Detail of *United States* by Thomas G. Bradford (Boston, 1838). David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

Northern Liberty

How Four Enslaved Women Found a Haven in New Bedford, Massachusetts

On June 21, 1834, an enslaved woman named Betsey arrived at the port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, on the sloop *Northern Liberty*. She and her daughters, Helen and Jane; a young boy named Toby; and another girl, Margaret, were accompanied by their enslaver, Georgia planter Patrick Gibson. Thomas Cole, a worker at the New Bedford Custom House, later recalled that "[Gibson] was introduced to me by the Capt[ain] of the sloop. Said he had some children with him which he wished to have educated. Inquired for a suitable person to have the care of them."[1] The ship's captain, Joseph Howland, referred to Helen and Jane as Gibson's daughters and noted Gibson showed them "great affection."[2] (Margaret was the daughter of Mary, an enslaved woman owned by Gibson; although she used the Gibson surname, Margaret's father is unknown.)

After speaking with several officials, Gibson was introduced to Nathan Johnson, a Black anti-slavery advocate and a respected member of the community. Johnson and his wife, Mary (known as Polly), who was also Black, then welcomed Betsey and the four children into their home. Toby soon returned to Georgia, but Betsey and the three girls remained with the Johnsons for several years. During their stay, they crossed paths with Frederick Douglass, another escapee from the horrors of slavery whom the Johnsons also housed briefly in 1838.[3]



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Patrick Gibson, who was unmarried, periodically wrote to Nathan Johnson, asking about the children's progress in school, expressing concern over their wellbeing, relaying news from their relatives, and sending recurring payments for their room and board. His letters show him as a doting father and seem to corroborate the opinion of Captain Howland, who described him as a "very kind master […] [who] wished to free his slaves."[4] But this benevolent characterization stands at odds with the harsh reality of his life as the owner of a southern plantation. While Gibson, who was born in Scotland, provided for his daughters' welfare in the free state of Massachusetts, he continued to own over a hundred slaves at his plantation on Creighton Island, Georgia, including Betsey's and Margaret's relatives. He offered rewards for the return of runaways in local newspapers and loaned his slaves to close acquaintances.[5]

Patrick Gibson's contradictory nature became even more apparent after his sudden death in Darien, Georgia, on March 12, 1837.[6] While Betsey and Captain Howland were certain that Gibson had planned to free his enslaved workers, his 1836 will and testament indicated otherwise.[7] In it, Gibson left $20,000 and thirty-four of his over one hundred enslaved workers to his friend Edmund Molyneaux Jr., an attorney and the British consul at Savannah. Gibson's will mentioned each of the enslaved people by name, including "Betsey & her two children, Helen & Jane, now in New Bedford, Massachusetts […] Margaret now in New Bedford."[8] At the time, Betsey was 37, Helen 14, Jane 10, and Margaret 5. Gibson's intentions, as well as Betsey and the girls' futures, were quickly called into question.

The group of people willed to Molyneaux also included Betsey's parents, Chloe and Toby; her sister Nancy and her children; and Toby, the young boy who had

EXECUTOR'S SALE.

ON Saturday the 3d day of February next, at the late residence of Patrick Gibson, Esq. on Creighton Island, in the county of McIntosh, will be sold,

All the personal property on the plantation of the deceased, (other than the slaves) consisting of household and kitchen furniture, cattle, horses, boats, plantation implements, corn, fodder, and sundry other articles. Sale to commence at 10 A. M. and to continue, if need be, to the following Monday.—Conditions of sale cash.

JONATHAN THOMAS, } Ex'ors.
R. R. CUYLER, }

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LAND & NEGROES FOR SALE.

ON the first Tuesday in February next, at the Court House in the city of Darien, McIntosh county, between the lawful hours of sale, will be sold the following property, to wit:

All that plantation or tract of Land, well known as Creighton Island, with the appurtenances, situated in the said county of McIntosh. Also, 100 acres more or less, of Pine Land, in said county, on the Main, considered as an appendage to the above.

Also, the following named Slaves, 84 in number, viz—Adam, Dido, January, Betsey, Jack, Charlotte, Mike, Chloe, Joe, Esther, Tiller, Sam, Nanny, Clinton, London, Moses, Eliza, Pender, old London, Cilla, Stephen, Prince, Suckey, Lucy, Esther, Anthony, Amy, John, Hannah, William, Ned, Susannah, Peggy, Tiller, Diana, Jim, Diana, Mary Ann, Abraham, Phillis, Cully, Bella, George, Cully, Clarissa, Eve, Patience, Cæsar, Mary, Polly, William, Nelly, Joe, July, Lydia, Frank, Affy, John, Cilla, Mingo, Cuffy, Bella, Nero, Tamar, Diana, Prince, Flora, Tirah, Nanny, Joe Hicks, Bob, Daphney, Hampton, Diana, Dolly, Chester, Hard Times, Peter, Andrew, Sam, Juno, Sally, Tom and Phœbe—being the real and personal estate of the late Patrick Gibson, Esq. Sold by order of the Honorable the Justices of the Inferior Court of McIntosh County, sitting for ordinary purposes.

The Island is well improved, with brick dwellings, and all necessary buildings for a Cotton Plantation. The land is believed to be equal to any in the State for the cultivation of Sea Island Cotton and Corn.

The Negroes will be sold in families. Conditions of sale cash—purchasers paying for titles.

JONATHAN THOMAS, } Ex'ors.
R. R. CUYLER, }

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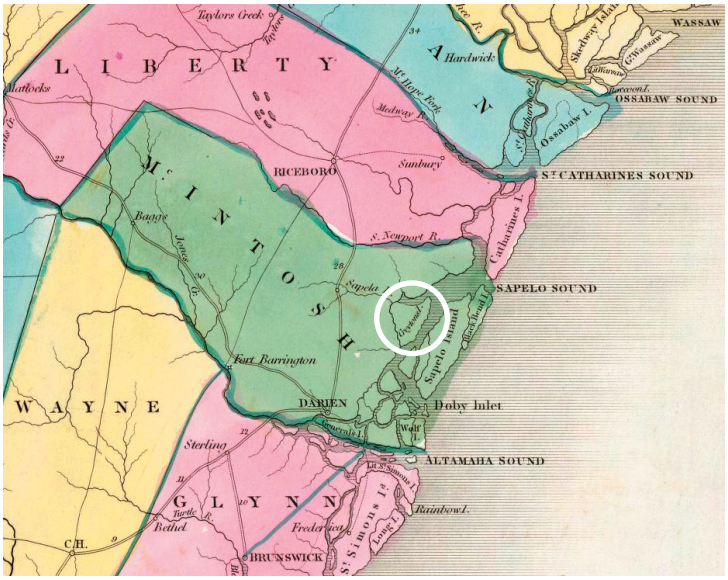
☞The Georgian and Darien Telegraph, will publish the above until the day of sale.



$20 REWARD.

ABSCONDED from the plantation of the subscriber, on Crayton Island, McIntosh county, about five weeks since, my negro fellow ADAM. he is about 5 feet 10 inches in height, yellow complected, stout built, with a speck on the ball of the right eye, quick in reply when spoken to, and puts on a sterna ppearance. It is probable that he is about this city. The above reward will be paid on his delivery to me, or his being lodged in the Jail of this county, or any other Jail from which I can get him. All persons are cautioned against harboring said negro, and Captains of vessels particularly, from carrying him away, as the law will be rigidly enforced against them if found out.

PATRICK GIBSON.

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Far left: Estate sale notices for Creighton Island, *Daily Savannah Republican*, November 23, 1837. Accessed through Georgia Historic Newspapers. *Above:* Detail of *Map of Georgia & Alabama* by David H. Burr (London, 1839). David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. Creighton Island is circled. *Left:* Runaway ad placed by Patrick Gibson, *Daily Savannah Republican*, November 1, 1832. Accessed through Georgia Historic Newspapers.

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traveled to New Bedford and returned to Georgia, as well as Margaret's relatives: Mary, her mother; Lydia, her grandmother; and her siblings, Catherine, Adeline, and Charles.[9] A larger group of enslaved people was included in the sale of Patrick Gibson's holdings. Newspaper ads show that Gibson's executors, Jonathan Thomas and R. R. Cuyler, sold the entirety of Creighton Island—including all buildings and dwellings, over a hundred acres of adjacent land, and "named Slaves, 84 in number."[10] William Cooke became the new owner of Creighton Island in 1838. A few of the names of enslaved people from Gibson's era appear in plantation allowance lists as late as 1860.[11]

Molyneaux waited several months to contact Nathan Johnson, and his first communication focused mostly on financial matters. In his second letter, dated August 15, 1837, he discussed room and board payments, but then ended bluntly, "I think it probable that Betsey & the children will return to Georgia this fall."[12] Molyneaux then did not raise the issue again until May 1839, when he wrote that his friend Robert Johnston was "soon going to Jamaica & will take charge of Betsey & the children."

Molyneaux instructed Nathan Johnson to take Betsey and the girls to Newport, Rhode Island, so they could travel with Robert Johnston. Molyneaux promised that Betsey's relatives would travel from Georgia to join them in Jamaica, where slavery had recently been abolished.[13]

Molyneaux's friend Robert Johnston, a member of a wealthy British family, had significant landholdings in St. Anne's Parish, Jamaica, and, by 1831, was the enslaver of over 120 people.[14] With slave rebellions on the rise and rumors of abolition growing in Jamaica, Johnston had relocated to Rhode Island with his family in 1832.[15] He continued to travel to Jamaica, to maintain control over his estate and labor force.

After slavery was abolished in Jamaica on August 1, 1834, and full emancipation occurred on August 1, 1838, Johnston and other planters—as well as the Jamaican Assembly—resorted to various forms of coercion to retain workers. Johnston developed an ambitious plan of building a town he named Annandale, which would include cottages, a Baptist church, and a school.[16] Johnston wanted workers to build a town in which they were invested, to guarantee their labor. Although the enterprise at least initially found favor with the formerly enslaved workers, by early 1839, they had abandoned the construction process and asked for higher wages.[17]

Consequently, Robert Johnston, who was then in Rhode Island, had a number of pressing issues demanding his attention in Jamaica. He made plans to travel with his 15-year-old daughter, Catherine, and agreed to take Betsey and the girls with him. Presumably, Johnston intended to bring the Gibsons to Annandale, where they likely would have had to find work in a tense post-slavery environment of labor disputes and standoffs.

However, wary of Molyneaux's intentions, Nathan Johnson did not comply with his instructions and did not bring his charges to Newport. Johnston set sail for Jamaica in July 1839 without the Gibsons. During the voyage, Catherine became ill and died at sea. Robert Johnston died six days later at age 55. Father and daughter were buried in Annandale.[18] If Johnston had a plan to settle Betsey and the girls at Annandale, he would not have been able to implement it if they had accompanied him.



Edmund Molyneux of England. Savannah. Undated. GHS 1275 Joseph Frederick Waring II papers. GH 1275–PH–01–11–01. Georgia Historical Society. Savannah, Georgia.

Before news of Johnston's death reached him, Molyneaux penned an irate letter to Nathan Johnson over his unwillingness to follow instructions and declared that he would no longer pay expenses for Betsey and the girls.[19] Molyneaux also mentioned that Betsey's relatives would be settled in Jamaica the following January.[20] In subsequent correspondence, Molyneaux offered to pay the Gibsons' passage to Georgia; from there they would have another chance to sail for Jamaica.[21] Still hesitant and unsure of how to proceed, Johnson took Betsey and the girls to the port of New Bedford, only to turn back after

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being told that they had to be registered as slaves in order to travel to Georgia.

After a friend told him about the plight facing Betsey and the girls, white abolitionist Benjamin Rodman raced to the port and intercepted Johnson and the Gibsons, voicing his suspicions about sending the group to Georgia.[22] Subsequently, a community-wide controversy broke out over whether Johnson had decided against sending Betsey and the girls to Georgia before or after Rodman's arrival. Johnson was accused of attempting to return his four charges to slavery and was forced to prove his innocence to the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society of New Bedford, an organization to which he belonged.[23] In the end, the accusations against Nathan Johnson were dismissed.

Eventually, Molyneaux's claims stopped, and Betsey, Helen, Jane, and Margaret lived in New Bedford for decades. Although Betsey married a man named Henry Tim on October 17, 1842, she was enumerated as unmarried in the 1850 census and in a household with her daughters and their husbands.[24] Helen married Shadrach Howard, a Black activist and seaman, and Jane married Philip Piper, a Black seaman. Each sister had at least two children.[25] Margaret married a man named Stephen J. Cook and had at least four children. She died at age 78 in 1907.[26]

We know that in addition to Betsey, Helen, Jane, and Margaret, others who were enslaved by Patrick Gibson somehow managed to reach New Bedford prior to the Civil War. Researcher and author Kathryn Grover compiled a database of African Americans living in New Bedford in about 1850 that shows that Margaret's mother, grandmother, and siblings had all settled in New Bedford by then.[27] We can only imagine how they managed to make the fraught journey from Georgia to Massachusetts.







Top: The Nathan and Mary (Polly) Johnson Properties, New Bedford, Mass., 2008. Daniel Case/Wikimedia Commons. *Above, left to right:* Nathan Johnson (d. 1880) and Mary Johnson (d. 1871) gravestones, Find a Grave memorials 99344724 and 99344591, Oak Grove Cemetery, New Bedford, Mass.

Betsey died in 1863. Her death record listed her as widowed and reported that she was buried in Fall River, Massachusetts. The document also stated that her mother, Chloe, was born in Georgia and her father, Toby, was born in Africa.[28] The fate of Betsey's parents, who Molyneaux planned to send to Jamaica along with her sister and niece, is unknown.

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The purpose of the 10 Million Names Project is to recover the names and histories of enslaved people of African descent who lived in the United States between 1500 and 1865. While this case leaves some questions unanswered, our intention is to shed light on individual accounts and the wider networks that helped fugitives from slavery in the decades preceding abolition in the United States. Pathways to freedom were offered by communities such as New Bedford and citizens like Nathan and Polly Johnson, who opened the doors of their home to fugitives like Frederick Douglass and enslaved families like the Gibsons. Those who didn't find a pathway to freedom also deserve to have their stories told. The 10 Million Names Project aims to answer questions that have gone unanswered and inspire the research and collaborations that will fill in the gaps of history.

The New Bedford Historical Society is a 10 Million Names partner. (The organization's president, Lee Blake, is a descendant of Betsey Gibson.) The Nathan and Polly Johnson papers are held at the New Bedford Public Library, and the Johnson House in New Bedford is now a National Historic Landmark and National Underground Railroad Site. ◆





Above: Margaret Gibson/Molyneaux, New Bedford, Mass., ca. 1855–1860. Courtesy of the New Bedford Historical Society. *Below:* Detail of "South-Eastern View of New Bedford, Mass.," from John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections . . . Relating to the History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts* (1844).

Notes

1 Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 48, Special Collections Department, New Bedford Free Public Library.

2 Ibid.

3 Len Travers, "Making a Living in the "Fugitive's Gibraltar," in *Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad*, ed. Timothy D. Walker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 181. See also Kathryn Grover, "The 1830s: Organizing Antislavery," in *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 118–156.

4 Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 48 [note 1].

5 Gibson's papers offer evidence of his practice of loaning out his enslaved workers: "Betsey's sister Nan sailed last week with Mr. & Mrs. Molyneux for New York. They are to stop all summer at south New Port [sic], Rhode Island. Nan has

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gone to suckle their babey." Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 5 [note 1]. In another instance, he noted "Greenoeck is in Savannah with Mr. Molyneaux." Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 2 [note 1].

6 Ibid., Folder 18 [note 1].

7 Ibid., Folders 39–47 and 48.

8 "Extract from the will of Patrick Gibson, Deceased: 'Eight, I give and bequeath onto my friend Edmund Molyneaux Jr. of Savannah the sum of Twenty Thousand Dollars, likewise the following slaves no. 34, thirty four in number, to wit, Toby^1 my driver, his wife Cloe^2 with their issue, to wit, Betsey^3 & her two children, Helen^4 & Jane^5, now in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Lousia^6 & her children to wit, jane^7, Cloe^8, Cuffy^9, Sucky^10, and Infant^11 and her future issue, Nan^12 & her child Harry^13, & her future issue, Charlotte^14 and her child^15 & her future issue, Toby^16, Greenock^17, Alicl^18, Rosannah^19, Betty^20, & Daniel^21, Jones^22 & Henry^23, (Toby's son by Nancy lately dead) Mary^24 (daughter of Lydia) and her children to wit. Margaret^25 now in New Bedford, Catherine^26 and Adeline^27 and her future issue, Lydia^28 (Mary's mother) and her grandson Bob^29, Mingo^30 & his wife Jeminia^31 and her son Henry^32 and daughter Doll^33, and Big Cuffy^34, husband of Louisa already mentioned, to hold to him the said Edmund forever. Georgia McIntosh County.'" Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 35 [note 1]. Meanwhile, Patrick Gibson left a total of £500 to Elizabeth, Jane, and Catherine Gibson, his nieces in Scotland. See "Chatham, Georgia, United States records," images, FamilySearch (familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C3Q5-WZLF?view=fullText), image 297 of 601.

9 Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 35 [note 1].

10 The names of the enslaved people in this group differ from those of the Molyneaux group, except "Betsy," "Chloe," and "Nanny" appear in both. In the larger group list, these names may or may not refer to Betsey of New Bedford, her mother, and her sister.

11 William Cooke plantation book, MS 1570, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

12 Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 22 [note 1].

13 Ibid., Folder 27.

14 Katherine Gallup and Eve Mayer, "Powel Family Papers, 1681–1938 (bulk 1730–1900)" [finding aid], 2003, 31, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

15 Brooke N.Newman, "Blood Ties in the Colonial Sexual Economy," in *A Dark Inheritance: Blood, Race, and Sex in Colonial Jamaica* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 175.

16 Elisabeth Griffith-Hughes, "A Mighty Experiment: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom in Jamaica, 1834–1838." Diss. PhD, Athens: University of Georgia, 2003, 160.

17 Ibid., 187.

18 Robert Johnston and Catherine Johnston gravestones, Find a Grave memorials 61160586 and 61161395, Trinity Church Cemetery, Newport, Rhode Island. As noted on the Find a Grave site, "His [Robert Johnston's] Mortal Remains Rest at Annandale"; Catherine was "Buried with Her Father." Memorial headstones for the two are in the family plot in Newport.

19 Molyneaux's letter was cancelled August 19, 1839, the day Robert Johnston died. Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 29.

20 No ship manifests or plantation records indicating that Chloe and Toby arrived in Jamaica have been located. Many of these records, which are held by the British National Archives, are not digitized.

21 Nathan Johnson Papers, Folder 30 [note 1].

22 Ibid., Folder 34.

23 The final report of the Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society of New Bedford on the charges against Nathan Johnson are in the Nathan Johnson Papers, Folders 39–47 [note 1].

24 Betsey Gibson and Henry Tim marriage record, *Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1620–1850*, AmericanAncestors.org; Philip Piper household, 1850 U.S. Census, New Bedford, Bristol County, Massachusetts, AmericanAncestors.org.

25 Jane Gibson and Philip F. Piper marriage record, June 26, 1846, *Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1620–1850*, AmericanAncestors.org; Piper household, 1850 U.S. Census [note 24]; and a research study by Kathryn Grover, "Biographical Entries of New Bedford and Coastal Towns Also Once Part of Dartmouth (Westport, Dartmouth, and Fairhaven) of People of African Descent," to be released as a database on AmericanAncestors.org in four parts beginning in fall 2024.

26 Grover, Ibid.; Margaret Cook death record, December 21, 1907, *Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1841–1910*, AmericanAncestors.org.

27 Kathryn Grover theorized in *Fugitive's Gibraltar* [note 3], 149–152, that Margaret was Patrick Gibson's daughter, although no proof has been found. Margaret is listed in several records, including the Young Anti-Slavery Society report on Nathan Johnson, as "Margaret Molyneaux"—perhaps the committee's way of distinguishing her from Betsey and her daughters, who used the name Gibson. According to historian Earl F. Mulderink III, "It seems unlikely that Molyneux was Margaret's father, because such information surely would have surfaced during the investigation into Johnson." Earl F. Mulderink III, "'The Whole Town Is Ringing with It:' Slave Kidnapping Charges Against Nathan Johnson of New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1839," *The New England Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (Sept. 1988): 353–354.

28 Betsey Gibson death record, *Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1841–1910*, AmericanAncestors.org.

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