

# SLAVERY in MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts was the first slave-holding colony in New England, though the exact beginning of black slavery in what became Massachusetts cannot be dated exactly. Slavery there is said to have predated the settlement of Massachusetts Bay colony in 1629, and circumstantial evidence gives a date of 1624-1629 for the first slaves. "Samuel Maverick, apparently New England's first slaveholder, arrived in Massachusetts in 1624 and, according to [John Gorham] Palfrey, owned two Negroes before John Winthrop, who later became governor of the colony, arrived in 1630." [1]

The first certain reference to African slavery is in connection with the bloody Pequot War in 1637. The Pequot Indians of central Connecticut, pressed hard by encroaching European settlements, struck back and attacked the town of Wetherfield. A few months later, Massachusetts and Connecticut militias joined forces and raided the Pequot village near Mystic, Connecticut. Of the few Indians who escaped slaughter, the women and children were enslaved in New England, and Roger Williams of Rhode Island wrote to Winthrop congratulating him on God's having placed in his hands "another drove of Adams' degenerate seed." But most of the men and boys, deemed too dangerous to keep in the colony, were transported to the West Indies aboard the ship *Desire*, to be exchanged for African slaves. The *Desire* arrived back in Massachusetts in 1638, after exchanging its cargo, according to Winthrop, loaded with "Salt, cotton, tobacco and Negroes."

"Such exchanges became routine during subsequent Indian wars, for the danger of keeping revengeful warriors in the colony far outweighed the value of their labor." [2] In 1646, this became the official policy of the New England Confederation. As elsewhere in the New World, the shortage and expense of free, white labor motivated the quest for slaves. In 1645, Emanuel Downing, brother-in-law of John Winthrop, wrote to him longing for a "juste warre" with the Pequots, so the colonists might capture enough Indian men, women, and children to exchange in Barbados for black slaves, because the colony would never thrive "untill we gett ... a stock of slaves sufficient to doe all our business." [3]

Most, if not all, of the limited 17th century New England slave trade was in the hands of Massachusetts. Boston merchants made New England's first attempt at direct import of slaves from West Africa to the West Indies in 1644, but though the venture was partially successful, it was premature because the big chartered companies still held monopoly on the Gold Coast and Guinea. By 1676, however, Boston ships had pioneered a slave trade to Madagascar, and they were selling black human beings to Virginians by 1678. For the home market, the Puritans generally took the Africans to the West Indies and sold them in exchange for a few experienced slaves, which they brought back to New England. In other cases, they brought back the weaklings that could not be sold on the harsh West Indies plantations (Phyllis Wheatley, the poetess, was one) and tried to get the best bargain they could for them in New England. Massachusetts merchants and ships were supplying slaves to Connecticut by 1680 and Rhode Island by 1696.

The break-up of the monopolies and the defeat of the Dutch opened the way for New England's aggressive pursuit of the slave trade in the early 1700s. At the same time, the expansion of New England industries created a shortage of labor, which slaves filled. From fewer than 200 slaves in 1676, and 550 in 1708, the Massachusetts

slave population jumped to about 2,000 in 1715. It reached its largest percentage of the total population between 1755 and 1764, when it stood at around 2.2 percent. The slaves concentrated in the industrial and seaside towns, however, and Boston was about 10 percent black in 1752.

As in other maritime colonies of New England, the chief families were among the chief slavers. Cornelius Waldo, relative of Ralph Waldo Emerson, was a slave merchant on a large scale, a proud importer of "Choice Irish Duck, fine Florence wine, negro slaves and Irish butter." His ship, *Africa*, plied the Middle Passage packed with 200 black people at a time crammed below-decks, though lethal epidemics of "flux" sometimes tore through the captives and cut into Waldo's profits. Peter Fanueil, meanwhile, inherited one of the largest fortunes of his day, which was built in large part on his uncle's slave trade. His philanthropy with this money gave Boston its famed Fanueil Hall.

Massachusetts, like many American colonies, had roots in a scrupulous fundamentalist Protestantism. Christianity was no barrier to slave-ownership, however. The Puritans regarded themselves as God's Elect, and so they had no difficulty with slavery, which had the sanction of the Law of the God of Israel. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination easily supported the Puritans in a position that blacks were a people cursed and condemned by God to serve whites. Cotton Mather told blacks they were the "miserable children of Adam and Noah," for whom slavery had been ordained as a punishment.

A Massachusetts law of 1641 specifically linked slavery to Biblical authority, and established for slaves the set of rules "which the law of God, established in Israel concerning such people, doth morally require." When two Massachusetts slave merchants joined with London slave raiders in a massacre of an African village in 1645, the colonial government registered its indignation, because the two men were guilty of the Biblical crime of "man-stealing" (kidnapping Africans instead of acquiring them in the approved way, in exchange for rum or trinkets) -- and because the slaughter of 100 or so villagers had taken place on a Sunday. Nonetheless, because of its Scriptural foundation, Massachusetts' attitudes toward slaves in some ways were more progressive than those of other colonies.

Like Connecticut and Rhode Island, however, Massachusetts had a problem with masters who simply turned out their slaves when they grew too old or feeble to work. Unlike the later Southern system, which took pride in its paternal care for slaves in their old age, Massachusetts masters had to be forced to keep theirs by a 1703 law requiring them to post £50 bond for every slave manumitted, to provide against the slave becoming indigent and the responsibility of some town. There are also instances on record of slave mothers' children given away like puppies or kittens by masters unwilling or unable to support them. There was no law against this.

Later reminiscences, long after slavery's end, emphasized the benign nature of Massachusetts slavery, but the laws and statutes of the time show it to be grim enough, and the need for control over even so small a population of blacks as lived in Massachusetts was felt to be great. Fear of an uprising no doubt was behind the 1656 exclusion of blacks (and Indians) from military duty. Concern about fugitive slaves, meanwhile, probably lay behind the 1680 act by which the colony imposed heavy fines on captains of ships and vessels that took blacks aboard, or sailed away with them without permission from the governor. Protection of masters' property

from slave theft certainly motivated the 1693 statute that forbade anyone from buying anything from a black, Indian or mulatto servant.

Boston, which had the largest slave population, also had its own layer of controls, on top of the province-wide ones. In statutes enacted at various times between the 1720s and 1750s, slaves in Boston were forbidden to buy provisions in market; carry a stick or a cane; keep hogs or swine; or stroll about the streets, lanes, or Common at night or at all on Sunday. Punishments for violation of these laws ranged up to 20 lashes, depending on aggravating factors.

Black slaves were singled out for punishment by whipping if they broke street lamps, under a law of 1753, and a special law allowed severe whippings for any black person who hit a white one (1705-6).

The colony, along with Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland, punished both races for miscegenation. But Old Testament abhorrence of "mixed natures" may help explain why the Massachusetts statute was more severe than that of any other colony on the continent. The Massachusetts law against mixed marriage or sexual relations between the races [*Massachusetts Acts and Resolves, I, 578*], dating to 1705, was passed "for the better preventing of a spurious and mixt issue." It subjected a black man who slept with a white woman to being sold out of the province (likely to the cruel plantations of the West Indies). Both were to be flogged, and the woman bound out to service to support any children resulting from the illicit union. In cases involving a white man and a black woman, both were to be flogged, the man fined £5 and held liable for support of any children, and the woman to be sold out of the province.

1. Lorenzo Johnston Greene, **The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776**. N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1942, p.16.
2. Edgar J. McManus, **Black Bondage in the North**, p.6.
3. Greene, p.62.