hands and vernacular. Wright's relation is the only known document written in an enslaved New Englander's own hand and in his own vernacular.[2]

The majority of enslaved people featured in this volume either purchased their own freedom with their army wages, or they were freed against their enslavers' wishes when constitutional slavery was abolished in Massachusetts in 1783. Cuffee Wright is a rare case. Rev. Conant manumitted Wright in his will and left him money, clothing, and bedding. Wright began his life in freedom with more security than many newly emancipated individuals. Abolition in Massachusetts brought freedom, but no financial support for freed Black families, who were left to fend for their economic survival after experiencing a lifetime of enslavement.


Item. To my Negro Man Cuffy, who has behaved in a good & faithfull manner, I give his Freedom & forty Pounds, together with his wearing apparell & the bed & bedding he now useth – The money to be paid him in three Months & the Things delivered to him directly after my Decease.

Opposite page: This drawing of the Turner-Burr house at Parting Ways in Plymouth, Mass., appeared on page 32 of the *Boston Globe* on December 8, 1895, accompanying J. N. Taylor's article, "Jim Burr's Life, History of Plymouth's Colored Citizen." The house was likely built around 1830 by Burr's cousin James Turner, son of Plato Turner who appeared in the 1790 census. A detail of *Map of Plymouth County,* by R. Cotton, ca. 1793–1803. Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library. *Above:* 1777 manumission of Cuffee Wright by Rev. Sylvanus Conant of Middleborough, Mass.; Plymouth County, Mass. Probate Records, docket #4829; AmericanAncestors.org.

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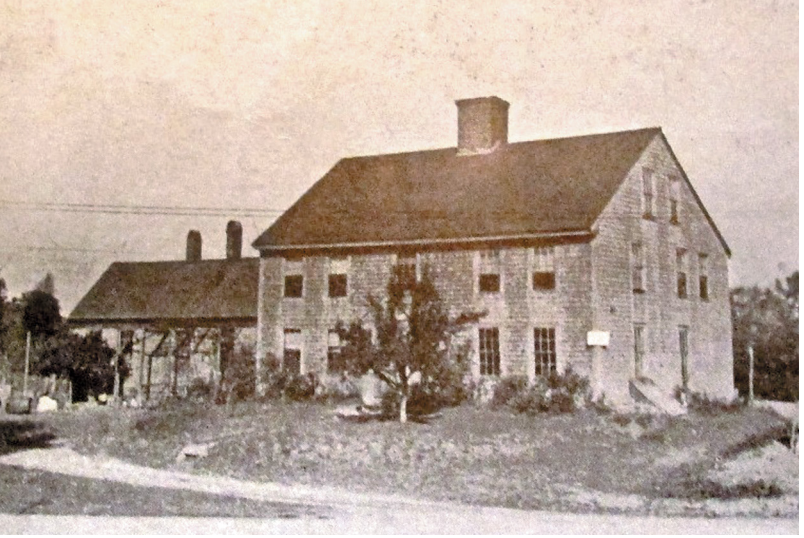

The Rev. Gad Hitchcock Parsonage, 909 High St., Hanson, Mass., where Violet Quason lived with her children from 1760 until 1783. Courtesy of Mary Blauss Edwards.

Violet Quason alias Osgood (1735–after 1802) and Puffer London (by 1743–after 1802)

Violet Quason alias Osgood was born in the Mattakeeset reservation in Pembroke. In the 1750s, the Mattakeeset tribe lost many adult men to the French and Indian War. Predatory white neighbors demanded so much debt payment that Quason's grandmother, Mattakeeset leader Patience (Momentaug) Coomes Thomas, sold off the majority of the Mattakeeset land, which had been deeded as a permanent reservation in the previous century. The tribe revolted against Thomas's leadership and sued to prevent the land from being sold but was unsuccessful. Thomas built an English-style house with the proceeds of the sale, but within several years she had accumulated so much debt that all of her grandchildren were forced into servitude. In 1760, Quason went to live with Hanson minister Rev. Gad Hitchcock to repay family debts.

Although Native Americans in eighteenth-century Massachusetts were not legally considered slaves, many were forced by poverty to serve indefinitely as debt peons for white families. Abuse of the debt peonage system and racist attitudes eroded Quason's status as a free woman, leaving her in virtual enslavement. In 1760, when Quason arrived at the Hitchcock house, Rev. Gideon Hawley of Mashpee reported that most Mashpee tribal members were living in forced servitude with little way to break free from the system. Native women in particular were often considered de facto slaves, and their children could be claimed as enslaved by white families.[3]

Quason was pregnant when she arrived at the Hitchcock house and Hitchcock later claimed Quason and her two children—Juba (b. 1761) and Dinah (b. 1769)—as his property. Hitchcock complained to Pembroke authorities that Juba was disabled as a teenager and consequently tried to receive reimbursements from the town pauper fund, claiming it was unjust for him to pay medical bills for a enslaved person who could not work. The town rejected the claim, stating that Massachusetts law determined that enslavers were responsible for any costs incurred by current or former enslaved people.

In 1783, Violet and her daughter, Dinah, left Hitchcock after learning that slavery had been abolished in Massachusetts. Hitchcock unsuccessfully filed a long complaint with the Massachusetts Court and requested reimbursement for his financial loss.

After 23 years of enslavement, Quason returned to Mattakeeset, where she tended to her elderly mother, Abigail (Coomes) Quason, and her grandmother Patience Thomas. Both women died soon after her return. In 1786, Quason married Puffer London, who had formerly been enslaved, and then purchased a home for her family in Marshfield. In the 1790 census, Violet London was one of the few Native Americans enumerated in Plymouth County, because indigenous tribes were sovereign nations, and their members not considered American citizens. Therefore, Native families living on Plymouth County reservations and in communities such as Assawompsett in Lakeville, Titicut in Middleborough and Bridgewater, and Herring Pond in Plymouth were not included in the federal census. Native and Black marriages had increased throughout the 18th century, so federal censuses included indigenous people married to Black householders but excluded Black spouses residing within Native communities.

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Prince Goodwin (1743–1821) and his wives, Nelly (1769–1801) and Lettice Barker (1763–1833); Cato Howe (1755–1824) and his wives, Althea (1750–1821) and Lucy (1775–1855); Quash Quande (1726–1806) and his wife, Phillis (d. 1819); and Plato Turner (1751–1819) and his wife, Rachel (1746–1824).

Most of the freeperson families featured in the 1790 book purchased their own houses and private property and lived interspersed with white neighbors. The Parting Ways community in Plymouth operated differently. Parting Ways was located on Plymouth common lands, public town land used to graze sheep. Plymouth's government authorized the Black residents of Parting Ways

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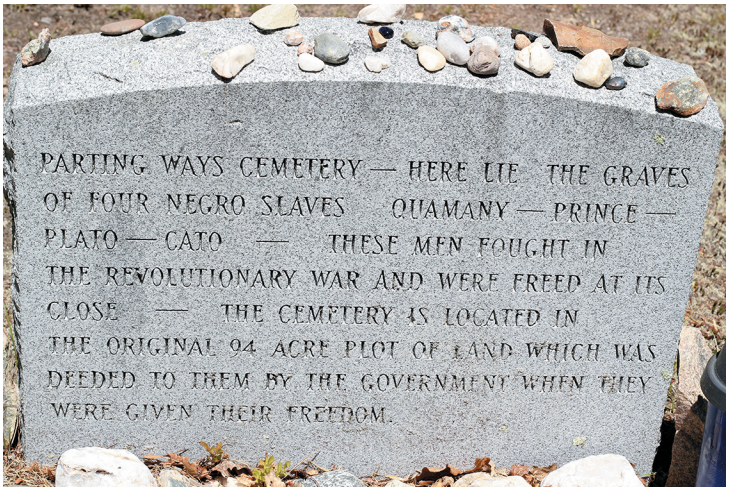


Parting Ways Cemetery, Plymouth, Mass.
Photo courtesy of Mary Blauss Edwards.

to legally own their houses and clear the land, but the land itself belonged to the town.

Despite its economic precariousness, a Black community flourished at Partying Ways from the 1770s through the 1910s. Other Black Plymouth County families who achieved home ownership faced the threat posed by racist and predatory loans. These ever-encroaching loans caused many families to lose their homes within a generation or two after the Revolution. Although the Parting Ways community could not build generational wealth through actual ownership of the land there, their autonomy to manage the property created a unique Black neighborhood for nearly a century and a half.

A 1976 archaeological dig that focused on evidence of the Black community at Parting Ways was featured in historian James Deetz's 1996 book, *In Small Things Forgotten*. Deetz was captivated by the life of Cato Howe and framed a chapter about Parting Ways around him.[4] But Quash Quande was the true heart of the Parting Ways community. Enslaved by Dr. LeBaron, a member of the committee that examined the murky legal status of the Plymouth sheep pasture, Quash learned about a legal loophole—that previously, the town had allowed poor white families to live at Parting Ways without owning the land. Upon his manumission in 1773, Quash moved to Parting Ways, becoming the first Black settler there, and was shortly followed by his extended family and friends. Research on *Plymouth County, Massachusetts Freeperson Families in 1790* led to many new discoveries about Parting Ways families, including their origins and their relationships to each other.

It has been a privilege to research and share the stories of the families featured in this book. For a long time, the stories about Black and Indigenous people from Massachusetts were under-documented and undervalued in the historical literature. Typically, Massachusetts town histories focused narrowly on white abolitionists and houses on the Underground Railroad in the twenty-year period prior to the Civil War. Topics such as Massachusetts' complicity in the slave trade and the lives of Black families who were enslaved there over two centuries were not treated. Today, it is clear that there is so much Black and Native history to be told, especially regarding slavery in New England. These stories are not lost—in many cases, primary sources records exist and are now being interpreted. The Plymouth County families described here fought to build a more equitable society, and their historic calls for justice are just as relevant today. ◆

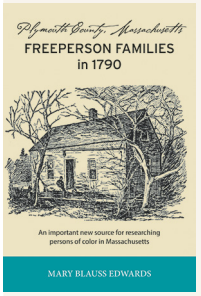
Notes

1 George R. Price, *The Easton Family of Southeast Massachusetts: The Dynamics Surrounding Five Generations of Human Rights Activism 1753–1935* (2006) 51–60, 206.

2 James F. Cooper Jr., "Cuffee's 'Relation': A Faithful Slave Speaks through the Project for the Preservation of Congregational Church Records," *The New England Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (June 2013):293–310.

3 Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren By Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (2015), 224, 228.

4 James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life,* rev. ed. (1996), 187–210.



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