

# Slavery in the Pioneer Valley – Five Who Resisted

Robert H. Romer

A sermon delivered at the UU Society of Amherst July 3, 2016

Slavery was widespread here in the Valley in colonial times, where most of the so-called “important people” owned one or two black slaves. When I first began this research 15 years ago, it was especially striking to me to discover that almost all the *ministers* in the valley were slave owners. I was *so* naive back then. By now, I am only surprised when I discover a minister who I can be quite sure did *not* own slaves.

But what I want to do this morning is to introduce to you five slaves who in one way or another *resisted* enslavement.

**Jenny** was the first slave whom I met in my research, and – partly for that reason – my book is dedicated to Jenny – as a representative of all the slaves who lived here in the Valley. Born in Africa about 1722, captured as a young girl, Jenny arrived in Boston where she was purchased in 1738 by Deerfield’s minister, Jonathan Ashley – (together with her baby, Cato – whose father is unknown). Jenny spent the rest of her life in Deerfield, and during that time, according to village tradition as recorded long after Jenny’s death by Deerfield historian George Sheldon – “Jenny fully expected, at death or before, to be transported back to Africa, and all her long life she was gathering, as treasures to take back to her motherland, all kinds of odds and ends – colored rags, shells, buttons, beads”. That preservation of her African traditions was Jenny’s modest act of defiance. This was nothing dramatic like Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion in Virginia, but still, it shows us that Jenny did not simply *accept* her status as Ashley’s slave property.

There is another way in which Jenny is very special. Everything we know about the slaves who lived in the valley comes from documents written by white owners – wills, bills of sale by which a person was sold to a new owner, estate inventories, merchants’ account books, an occasional mention in a family letter, ads for slaves who had run away – but *nothing* in the voice of a slave.

Jenny provides an exception to that statement. Sheldon writes about Jenny – “By the tale she always told, she was daughter of a king in Congo, and when about twelve years old, she was one day playing with other children about a well, when they were pounced upon by a gang of white villains, and the whole party were seized and hurried on board a slave ship, and then – in quotation marks – ‘*we never see our mothers any more*’ “

Think about that quotation – “*we never see our mothers any more*”. This is oral tradition, not a document, just words passed down from one person to another in the village and eventually to historian George Sheldon who wrote them down a century later. But even with all those reservations, this is *Jenny*, speaking to us from two hundred and fifty years ago.

**Cato**, Jenny’s son, born in America, continued this African tradition of collecting buttons and shells, a tradition that Cato maintained until the end of his life in 1825.

(And I would *love* to know what happened to those collections that Jenny and Cato made.)

**Prince** was a slave who belonged to Dr. Thomas Wells of Deerfield, who sold him to Deerfield farmer Joseph Barnard in the spring of 1743. Sales of slaves were often accompanied by formal bills of sale, but the only surviving record of that sale is a brief entry in Barnard's account book – “then bought of Doctor Wells his Negro fellow at 160 pounds”.

From then on, there are almost daily entries in Barnard's account book telling us what Prince was doing that day – sometimes working alone in Barnard's fields, sometimes being rented out for the day to another Deerfield farmer (there's some cash income for Barnard), and often working in the fields alongside his owner.

On March 7, 1744, Dr. Wells died, and the next day, Barnard rented Prince to “Widow Wells” to dig the grave.

I know where that grave is, and it gives me a strange feeling to stand in front of Dr. Wells' gravestone, knowing not only who is buried there but who dug the grave and on what day. There on March 8, 1744, Prince dug the grave of the man who had previously owned him.

I went to a lot of trouble to get a good photograph of that gravestone in the old Deerfield cemetery, and my editor and I liked it so much – not simply as a photograph but because of the feelings about slavery that are evoked by knowing the circumstances of that burial – that we put it on the back cover of my book.

Now, it is often said that because here in New England, slaves worked and lived in close contact with their owners, sometimes living under the same roof, therefore “*our*” slaves were happy and contented and were really “*just like members of the family*”. (I hate that phrase, “just like members of the family”.)

Happy and contented? Well, maybe, maybe not.

In October, 1749, Prince ran away, and Barnard placed an ad in a Boston newspaper, offering a reward of ten pounds. It is a sad fact that the only *descriptions* we have of slaves in the valley come from ads placed by their owners when they ran away. Here is the way in which Barnard's ad began – “Ran away from his master, Joseph Barnard of Deerfield, a Negro man named Prince, of middling stature, his complexion not the darkest or lightest for a Negro. Slow of speech, but speaks a good English.” The ad goes on to describe the impressive number of items of clothing that Prince took with him when he ran away.

We don't know why Prince ran away or where he was trying to go, but the fact is that he did seek his freedom. And we know that he did not succeed, for by the following summer, entries in Barnard's account book show that Prince was back in Deerfield, working every day for Joseph Barnard. And there is one final entry about Prince in that account book showing that in June, 1752, Barnard hired a Deerfield carpenter to build “a coffin for Prince”.

David Parsons, the first minister in *Amherst*, also owned slaves, a married couple, **Pompey** and Rose, and their son Goffy.

Like Barnard's slave Prince, Pompey ran away, and the ad that Reverend Parsons placed in a Boston paper in March, 1760 tells us something about his appearance – “Ran away from his master David

Parsons of Amherst a Negro man named Pompey, about 26 years of age – a fellow of the tallest stature, judged six feet and a half high, has been long in the country, can read and write, speaks good English, had on when he went away two jackets”, and so on.

Whether Pompey’s wife and child were still alive and owned by Parsons when Pompey ran away we don’t know. Nor do we know what was in his mind when he ran away. With a height of six feet six, it would have been difficult for Pompey to remain inconspicuous. But as far as we know, he did make good his escape and was never recaptured. Perhaps he made it to Boston and signed on as a sailor, no questions asked, which was one way in which New England slaves occasionally did manage to escape.

The best example of slave resistance here in the valley is the story of **Amos Newport**. Amos was born in Africa about 1715, captured as a boy, arrived in Springfield as the property of a Springfield merchant, David Ingersoll, who sold him in 1729 to Joseph Billings of Hatfield.

Somehow Amos acquired the surname Newport. His owner never referred to him with that name. Newport was apparently a name that Amos created for himself, an act of defiance at a time when almost all the slaves here were known only by the names assigned to them by their owners – Jenny, Cato, Prince, Pompey, Amos, Caesar, Titus, Phyllis. (Think how *dehumanizing* it must have been if, for instance, you were one of the five Caesars who lived on the main street of Deerfield in the 1750s. Without a surname, the only way in which the white people in town could distinguish you from the Caesar who lived next door would be by the name of your *owner* – “Mr. Dickinson’s Caesar”, say, or “Mr. Hoyt’s Caesar”, and so on.)

The fact that Amos gave himself a surname is also important for another reason – think about doing genealogy if you do not have a surname to work with. How would we ever be able to trace Amos’s descendants?

But the really important thing about Amos is that in 1766, having lived in Hatfield as a slave for almost 40 years, Amos sued for his freedom. He did not claim that he had been abused by his owner, or that he had not been legally sold to Billings or that he had been promised his freedom.

**Amos simply wanted to be free.**

I think we can all understand that. (Although I don’t think any of us can even begin to imagine what it would be like to be the legal *property* of someone else – I know *I* can’t.)

So Amos went to court to sue for his freedom –

When he went to court, the lawyer for Billings, the owner, was Simeon Strong, a prominent Amherst lawyer, owner of the Strong House, now the home of the Amherst Historical Society, next door to Jones Library. Amos was represented by a Springfield lawyer, Moses Bliss. How his suit was financed, I have not been able to discover. Perhaps Bliss was working *pro bono*, perhaps sympathetic Hatfield residents helped pay his legal expenses, or perhaps over the years Amos had squirreled away some cash by doing odd jobs for Hatfield residents on Sundays.

We just don’t know.

In any event, Billings and *his* lawyer produced the perfectly valid bill of sale by which Ingersoll had

sold Amos to Billings in 1729, and Amos lost his suit.

But Amos didn't give up. He appealed the case to the highest court in Massachusetts. And lost again. Once again, the jury concluded that – quote – “the said Amos is not a freeman as he alleged but the proper slave of the said Joseph Billings”.

Amos Newport never became free. But he really, really tried. And perhaps his persistence and his filing of those lawsuits contributed in some small way to the gradual ending of slavery in Massachusetts in the last two decades of the 1700s. And in talks I have given, I have often referred to Amos as a *hero* of mine from colonial times for his valiant attempt to gain his freedom.

So those are my five heroes.

Jenny, who kept her ancestral traditions alive by collecting those buttons and shells.

Her son, Cato, who continued those traditions.

Prince and Pompey, who ran away.

And Amos Newport, who went to court, twice, in an unsuccessful attempt to gain his freedom.

And of course there were *others*, not just these five.

Amos never became free, but his descendants did, and by the mid-1800s there were Newports living in Amherst. Dwight Newport and his son Edward both worked for Amherst College, and when we abolished fraternities in 1984, the former fraternities, now dormitories, needed new names and, in response to suggestions from some alumni, the Phi Delta Sigma house became Newport Dorm.

And I recently had the great pleasure of meeting and corresponding with Amos Newport's great-great-great-great-great- ( 6 greats) granddaughter, Alyssia Bailey, who had been put out for adoption as a baby 40 years ago, who just recently found out who her birth mother was and then discovered her ancestry through her discovery of my book and of articles I had written about Amos Newport and his Amherst descendants. Two years ago, Alyssia didn't know who her *mother* was, and now she knows her direct ancestors all the way back to Amos, born in Africa 300 years ago. Last February, after a year of email exchanges, Alyssia came to visit, and I took her to Hatfield where she could walk the streets that her enslaved ancestor, Amos Newport, had walked, and stand in front of the site where Amos had lived. What a wonderful thing for her – and for her children – to have this history.

Almost every black American, of course, has some ancestors who were born in Africa. But it is much rarer that someone can identify a particular person as an African-born ancestor and can pinpoint an approximate date for that person's birth and for the time of his or her arrival in America and in addition can know and even visit the spot where his or her enslaved ancestor lived 300 years ago.

And of course this was also an exciting moment for me. This is the sort of thing that authors just dream about – to find out that what we do can have a real impact on *someone else's life*.

Finally, a comment about what motivated me to begin this research and to continue to do it and to write

and talk about it.

First, I want my neighbors – that is, everyone in the valley – to know how widespread slavery was, not in order to make anyone feel guilty but because I firmly believe that the more we know (I am a professor, after all) – that the more we know about a painful subject such as slavery, the more likely we are to be able to deal with its continuing legacy. One way of emphasizing the fact that slavery was by no means simply a southern phenomenon is to point out that in the 1780s, as the American Revolution was coming to an end, slavery was legal and being practiced in every one of the 13 original states – even way out here in the picturesque “Pioneer Valley”.

But there is another reason, one which I gradually came to see as more important. For most of the slaves who lived in the valley, we know very little about the lives they led. Sometimes there is just one piece of paper, one entry in an account book, or an item in an owner’s estate inventory. I sometimes refer to them, with a nod to Ralph Ellison, as “*the invisible men and women of our colonial past*”. We can never undo the crime that was done by kidnapping these people and bringing them to America as slaves. But at least we can try to keep them from being lost to history by telling what we know of their stories.

As another historian wrote, in another context, “*To remember them is to make them live again*”.

---

Opening Words --

## **What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?**

Frederick Douglass’s speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”(excerpts), delivered on July 5, 1852 at a meeting sponsored by the Rochester , New York Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society.

The theme of today’s service is about slavery in the valley in colonial times, but because today is July 3<sup>rd</sup>, our opening words are from the next century. Let me explain.

In 1852, the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, New York invited Frederick Douglass to give an oration to their society on Sunday, the Fourth of July. Douglass declined but offered instead to address them on the 3<sup>rd</sup> or the 5<sup>th</sup>. The result was his famous speech – **What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?**

Because of today’s date, it seemed obvious to me that we should mark the occasion with an excerpt from that speech by Frederick Douglass.

“This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. ... What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer – a day that reveals to him more than all other days in the year the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is

a sham – your boasted liberty, an unholy license – your national greatness, swelling vanity – your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless – your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence – your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery – your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States.”

---

## Reading –

This reading is from Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s “Army Life in a Black Regiment”. Like the opening words by Frederick Douglass, this reading, too, is relevant to tomorrow’s national holiday. Higginson is probably best known in Amherst as mentor to Emily Dickinson. But he was also a Unitarian minister, an ardent abolitionist, one of the so-called “Secret Six” who consulted with John Brown before Brown’s 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry and the only one of the Six who was open, after the raid, about his involvement with Brown. When the Civil War began, he joined the army as a captain, then – promoted to Colonel – went to South Carolina where the Union, very early in the war, occupied the coastal areas and there he organized one of the very first black regiments, consisting of men who had been slaves in that area. In this passage, he describes talk among his soldiers that he heard one evening in December, 1862.

The most eloquent was Corporal Prince Lambkin, just arrived from Florida. He described most impressively the secret anxiety of the slaves in Florida to know all about President Lincoln’s election and told how they all refused to work on the fourth of March [that was the day of Lincoln’s inauguration in 1861], expecting their freedom to date from that day.

He finally brought out one of the few really impressive appeals for the American flag that I have ever heard, Higginson writes, quoting Corporal Lambkin –

“Our masters they have lived under the flag, they got their wealth under it, and everything beautiful for their children. Under it they have ground us up and put us in their pocket for money. But the first minute they think that old flag mean freedom for we colored people, they pull it right down and run up that rag of their own. But we’ll never desert the old flag, boys, *never*. We have lived under it for eighteen hundred and sixty-two years, and we’ll *die* for it now.”

**Hymns --****Lift Every Voice and Sing**

Let us join in singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, hymn # 149 in the hymnal. This song was designated as the “Negro National Anthem” by the NAACP in 1919 and has been known and used that way ever since.

**Amazing Grace**

Please join in singing “Amazing Grace”, hymn # 205 in the hymnal. As you probably know, “Amazing Grace” was written in the 1770s by John Newton, former captain of a slave ship who had eventually come to regret his involvement in the Slave Trade.

**Closing Words –**

For our closing words, I will just repeat what I said earlier, about our responsibility to keep the enslaved people of the valley from being lost to history –

***To remember them is to make them live again.***

---