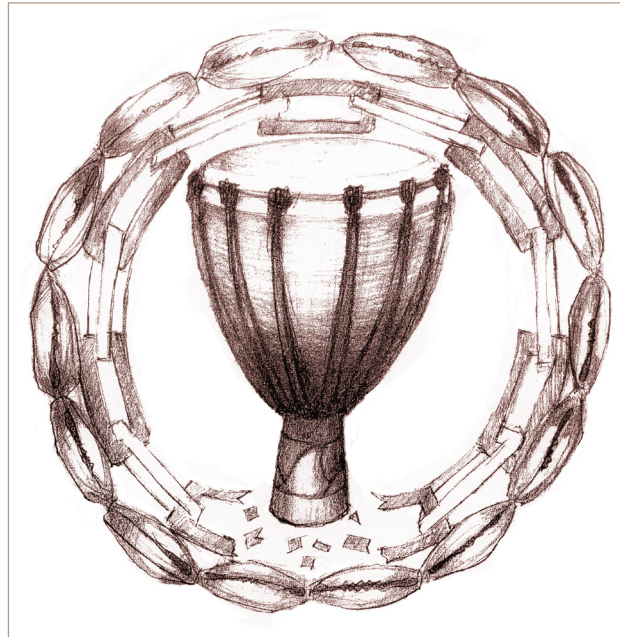


*African American Historic Sites
of Deerfield, Massachusetts
Map & Guide*



A publication of the
Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association's
*African Americans
in Early Rural New England Project*



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Remembering the History of Deerfield Slavery

The early memories of George Sheldon (1818-1916), a lifelong Deerfield resident and self-appointed town historian, included Cato, who had once been a slave of the Reverend Jonathan Ashley. As slavery was part of the town's history Sheldon knew of "no reason...why we should not face the facts relating to it, found in church and town records, and old family manuscripts." Sheldon's "Essay on Negro Slavery" did just that, drawing on unpublished sources ranging from bills of sale to an unpublished reminiscence written by Pliny Arms in the 1840s recounting the community's memory of the public whipping of Titus, the slave of Daniel Arms, as punishment for an unsanctioned slave celebration which Titus evidently led.

After learning about the same Cato that George Sheldon knew as a boy, retired Amherst College physics professor Robert Romer continued to research the history of enslaved people in Deerfield. His passion for the topic led to the construction of the first map of Old Deerfield's main street devoted to identifying sites where slaves lived and worked. He published *Slavery in the Connecticut Valley of Massachusetts* in 2009, dedicating it to Cato's mother, Jenny.

"To those in the habit of thinking of negro slavery as an exclusively Southern institution, this title may have in it an element of surprise, if not of offence. I know of no reason, however, why we should not face the facts relating to it, found in church and town records, and old family manuscripts."

—George Sheldon, from the *History of Deerfield*, 1895

Deerfield and the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association

Located two hours west of Boston, the town of Old Deerfield, Massachusetts, has one of the best-documented and preserved histories in the nation. The Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association (PVMA) was founded in 1870 with the goal of "memorializing" the past through monuments, public commemorations, and written histories. It collects and preserves the bulk of known primary sources documenting Deerfield's past.

This publication builds on research first undertaken by the PVMA African American Monument Committee, formed in 2005, to give greater visibility to Deerfield's African American presence and experience. Representatives of Memorial Hall Museum, Historic Deerfield, Inc., schools, and the community, as well as scholar advisors, served on the Monument Committee. Many of the original members are now serving on the new, expanded African Americans in Early Rural New England Project.



Plaque carved by
Dimitrios Klitsas,
2005

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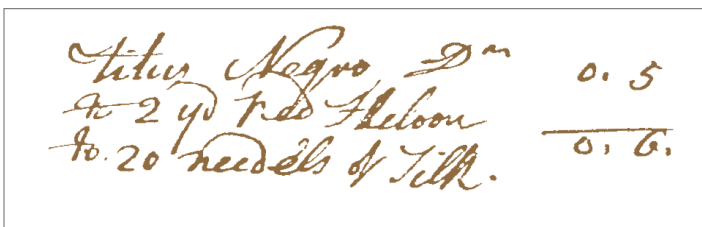
In Memory of Miss Mary J. Hawks,
Curatorial Researcher, Memorial Hall Museum



A Web of Community

Servitude took many forms in the 18th century. Indentured servants, whose contracts could be bought and sold, apprentices bound to labor for their masters for a set term, and slaves (often referred to as “servants for life”) were common sights in fields, shops and houses throughout the colonies. By the mid-eighteenth century, 38% of households on Deerfield, Massachusetts’ mile-long main street included slaves. The Williams family alone owned at least 13 slaves during the eighteenth century, several of whom were baptized at the Fourth Meeting House by the Deerfield minister who himself owned three slaves.

Slave owner or not, Deerfield men, women and children were tended by the same physicians, shopped in the same store, and worshipped at the same meeting house as enslaved residents. Since Deerfield masters regularly hired out their slaves, even non-slave owners could benefit from their labor. The account book of Daniel Arms, Jr. documents the many occasions on which Deerfield’s non-slave owners purchased the labor of Arms’ slave, Titus. Humphry was one of many enslaved Deerfield residents who were both treated by and who labored for Dr. Thomas Williams, who, himself, owned slaves. ‘Umphry,’ who bought three pipes at Elijah Williams’ store, was among eighteen or so slaves and free blacks with accounts there in the mid-1700s. Meseck, owned by Abigail and Ebenezer Hinsdale, assisted Ebenezer in the operation of trading posts in Deerfield and Hinsdale, NH. These webs of interaction and economic relationships meant that Deerfield’s free and enslaved residents crossed paths daily.

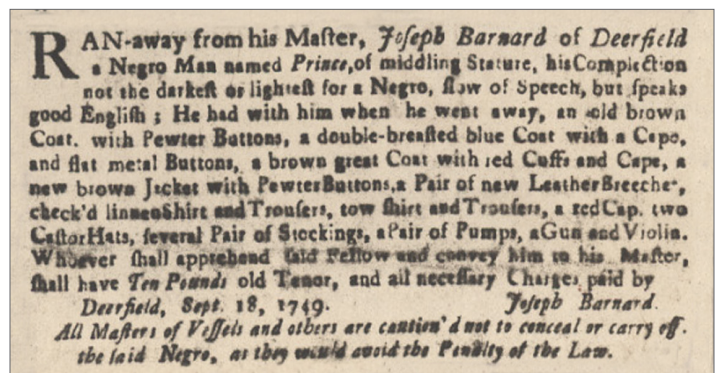


Titus had an account at Elijah Williams’ store. This entry in that merchant’s account book records Titus’ purchase of sewing items. Elijah Williams Account Book, collection of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association.

Control and Resistance

Slave owners, civic leaders, and ministers attempted to dictate most aspects of slaves’ lives. Massachusetts laws mandated a curfew for all slaves and forbade their consumption of alcohol. The Reverend Benjamin Wadsworth linked Christian virtue to obedience: “When your master or Mistress bids you do this or that, Christ bids you do it, because he [Christ] bids you obey them.” Despite these coercive efforts, slaves found a variety of ways to exercise some personal control over their lives and culture.

In 1749, Prince ran away from Joseph Barnard, taking with him extra clothing, a gun, and a violin that he could use or barter for his survival on the road. His freedom was short-lived; he died back in Deerfield in 1752. Other forms of resistance included theft and holding clandestine meetings; as late as the 1840s, Deerfield residents still remembered that sometime in the 1760s, Titus and several other slaves “belonging to some of the most respectable people” stole food and rum and gathered for a frolic at a “place of resort.” The risk inherent in such activities was dramatically demonstrated when Titus and the other slaves were caught and whipped. Jenny, abducted from her African home as a young girl, continued throughout her life to collect small objects in preparation for her spirit’s return to Africa, maintaining her African beliefs despite decades of servitude in a minister’s household.



Advertisement in “The Boston Weekly Post-Boy” newspaper, October 2, 1749, copy, collection of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association.



Slavery and the 18th-Century Family

Slaves in New England were considered part of the household for which they labored. They often slept in the same building with the master's family, worked alongside family members, and were expected to participate actively in the church community. Ex-slaves often referred to themselves as having been "raised in the family" of the master.

What did it mean, however, to be part of an 18th-century family? Today we assume that families are bound together by ties of affection. In contrast, the 18th-century family was bound together much more tightly by duty. The family was a hierarchical unit headed by a patriarch (or his widow) who exercised authority over the entire family, including children, apprentices, servants, and slaves, and was accountable for their physical and spiritual well-being. Every household member was responsible for specific domestic and agricultural tasks that would ensure the well-being of the family as a whole. The patriarch had a legal right to use physical force to obtain obedience from any reluctant family member.

That Daniel Arms and his slave, Titus, spent a January day in 1762 working side by side for another Deerfield farmer in no way meant that they were perceived as equals; Deerfield church members made Titus' subordinate status clear when they rebuked him for "di[s]obedience to his master." This fundamental inequality was again revealed when Titus was, without a trial, publicly whipped for stealing and when Daniel Arms decided to sell him for only 19 shillings (the equivalent of four gallons of West India rum.)

"...Sell & Convey to him a Certain Negro Boy Named Prince aged about nine years, a Servant for life..."

"Is this where Titus lived?"

Is this the house where Titus lived? Ultimately, we do not know. The Old Arms homestead, where Titus worked and slept in the mid-eighteenth century, was built around 1720. This drawing, published in *The Life of a New England Boy* (1896), is based on the artist's memory of how it looked over 75 years after Titus walked its grounds. The house may have been renovated or rebuilt about 1809. It was torn down in 1853. The renovation, razing and rebuilding activity on the Arms house lot, highlights the difficulties of offering an accurate view of the places where Titus and other enslaved Deerfield residents resided. Many structures now standing on slavery sites post-date the lives of the slaves who once lived there. The few existing structures dating to an enslaved person's presence have been altered, renovated and restored. Despite these changes in the built environment, surviving evidence in the form of account books, wills, inventories and other sources informs and reminds us that dozens of enslaved people lived and worked on the Deerfield Street.



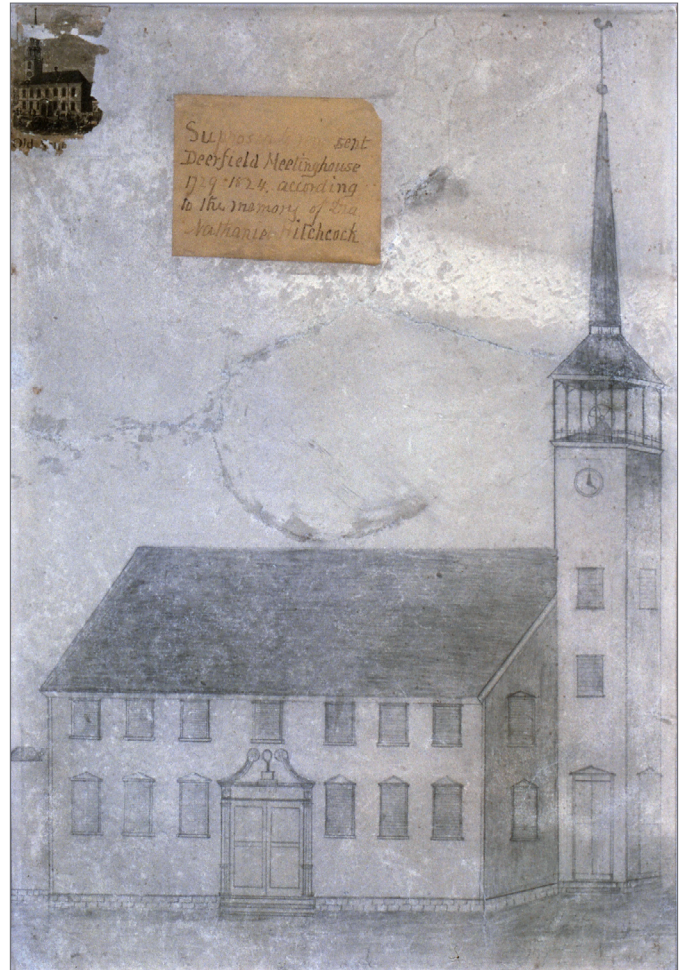
Old Arms homestead, c. 1850, Collection of Memorial Hall Museum.



The Soul of a Slave

The civic and sacred life of the entire community, free and unfree, centered on the meeting house. Deerfield ministers baptized, admitted to membership, married, chastened, and reconciled numerous enslaved residents. Ministers and slave owners hoped to convert slaves to Christianity and rejoiced when such conversions occurred. The Third Church of Boston's Reverend Samuel Willard reminded his congregation that "the Soul of a Slave, is, in its nature, of as much worth, as the Soul of his Master." In 1742, the Deerfield church membership affirmed this "Duty of Parents & Masters," and promised to "Send yr. children & Servants to Such Catachisings as their minister appoints until yy are 18 years old except married.... [and] to hear the explanation of the assemblies Catechism until they are 21 years old."

What type of "catachising" did Deerfield slaves receive? One evening in 1749, the Reverend Jonathan Ashley told them that their lowly status on Earth would not dictate their place in the kingdom of God. "Servants who are at the dispose and command of others, who...are despised in the world, may be the Lord's freemen and heirs of Glory." "If you are Christ's freemen," he concluded, "you may contentedly be servants in the world." But, he warned, "If you are not Christ's freemen, you will be slaves of the devil."



Fourth Meeting House, drawn from memory c. 1830, Collection of Memorial Hall Museum.



For Further Reading

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Joanne Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1998.

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Memorial Hall Museum Online, *American Centuries ... view from New England*, <http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/>.
The history website of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association's Deerfield Teachers' Center.