



BLACK HISTORY AT THE VASSALL ESTATE

Special History Study

Anthony T Vassall
Marks

Cuba ^{her} Vassall
marks
Jill Vassall

Ceyrus Vassall

James Vassall

Laura Vassall

Catherine Vassall

Abigail Vassall

Longfellow House—Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Caitlin DeAngelis, Carla D. Martin, Rayshauna C. Gray, Aabid Allibhai, Eshe Sherley
September 15, 2025

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National Historic Site**

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**National Park Service
September 15, 2025**

Cover illustration. The cover of this report features a collection of the marks of Anthony and Cuba Vassall, along with signatures by four of their children (Darby, Cyrus, and James Vassall, and Flora Vassall Maranday), as well as their grandchild, Catherine Vassall, and James's wife, Abigail Hall Vassall (daughter of Primus Hall). Reproduced from images of documents at Harvard University Archives and Massachusetts State Archives.¹

¹ Tony Vassall, c.1713–1811. Receipt and warrant for Massachusetts state pension payment to Anthony Vassall, 1792, HUY 218, Harvard University Archives (HUA). <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.arch:41272405>. Anthony Vassall Probate, Middlesex Probate #23335, 1811. Massachusetts State Archives (MSA).

BLACK HISTORY AT THE VASSALL ESTATE
SPECIAL HISTORY STUDY

Longfellow House-Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site

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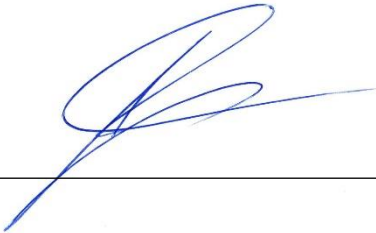


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Executive Summary

This report comprises a Special History Study for Longfellow House–Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site focusing on Black history. The study documents and analyzes the Black experience during and after John and Elizabeth Vassall’s occupancy in Cambridge, MA. Darby Vassall’s life dates provide rough brackets for this study: born enslaved at the Vassall house in Cambridge in 1769, about ten years after its construction, he died a prominent member of the free Black community in Boston in 1861. The report uncovers the lives and communities of enslaved people who worked at the Vassall House and lived in the surrounding community before, during, and after the American Revolution. The information produced from this study greatly expands existing baseline information. The report further illuminates the site’s national significance and is likely to inform visitor programming and cultural resource management.

Central questions addressed in this report include:

1. What role did slavery play in building the fortunes of the Vassall family?
2. How did slavery in Massachusetts relate to slavery in the Caribbean? What is the geographic context of this connection?
3. Who were the enslaved occupants of the Vassall house?
4. What was the role of enslaved people in the construction and later economic and social operations of the Vassall House, and how is this reflected in the cultural resources at the site today?
5. What strategies did Black occupants of the Vassall house pursue to construct, express, and maintain their identities?
6. What relationships existed among the enslaved residents of the “Tory Row” estates along Brattle Street and in the surrounding communities?
7. How did the American Revolution affect enslaved people in Cambridge?
8. What happened to the enslaved residents of the Vassall house after their emancipation?

Using interdisciplinary methods, the report documents the Black experience at the Vassall House and the surrounding community of Cambridge. It combines the tools and methodologies of historians and ethnohistorians to uncover the lives and communities of enslaved people who worked at the Vassall House and lived in the surrounding community before, during, and after the American Revolution. Archival data including census records, church records, wills and probate inventories, and newspapers are utilized to fill the gap in Black history at the site. The report's design also includes significant engagement with descendant communities and partners to build additional research questions, identify sources, and form a foundation for future research.

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Dedication

This report is presented in honor of recovering, remembering, and restoring the memory of the Black Vassalls, their kin and community, and celebrating the legacy of the paths they forged for liberated people everywhere.

Preface



Figure 1. Photo of the 1759 fireback at 105 Brattle St, Southwest Chamber, displaying part of the Vassall family emblem -- a stylized sun with a face -- and the year 1759. Reproduced by permission of the National Park Service and the artist, © 2015 Xiomaro.com.

The 1759 Fireback

Dawn is breaking in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A woman's shadow stretches long across the floor. In an upstairs chamber, she steps around a luxurious bed, not hers. Across the room, glass windows overlook a vast property—orchards, gardens, outbuildings—stretching down to the Charles River.

Bracing against the cold, dry air, she moves quietly to the fireplace to stoke the fire and warm the room as its residents awaken. It is a highly decorative fireplace, framed with imported ceramic tiles depicting English pastoral idylls and an imagined fishing scene from China. When she leans forward to light the kindling, her forehead is inches from an iron fireback displaying part of the Vassall family emblem: a stylized sun with a face. Above it, the year this house was built: 1759.

The fire tended, she thinks of the many tasks that lie ahead. She will move up and down the steep stairs, empty chamber pots, prepare and serve meals, carry fresh water, mend clothing, dress the family, mind the children. She will kneel, scrub, lift, sweat, shiver, and care for this home and its people. She will work until she sleeps, then rise and work again. She will build and love her own family around this work.¹

This is the Vassall House. Later, it will be known by many names: General Washington's Headquarters, Craigie Castle, the Longfellow House, 105 Brattle Street, and in the twenty-first century, the Longfellow House—Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site. The original structure, a Georgian mansion, was commissioned by John Vassall (1738–1797), a member of a wealthy white family of English and French descent.² They are her enslavers. The white Vassalls control the lives of several other people on this property, and thousands more enslaved on sugar plantations on the Caribbean island of Jamaica.

Long after she is dead, the fireback will remain. It is one of the few objects with a continuous presence in the house for more than 260 years. The house, grounds, and

¹ On enslaved people's work in colonial New England, see Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620–1776* (Martino Fine Books, 2017 [Columbia University Press, 1942]), 100–123; Joanne Pope Melish, "Northern Slavery and Its Legacies: Still a New (and Unwelcome?) Story," in *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery*, ed. Bethan Jay & Cynthia Lynn Lyerly (University of Wisconsin Press, 2016); Felicia Y. Thomas, "'Fit for Town or Country': Black Women and Work in Colonial Massachusetts," *Journal of African American History* 105, no. 2 (Spring 2020), 191–212; Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York University Press, 2016), 104–135; Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Bright Leaf, 2019), 70–92; Aabid Allibhai, "Race and Slavery at the First Church of Roxbury: The Colonial Period, 1631–1775" (2023), 9–10, https://www.uuum.org/_files/ugd/7b9fdf_e1af87b0d02544f4a9a4f07aa21f2806.pdf.

² In any discussion of the white Vassall family, substantial confusion may arise from the large number of individuals who share names. In this report, people who are likely to be confused with one another are identified by their birth and death years. Married women are identified with their birth names and married names, the latter in brackets when referring to events before their marriages. While somewhat inelegant, it is our hope that it will allow readers to distinguish between Elizabeth Vassall [Oliver] (1739–1779) and Elizabeth Oliver [Vassall] (1744–1807), among others.

inhabitants will all change over the centuries, but the fireback and the tiles that surround it will stay, some of the few surviving things that she touched.

The Vassall house in Cambridge is the fruit of a vast organism of exploitation stretching from New England to the West Indies to the West African coast.³ It is part of a network of historic sites built with the profits that the white Vassall family gained by enslaving many thousands of people on their sugar plantations in Antigua and Jamaica.

Many of these historic sites are in New England. They include, in Massachusetts, the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, Peacefield at Adams National Historical Park in Quincy, the Codman Estate in Lincoln, Elmwood and the Henry Vassall House in Cambridge; and Point Pleasant in Bristol, Rhode Island. Others are in the heart of London, like Holland House in Holland Park, where John Vassall's cousin Elizabeth Fox Vassall established a famous literary salon. All of these sites are connected to the Longfellow House—Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site because they were built or maintained by the fortunes of the extended white Vassall family.

The subject of this historical study—the house at 105 Brattle Street—was built with the money that John Vassall made by enslaving and exploiting Black people on his plantations in western Jamaica. Over the course of his lifetime, John Vassall enslaved at least three thousand men, women, and children.⁴ Many of them were captured in Africa and transported to Jamaica via the infamous Middle Passage, while others were born into slavery. All suffered under a

³ Eric Kimball, “‘What have we to do with slavery?’: New Englanders and the Slave Economies of the West Indies,” in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of Economic Development* ed. Sven Beckert & Seth Rockman (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 181–194; Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (Liveright, 2016).

⁴ John Vassall (1738–1797) owned multiple properties in Jamaica, including at least two plantations: Newfound River estate in Hanover and Lower Works Pen in St. Elizabeth. While it is difficult to count exactly how many people he enslaved, three thousand is a conservative estimate. Please see Appendix D for more on estimating the number of people enslaved by the white Vassall family.

brutal regime of malnutrition, disease, and hard labor to produce the sugar, molasses, and rum that made John Vassall rich.⁵

Since the nineteenth century, white New Englanders have often obscured the history of slavery in the region, preferring to emphasize histories of abolitionism. This rewriting frequently defines New England in opposition to the slave societies of the South and Caribbean, rather than emphasizing continuity and interdependency. When slavery in New England has been remembered, it has often been portrayed as small in scale and marginal in economic importance. This narrative has also been challenged by Black New Englanders, descendants, public historians, and scholars whose work both confronts the historical reality of slavery in New England and places it within the larger context of American slavery.

The history of 105 Brattle Street speaks to the intimate ties between New England and the wider system of Atlantic slavery. The house could not have existed without the sugar plantations and the enslaved people who lived and died on them. As John Vassall's uncle, William Vassall, explained in a succinct summary of the relationship between the Vassall family's Caribbean plantations and their comfortable lives in Massachusetts: "I was born in the Island of Jamaica, & removed at about 3 years old to Boston, Where I was Educated, & lived between 50 & 60 Years from choice, & Expended near Fifty thousand pounds Sterling, Every farthing of which I received from my Estate in Jamaica."⁶

⁵ For accounts of slavery in Jamaica, see, among others, Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in Atlantic Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2008); Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Richard Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Virginia and Jamaica* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁶ William Vassall expressed similar sentiments many times, including in letters to Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin, Massachusetts Congressman (later Senator) Theodore Sedgwick, and Simeon Potter of Newport, Rhode Island. This version of the quotation is from a letter to Theodore Sedgwick, who was married to Penelope Russell, the granddaughter of William Vassall's brother Henry. William Vassall to Theodore Sedgwick, 7 September 1784, Sedgwick Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 5, MS N-851, Massachusetts Historical Society; William Vassall to Simeon Potter, 15 April 1784, William Vassall Letterbooks, vol. 1 (1769–1786), MD2047, Sheffield Archives.



Figure 2. Front facade of the Longfellow House—Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site in late summer, the structure’s symmetry characteristic of the Georgian style of architecture. Reproduced by permission of the National Park Service and the artist, Photography Rhode Island, James. P. Jones.

Today, Longfellow House—Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site preserves a remarkable Georgian house whose occupants shaped our nation. The lands are rooted in the Massachusetts tribe. After European land claims and settlement, the Marrett family first developed the property during the British colonial era. The house was a site of colonial enslavement and community activism, George Washington’s first long-term headquarters of the American Revolution, and the place where Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote his popular contributions to nineteenth-century American literature.

The house’s original owner, John Vassall Jr., enslaved at least seven people on the estate itself: Cuba, Dinah, Malcolm, William, and three children: James and two “small boys” whose names are unconfirmed. The vast wealth of the Vassall family—and that of their neighbors—shaped the Cambridge landscape. When the loyalist Vassalls fled their home ahead of the American Revolution, the people they enslaved there seized their freedom. This report tracks their lives and legacies: the Black History at the Vassall Estate.

Methodology

This study was conducted by a research team of five historians, social scientists, and public scholars from January 2023 until September 2025. Collectively, we have extensive expertise encompassing the fields of African and African American Studies, history, social anthropology, women and gender studies, and applied and public scholarship more broadly. Members of our team have previous experience in a number of projects, sites, and topics closely related to the history of the Vassall family, including the Harvard and the Legacies of Slavery Project, the Tufts African American Trail Project, History Cambridge, the Tory Row Anti-Racism Coalition, the history of the Royall family, and the global history of commodity chains. Our work was led by Co-Principal Investigators Dr. Caitlin DeAngelis (independent scholar) and Dr. Carla D. Martin (Lecturer, Harvard University Department of African and African American Studies and President of the Board, Institute for Cacao and Chocolate Research), and supported by three Project Historians: Dr. Aabid Allibhai (Junior Fellow, University of Michigan Society of Fellows & Assistant Professor, University of Michigan Law School), Rayshauna C. Gray (independent scholar), and Dr. Eshe Sherley (Assistant Professor, Program in African American Studies, Wake Forest University).

We employed a rigorous, multipart research strategy involving interdisciplinary and public history methodologies to document the Black experience at the Vassall Estate and the surrounding community of Cambridge. Our team worked individually and with partners to analyze archival data located in the Boston area, Antigua, Jamaica, and the United Kingdom, including census records, church records, wills and probate inventories, and newspapers. Our work privileged principles of multidisciplinary research: diverse engagement with sources and methodology, multivocality, collaboration, transparency and accountability, and accessibility.

Our goal throughout this research was to interpret the Black history at the Vassall Estate in a manner that is effective, informative, and respectful of the experiences of the millions of men, women, and children who were enslaved. To do this, it was necessary to pursue three simultaneous avenues of research.

First, we worked closely with known descendants to establish goals and priorities for our descendant and community engagement research. Our team held a strong commitment to

honoring the expertise of descendants, structuring our project in concert with their questions and concerns, and inviting them to interpret with authority. We aimed to ground our analysis in consent-driven oral history, focus groups, genealogy, and outreach activities that engaged both lineal descendants of people enslaved by the Vassalls and wider descendant communities in an early, frequent, and sustained manner. Our work took place in consultation with descendants who had already been identified, and preliminary steps were also taken to identify descendants of people enslaved by the Vassall family in Antigua, Barbados, and Jamaica.

Second, we created a community census illustrating the kinship connections between the Black Vassall family and other enslaved people in eastern Massachusetts. This network included many people who were enslaved at sites like Royall House in Medford, Elmwood in Cambridge, and Peacefield in Braintree, and tracing these connections allowed us to place the Black Vassall family within the context of their extended family and wider community.

Third, we investigated under-studied Vassall family documents housed in archives in the United Kingdom and Jamaica, as well as Oliver and Royall family documents in Antigua. These included items like inventories in the Jamaican National Archives from the Vassall family plantations, “Slave Registers” in the UK National Archives that list the names of people enslaved at the Green River and Newfound River plantations, and two volumes of Letter Books kept by William Vassall from 1769–1800, which are in the collection of the Sheffield City Library in the UK. These letter books are particularly valuable sources because William Vassall wrote extensively about the period of the Loyalist exile from Massachusetts, and about the Vassall family’s treatment of enslaved people during that period. Along with local collections like the Temple, Nelson, Lloyd, Vassall, and Borland family papers at Harvard’s Houghton Library and the collections of the Longfellow House–Washington’s Headquarters Historic Site, these wide-ranging sources enabled us to expand our understanding of Black history at the house itself as well as placing it within a global context.

This project has been driven by the goals of uncovering the lives and communities of enslaved and formerly enslaved people who worked at the Vassall House and lived in the surrounding community before, during, and after the American Revolution. We are confident that our work significantly expands existing baseline information to influence different aspects

of the park, including interpretation and education programming, and how the park's significance is presented to visitors and the public.

Note on Content

This report documents the violent history of slavery on a scale ranging from the global to the personal. It includes discussion of sexual violence, torture, murder, and the public execution, mutilation, and display of Black people's bodies as a weapon of terror to enforce slavery in both New England and the West Indies. In particular, this report includes extensive discussion of violence perpetrated against enslaved infants and children, including the purposeful separation of mothers and newborns.

Note on Money

In the eighteenth century, the colonists in British North America and the Caribbean used several different kinds of money. These included the British pound sterling, provincial money that was specific to a particular colony (for example, "Jamaica money" or "money of the province of Massachusetts"), and foreign currencies, especially Spanish silver dollars.

British pounds were divided into shillings, pence (pennies), and farthings. The common symbols and abbreviations were

pound = £
shilling = s or /
penny = d

One pound equaled 20 shillings. One shilling equaled 12 pence. One penny equaled 4 farthings.

£1 = 20s = 240d = 960 farthings

The same amount of money could be written several different ways. For example, an amount of 5 pounds, 18 shillings, and 2 pence could be written:

£5.18.2
£5 18s 2d
£5 18/ 2

Few of the records quoted in this report include farthings, but when they do, they are often expressed as a fraction. For example, an amount of 5 pounds, 18 shillings, 2 pence, and 3 farthings could be written:

£5.18.2 $\frac{3}{4}$

Other types of British coins were also used during the eighteenth century. A Guinea was a gold coin worth 21 shillings (£1.1.0). A halfpenny was worth half a penny (two farthings).

Due to inflation, exchange rates, and the idiosyncrasies of local economies, it is often difficult to convert eighteenth-century money from one currency to another. For the sake of clarity, this report attempts to contextualize specific amounts of money by providing comparisons to the value of other goods in the same place and time. For example, in chapter 2, the discussion of building costs for John Vassall's mansion in Cambridge compares the cost of specific building materials to the price of a hogshead of sugar in the same year.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE WHITE VASSALLS: AGENTS OF EMPIRE, SLAVE TRADERS, AND SUGAR PLANTERS

“In fact, [New England] in many ways depended on plantation slavery—
those plantations were simply offshore.”

— Wendy Warren,
New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America (2016)

“I was born in the Island of Jamaica, & removed at about 3 years old to Boston,
Where I was Educated, & lived between 50 & 60 Years from choice,
& Expended near Fifty thousand pounds Sterling,
Every farthing of which I received from my Estate in Jamaica,
for I was not Engaged in business, nor Ever got one farthing
in the State of Massachusetts.”

— William Vassall, 1784⁷

Agents of Empire (1609–1670)

To understand 105 Brattle Street’s relationship to the broader history of slavery in the Atlantic world, it is necessary to trace the white Vassall family’s history back to the early 1600s. A century before John Vassall (1738–1797) was born, his ancestors played an active part in the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade, the creation of sugar plantations, and the enduring ties between New England and the West Indies. While slavery in New England has often been portrayed as insignificant compared to slavery in the Caribbean or the southern mainland

⁷ William Vassall to Theodore Sedgwick, 7 September 1784, Sedgwick Family Papers, Box 6, Folder 5, MS N-851, Massachusetts Historical Society.

colonies, the history of the white Vassall family demonstrates how closely intertwined those histories were.

In the early 1600s, the white Vassalls were neither aristocrats nor the richest of the rich. Instead, they belonged to a middle class of striving merchants and mid-level officials.⁸ They were descended from John Vassall, a Norman Protestant whose father sent him to England “by reason of the troubles [in France]” in the 1500s.⁹ John’s son, also named John Vassall (c.1544–1625), outfitted a ship that helped Queen Elizabeth defeat the Spanish Armada in 1588.¹⁰ The Vassall family motto—*Sæpe pro Rege, semper pro Republica* (“Often for the king, always for the state”)—suggested a flexible attitude toward loyalty. Generations of white Vassalls proved that they were loyal to the Crown when it benefited them, but had no allegiance higher than the pursuit of their own wealth.

⁸ There are several published genealogies of the Vassall family. This report relies primarily on Charles Maclear Calder’s *John Vassall and His Descendants By One of Them* (Stephen Austin and Sons, 1921), which corrects and expands an earlier work by Edward Doubleday Harris, *The Vassalls of New England and Their Immediate Descendants* (Albany, NY, 1862). Other important genealogical sources include entries for John, Samuel, and William Vassall compiled by Bertha Porter for the *Dictionary of National Biography* (UK), volume 58 (1899) and “The Visitation of London (1633–1635),” ed. Joseph Jackson Howard, *Publications of the Harleian Society*, vol. 1–2 (1880).

⁹ There is some confusion as to which John Vassall was the emigrant from France. *The Visitation of London*, a collection of genealogies compiled between 1633–5 by Sir Henry St. George, takes evidence directly from Samuel Vassall (1586–1667), who described his father as “John Vassall of Cockseyhurst in Com. Essex,” who married Anne Russell of Radcliffe and Judith Boroughs of Kent. Samuel’s grandfather, also John Vassall, was born at “Rinart” near Caen in Normandy, was sent to England by his father, and “died very yong.” Marriage records from St. Dunstan, Stepney, confirm that John Vassall was married to Anne Russell on 4 September 1580 and to Judith [no surname] on 27 March 1593. The “troubles” referenced here may mean the violence and political turmoil that accompanied the Reformation, during which violence against Protestants drove many from France. John Vassall likely arrived in England before the birth of his son in 1544, quite early in the history of French Protestants (particularly in northern France), which may suggest previous ties to England or political/religious difficulties specific to John Vassall.

¹⁰ The ship was either called *Samuel* or *Solomon*. “John Vassall of Ratcliffe Mariner” died of plague in London on 13 September 1625 and was buried in Stepney. Porter, “John Vassall,” 155–6; St. Dunstan’s All Saints, London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538–1812, Ancestry.com.



Figure 3. Hand-drawn image of the Vassall family coat of arms. The crest bears the emblem of a sun, part of a Latin visual pun: a chalice (*vas*) and sun (*sol*) combined to make *Vas-sol*. Above these symbols, a sailing ship with three masts and a flag flying in the wind signified the family's ongoing investment in the Atlantic economy. The family motto underlines the image: *Sæpe pro Rege, semper pro Republica* ("Often for the king, always for the state"). The Vassall family affixed these symbols to important objects, including the fireback, bookplates, tombstones, and two silver tankards they gave to Harvard College, which are now part of Harvard's ceremonial silver.¹¹ Reproduction from Samuel Batchelder, *Vassall Family Coat of Arms* (1898) in the collection of History Cambridge.

¹¹ John Vassal Tankard (873.1927) and William Vassal Tankard (874.1927), Harvard Art Museums. These tankards were presented to Harvard by John Vassall (1713–1747) and William Vassall (1715–1800) as part of their payment

The Vassalls were early supporters of English colonization efforts in the Americas. In 1609, John Vassall (c.1544–1625) invested in the Virginia Company, founders of the Jamestown Colony. This was a minor investment: Vassall held two shares and was among several hundred stockholders listed in the Company’s 1609 charter.¹² Yet this early interest in colonizing North America established a path that two of John Vassall’s sons would follow. These two brothers, Samuel Vassall (1586–1667) and William Vassall (1592–1655), expanded the white Vassall family’s involvement in slavery, the slave trade, and settler colonialism.¹³

Like their father, Samuel and William Vassall took an early interest in settler colonialism. In 1628, both brothers became proprietors of the Massachusetts Bay Company, the corporation that established the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Unlike the Virginia Company, which had hundreds of investors, the Massachusetts Bay Company had only twenty-six original members.¹⁴ This made Samuel and William Vassall founders of Massachusetts; their signatures appear on the 1629 charter. Together, they patented one-tenth of all the land claimed by the Massachusetts Bay Colony.¹⁵ The brothers were also responsible for buying supplies for Massachusetts Bay before the ships left England. In March 1629, “Mr. Vassall” approved the purchase of “Apparell for 100 men,” including 100 “wastecoates of greene cotton bound about

to secure the elite status of “Fellow Commoner.” Janine Ellen Skerry, “Silver at Harvard College from its Founding to the Revolution” (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 2004).

¹² Porter, “John Vassall,” 155–6. *Encyclopedia Virginia*, “Second Charter of the Virginia Company,” maintained by Humanities Virginia and the Library of Virginia, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/second-charter-of-virginia-1609/>. Transcription by William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (New York, 1823), 1:80–98.

¹³ William was the direct ancestor of John Vassall (1738–1797), who built 105 Brattle Street. Calder, *John Vassall*; Bertha Porter, “Samuel Vassall” and “William Vassall,” 156–58. See Appendix A for genealogical information.

¹⁴ Eventually, the Virginia Company would accrue more than 1,700 investors, but about 650 appear on the 1609 charter that includes John Vassall’s name. Second Charter of Virginia (1609), transcribed by William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (New York, 1823), 1:80–9, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/second-charter-of-virginia-1609/>

¹⁵ Porter, “Samuel Vassall,” 157–8; Charter of Massachusetts Bay Colony (1629), transcribed and accessible via The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mass03.asp, based on Francis Newton Thorpe, *The Federal and State Constitutions Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the States, Territories, and Colonies Now or Heretofore Forming the United States of America, Compiled and Edited Under the Act of Congress of June 30, 1906* (Government Printing Office, 1909).

with red tape,” 500 “redd knitt caps,” 400 “peare of shews,” and hundreds of blankets, sheets, pillows, and towels.¹⁶

The older brother, Samuel, was a successful merchant and politician in London. He imported spices, opium, and other goods from the Mediterranean and tobacco from Virginia. Some seventeenth-century records called him a “clothier” because he imported cloth.¹⁷

In 1628, Samuel Vassall became embroiled in a political battle between King Charles and Parliament by refusing to pay a customs tax (“tonnage and poundage”) on a shipment of Mediterranean currants. He was imprisoned and his goods were seized. This was not the only time Samuel Vassall was imprisoned. In the early 1630s, he promised to supply ships for a new colony in the Carolinas but failed to do so. This left the colonists stranded and Samuel was imprisoned for breach of contract.¹⁸

Although his business dealings frequently landed him in legal trouble, Samuel Vassall’s stand against tonnage and poundage taxes made him popular among people who opposed the expansion of royal power. His peers elected him to Parliament in 1640.¹⁹ As his political influence grew, Samuel served on both the Navy Committee and the Commission for the Plantations in the Colonies, which oversaw colonial policy.²⁰

¹⁶ This may have been either Samuel or William. Nathaniel Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, (Boston, 1853), 23–25.

¹⁷ Porter, “Samuel Vassall,” 157-8.

¹⁸ The details of this episode are beyond the scope of this project, but it demonstrates Samuel Vassall’s continuing investments in all aspects of Atlantic colonization. For accounts of Samuel Vassall’s involvement in the failed colony, see Lindley S. Butler, *A History of North Carolina in the Proprietary Era, 1629–1729* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022); L. H. Roper, *Conceiving Carolina: Proprietors, Planters, and Plots, 1662–1729* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹⁹ Samuel Vassall was elected twice: once to the Short Parliament of 1640 and again to the Long Parliament later in 1640. He was probably excluded from Parliament during Pride’s Purge in 1648, but readmitted in 1659. Although some published genealogies say that Samuel Vassall (and his father John) were aldermen of London, they do not appear in the official list of London Alderman compiled in the 20th century. Alfred P. Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London Temp. Henry III–1912* (London, 1908), British History Online, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/london-aldermen/hen3-1912>.

²⁰ In addition to legislative work, Samuel Vassall personally loaned the government more than £2,500 to send troops to put down a rebellion in Ireland. He continued to serve in the House of Commons until at least 1648 (Bevan says he was excluded from the Rump Parliament in 1648 and readmitted in 1659). Charles McLean Andrews, *British Committees, Commissions, and Councils of Trade and Plantations, 1622–1675* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1908); Jeremy Black, ed., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Volume II Seventeenth Century* (Taylor & Francis, 2022); Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London*, 1908.

One of Samuel Vassall's most consequential projects was the transformation of English trade in Africa. Before 1649, this trade was controlled by a monopoly called the Guinea Company. Under its royalist governor, Sir Nicholas Crispe, the Guinea Company engaged in some slavetrading but also searched for gold and traded with African partners for goods like hides, ivory, redwood, and gum arabic, which were produced or processed locally. This meant that the Guinea Company was not exclusively, or even primarily, a slave-trading operation in the 1630s and 1640s.²¹

Samuel Vassall saw an opportunity for profit. In the 1630s and 1640s, he became one of the principal agitators for expanding English involvement in the slave trade. As early as 1632, he was an "interloper," a rogue slave trader who ignored the Guinea Company's monopoly by financing illegal slaving voyages. Vassall co-owned at least four unauthorized slaving vessels. In 1647, his ship *Mayflower* was captured by the Spanish, who confiscated its cargo of ivory and 350 African captives.²²

Some of the African men, women, and children Samuel Vassall sold into slavery were sent to Spanish and Portuguese colonies, but many went to Barbados. The first English settlers arrived in Barbados in 1627, so the colony was still in its early stages when Samuel Vassall began trafficking enslaved people to its sugar plantations. In 1647, one of the ships he co-owned—*Benjamin*—sailed from the Bight of Biafra with 251 captives, of whom only 174 reached Barbados alive. The death rate was over 30 percent.²³

By the late 1640s, Samuel Vassall was frustrated with his position as an outsider to the Guinea Company. He sued the company in an unsuccessful effort to force his way in as a shareholder. Vassall was rebuffed by the Company's royalist leaders, but his fortunes changed after the execution of King Charles I in 1649. Vassall's lawsuit initiated an audit that eventually

²¹ Larry Dale Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted: The English Colonization of Barbados, 1627–1660* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 120; L. H. Roper, *Advancing Empire: English Interests and Overseas Expansion, 1613–1688* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²² The four ships were *Mayflower*, *Peter*, *John*, and *Benjamin*. N.B: The *Mayflower* that was captured in 1647 was not the same *Mayflower* that carried colonists to Plymouth. L.H. Roper, "Carolina, the Torrid Zone, and the Migration of Anglo-American Political Culture," in *The Torrid Zone: Caribbean Colonization and Cultural Interaction in the Long Seventeenth Century*, ed. L.H. Roper (University of South Carolina Press, 2018); Slave Voyages Database, Voyage ID 21879, www.slavevoyages.org.

²³ Slave Voyages Database, Voyage ID 26256, www.slavevoyages.org.

led to the reorganization of the Guinea Company. In 1651, it was rechartered with Samuel Vassall as its governor and majority shareholder.²⁴

Over the next decade, Samuel Vassall and his allies in the Guinea Company transformed English trade in Africa. The era of searching for gold and trading for African-made products ended. Instead, Samuel Vassall and his cronies expanded the slave trade to feed the new sugar plantations in the English West Indies.

Samuel Vassall's younger brother, William, was the other side of the English colonial coin.²⁵ Unlike Samuel, who spent most of his life in London, William Vassall lived for several years in Massachusetts and later moved to Barbados. He built the multigenerational plantation dynasty that would eventually allow his great-great-grandson, John Vassall, to build a mansion in Cambridge.

William Vassall was an active member of the Massachusetts Bay Company. He served on the governor's High Council, a group of a dozen men who governed the Colony. In 1629, he was one of the twelve leaders—including Governor John Winthrop—who signed the Agreement at Cambridge, a governing document similar to the famous Mayflower Compact in Plymouth Colony.²⁶

William Vassall traveled to Massachusetts with the Winthrop fleet in 1630 but returned to England almost immediately.²⁷ In 1635, he brought his wife Anne and their six children to Massachusetts. They settled in Roxbury but soon quarreled with their neighbors. According to Massachusetts governor John Winthrop, William Vassall was, "a man of a busye and factious

²⁴ Julie M. Svalastog, *Mastering the Worst of Trades: England's Early Africa Companies and Their Traders, 1618–1672* (Brill, 2021); S. D. Smith, *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic: The World of the Lascelles, 1648–1834* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Calder, *John Vassall*, 6–8; Porter, "William Vassall," 156–57.

²⁶ Agreement at Cambridge, 26 August 1629, Winthrop Family Papers, MS N-262, Massachusetts Historical Society, published in *The Winthrop Papers*, vol. 2, ed. Stewart Mitchell (Massachusetts Historical Society 1931); published online with transcription at www.masshist.org/publications/winthrop/; *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, ed. Nathaniel Shurtleff, W. White (1853), 34–60.

²⁷ William Vassall traveled on the ship *Lyon*. He returned to England with the fleet when it departed a few weeks after arriving. John Winthrop, *The history of New England from 1630 to 1649: From his orig. mss. With notes to illustr. the civil and ecclesiast. concerns*, ed. James Savage (Boston, 1853), 319.

spirit, & allways opposite to the Civill Governmentes of this countrye, & the waye of our Churches.”²⁸

From Roxbury, the Vassalls moved to Scituate, which was part of the still-separate Plymouth Colony, not part of Massachusetts. They built an impressive house on the North River, known locally as “Belle House.”²⁹ In 1642, William Vassall served on Plymouth Colony’s Council of War with Captain Myles Standish, who would one day appear in fictional form in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s famous poem, *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858).³⁰ However, as in Massachusetts Bay, William Vassall soon became embroiled in various political and religious disputes. In 1646, he sailed to England yet again in hopes of airing his many grievances to sympathetic allies.³¹ He never returned to New England.³²

Instead, after a short stay in England, William Vassall went to Barbados, possibly at the urging of his brother Samuel. He arrived in 1648, just as Samuel was transporting increasing numbers of African captives to the island. William established a sugar plantation in St. Michael Parish, on the west side of the river that runs through Bridgetown.³³ In addition to overseeing his own plantation, he was also an active member of the Barbadian colonial government, involved in building the roads and infrastructure necessary for transporting Barbados sugar to

²⁸ Alison Games, *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (Harvard University Press, 1999). A version of this passage with modernized spelling appears in John Winthrop, *The history of New England*, 319.

²⁹ After the white Vassalls moved to Barbados, Belle House was sold to John Cushing, whose children and grandchildren inhabited it for the next century. Justice William Cushing, the judge who would later decide the famous Quock Walker case and serve on the US Supreme Court, was born in the Vassall house in 1732. *Old Scituate*, (Massachusetts Daughters Of The American Revolution, Chief Justice Cushing Chapter, 1921), 34.

³⁰ *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth, vol. 2, 1641–1651*, ed. Nathaniel Shurtleff (Boston, 1855), 47.

³¹ A pamphlet titled “New England’s Jonas Cast Up at London” (1647) was probably co-authored by William Vassall. It was answered in a pamphlet by Edward Winslow, “New England’s Salamander Discovered” (1647). Porter, “William Vassall,” 158. An extensive account of the disputes between William Vassall and his peers in New England can be found in the introduction to John Child and William Vassall, “New-England’s Jonas Cast Up at London,” edited by William T. R. Marvin (Boston, 1869), available via the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/01019982/>

³² In addition to several of his children, William Vassall left an indentured white servant, John Lewis, in Scituate. The Plymouth Colony Court that sat on 2 March 1647 heard a complaint from John Vassall that Lewis had run away, but still had three years left of his indenture, which had previously been owned by William Vassall. The court ordered Lewis to serve John Vassall for three years. *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth, vol. 2, 1641–1651*, ed. Nathaniel Shurtleff (Boston, 1855), 111.

³³ Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted* (2003); Deed conveying land in Barbados from Frances Adams to Nicholas Ware, dated 8 April 1657, printed in *The Mayflower Descendant*, Massachusetts Society of Mayflower descendants (1909); *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, vol. 67, New England Historic Genealogical Society (1913), 369.

markets to London. William also worked as an agent representing the business interests of New England merchants who provisioned Barbados with vital products like salt fish to feed enslaved people and barrel staves to hold the sugar they produced.³⁴ This work strengthened the economic ties between New England shipping, Caribbean plantations, and English slave traders. By the time William Vassall died around 1655, he had played a quiet, but essential part in building the foundations of the sugar–slave economy in the English West Indies.

William Vassall’s children furthered the family’s wealth and power through their marriages and business dealings. His oldest daughter, Judith (1619–c.1670), married *Mayflower* passenger Resolved White and became the matriarch of an influential Massachusetts family.³⁵ Another daughter, Anne (1629–1687), married Nicholas Ware of Virginia, who took over William Vassall’s plantation in Barbados after his death.³⁶ Their descendants became plantation owners and politicians in Virginia and Georgia, eventually intermarrying with Thomas Jefferson’s family.³⁷

William Vassall had one surviving son, John (1625–1688), who was the direct ancestor of the John Vassall who built 105 Brattle Street.³⁸ Like the other white Vassalls, he was eager to make his fortune by engaging in colonial projects that exploited and enslaved Indigenous and African people, while also pushing the boundaries of English law. Around 1664, John Vassall

³⁴ Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted*, 138.

³⁵ Various online databases of *Mayflower* descendants contain the genealogies of Judith Vassall’s descendants, including several governors, William Durant (cofounder of General Motors), Thomas J. Watson (former CEO of IBM), and a number of artists including singer James Taylor. mayflower.americanancestors.org/famous-descendants.

³⁶ After William Vassall’s death in 1655, his children inherited the plantation. His daughter Anna and her husband, Nicholas Ware, bought up the shares of her sisters Mary Vassall, Frances Vassall Adams, and Judith Vassall White, reconsolidating the plantation under the ownership of the Ware family. Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted* (2003); Deed conveying land in Barbados from Frances Adams to Nicholas Ware, dated 8 April 1657, printed in *The Mayflower Descendant*, Massachusetts Society of Mayflower descendants (1909); *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, vol. 67, New England Historic Genealogical Society (1913), 369; In 1661, Nicholas Ware sent tobacco to “John Vassall of Barbados” in exchange for enslaved people. *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 12 (1904), 303.

³⁷ Susan Ware, daughter of Georgia senator Nicholas Ware, married Francis W. Eppes, the son of Thomas Jefferson’s daughter Maria. Eppes was a founder of the seminary that became Florida State University. A statue of Eppes on the campus of Florida State was removed in 2020. Byron Dobson, “Eppes statue removed from FSU as Thrasher announces anti-racism task force,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, 23 July 2020.

³⁸ Calder lists three sons of William Vassall and Anne King, two of whom died in childhood. John Vassall (1625–1688) stayed in Scituate when his father departed, but went to Barbados after William’s death. Calder, *John Vassall*, 7-8.

mustered a group of Barbadian settlers to found a new colony in the Carolinas. He initially sought permission from the Lords Proprietors, the eight aristocrats who nominally controlled the region, but they chose to approve a rival colony. Undeterred, John Vassall and his rogue colonists established a settlement called Charles Town along the Cape Fear River near modern-day Wilmington, North Carolina. At its peak, the colony, sometimes called Clarendon Colony, numbered about eight hundred settlers. John Vassall was their deputy governor.³⁹

The Cape Fear Colony was a disaster. The settlers frequently kidnapped and enslaved members of the Indigenous Waccamaw–Woccon nations, making enemies rather than alliances.⁴⁰ At the same time, internal discontent over land allotments and inadequate supplies destroyed the settlers' faith in their governor. By 1667, the colonists were in open revolt against John Vassall. "The rude Rable of our Inhabitants ware dayly redy to mutany against me for keeping them there soe long," he complained in 1667. Most of the settlers abandoned the colony and walked to Virginia. Vassall remained determined to stay "if but twenty men would stand with mee," but his resolve crumpled when Waccamaw–Woccon leaders took the colonists' disarray as an opportunity to drive them out entirely. They killed the colony's cattle and told Vassall to leave or die. "I could not find 6 men that would hold true to me to stay," Vassall wrote from his exile in Virginia, "so [I] was constrained to leave it to my greate loss & ruin."⁴¹

³⁹ For an overview of John Vassall's involvement in the short-lived Cape Fear colony, see James M. Clifton, "John Vassall," in *The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, ed. William S. Powell, (NCpedia, State Library of NC, 1996), <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/vassall-john>.

⁴⁰ English settlers referred to the Native people of this region as the "Cape Fear Indians." Prof. Patricia Barker Lerch of the University of North Carolina Wilmington has argued, "The Cape Fear Indians were very likely the Waccamaw–Woccon Indians" (*Waccamaw Legacy*, 4). This claim is supported by the Waccamaw Siouan Indians, a state-recognized tribe in North Carolina, who recommend Prof. Lerch's books on their tribal website (<https://waccamaw-siouan.org/>). English records from the seventeenth century do not differentiate between the Waccamaw, the Woccon, and other tribes that lived in the Cape Fear region, but John Vassall's Clarendon colonists likely enslaved members of all tribes in the region. This report refers to the "Waccamaw–Woccon people," acknowledging that the nuances of seventeenth-century identities are substantially obscured by centuries of ongoing genocide perpetrated against Native peoples by European settlers and the United States. Patricia Barker Lerch, *Waccamaw Legacy: Contemporary Indians Fight for Survival. United States* (University of Alabama Press, 2004); D. Andrew Johnson, *Enslaved Native Americans and the Making of Colonial South Carolina* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024).

⁴¹ Other members of the white Vassall family were also involved with the Cape Fear colony. Samuel Vassall had been interested in the Carolinas for decades, and was eager to support his young relative's efforts. His son, Henry Vassall (1631–c.1667), served as the Cape Fear Colony's agent in London. In February 1666, Samuel and Henry set sail for Virginia in the ship *Marygold*. Both of them died during the expedition. John Vassall to John Colleton, 6

Around this time, John Vassall enslaved a woman named Mary. Records refer to her as a “negro woman called black mary” rather than as an Indigenous person, suggesting that Vassall may have brought Mary with him from Barbados to Carolina, rather than kidnapping her at Cape Fear.⁴² Mary was the first Black person enslaved by the white Vassalls whose name survives in documents. She was also the first Black person enslaved by the white Vassalls to make a legal argument for her own freedom.

Sometime before 1674, John Vassall sold Mary to an estate in Virginia.⁴³ She refused to work for her new enslavers, maintaining that she was an indentured servant, bound to serve for a set number of years, not a slave for life. She may have run away. In 1674, the estate petitioned the Virginia General Court to force Mary to return. The Court ordered Mary to “returne to her Service,” but ordered her enslavers to write to John Vassall to clarify her legal status. “Take care to write to Coll. Vassall to know whether the Said negroe woman was A Slave or free,” the Court ordered. “And if Appeare she was noe slave when bought, then [the administrators] to pay her for her Service what this Court shall Adjudge.”⁴⁴

It is unclear whether John Vassall ever commented on Mary’s status.⁴⁵ By 1674, he was no longer living on the mainland.⁴⁶ With the Cape Fear Colony defunct and his fortune in tatters, he turned toward the next big opportunity: Jamaica.

October 1667, in B. P. R. O. Shaftesbury Papers. Bdle 48. No. 8, via Documenting the American South, University Library of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Clifton, “John Vassall” (1996).

⁴² Black and Indigenous people frequently intermarried, formed alliances, and lived in community, so many Waccamaw–Woccon people also have African ancestors. It is possible that Mary was Afro-Indigenous, even if colonial records did not define her that way. Minutes for 9 April 1674 in *Minutes of the Council and General court of colonial Virginia, 1622–1632, 1670–1676, with notes and excerpts from original Council and General court records, into 1683, now lost*, ed. H. R. McIlwaine (Virginia State Library, 1924), 372; Helen T. Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926) vol. 1, page 80.

⁴³ The estate belonged to Edmund Scarborough, but court records say that Mary was purchased from John Vassall by the administrators rather than by Scarborough himself. McIlwaine, *Minutes* (1924), 372.

⁴⁴ Catterall, *Judicial Cases*, 80.

⁴⁵ The Virginia General Court records are not comprehensive, but there appears to be no further mention of Mary in the General Court minutes edited by McIlwaine.

⁴⁶ John Vassall was involved in several lawsuits in Virginia in the early 1670s. On 25 September 1671, he sued Capt. John Lord for defamation (McIlwaine, 269). On 13 November 1672, he paid a bond to the Rappahanock Court promising to appear at a later court session to answer a lawsuit brought against him by John Saffin, and was still present to be questioned in the case in March 1673 (McIlwaine, 323, 328). Yet the governor of Jamaica appears to have noted his arrival in Jamaica on 10 March 1672: “from Virginia comes one John Vassall, a sober rational man” (Calder, 8). It is possible that Vassall was traveling back and forth between Virginia and Jamaica.

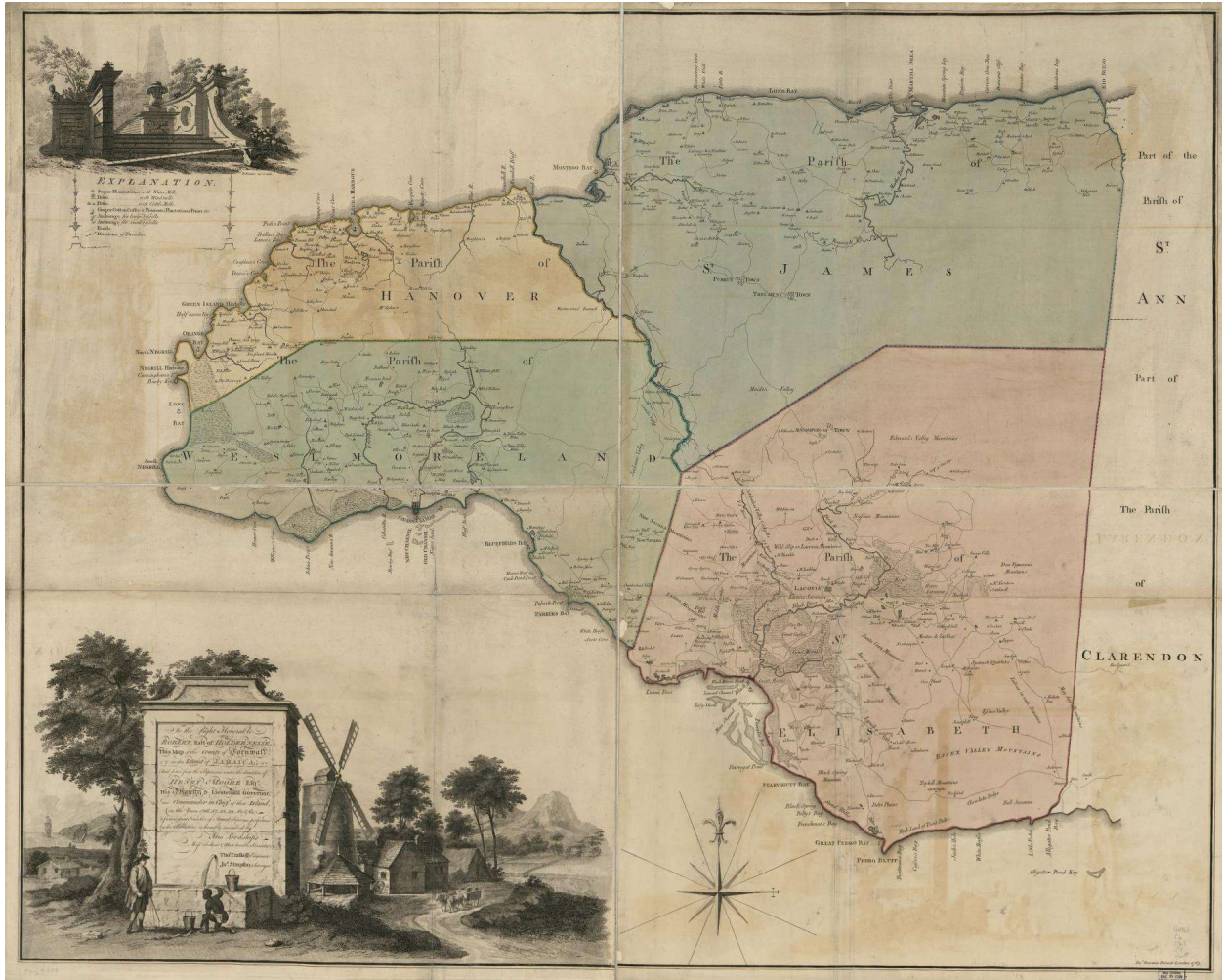


Figure 4. Historic map of the county of Cornwall, Jamaica, with several white Vassall properties labeled. Reproduction by permission of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.⁴⁷

The White Vassalls in Jamaica

Christopher Columbus landed in Jamaica in 1494. For the next 150 years, the island was colonized by the Spanish, who waged a genocidal campaign of murder, torture, and disease that killed many of the Indigenous Taíno people. In 1655, the English captured Jamaica from the Spanish.⁴⁸

After the collapse of the Cape Fear Colony, John Vassall saw Jamaica as the new land of opportunity. Most of the island’s four thousand inhabitants lived on the southeast coast near

⁴⁷ Craskell, Thomas, Henry Moore, James Simpson, and Daniel Fournier. *This map of the county of Cornwall, in the island of Jamaica*. Londini: D. Fournier, 1763. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/73691849/>.

⁴⁸ Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Norton, 1973), 149–187.

Port Royal and Spanish Town, but John Vassall established himself in St. Elizabeth Parish, on the southwest coast.⁴⁹ Between 1669 and 1672, he purchased five thousand acres at the mouth of the Black River, along Luana Bay.⁵⁰ At the time, sugar production in Jamaica was just beginning, with fewer than sixty slave-labor plantations on the island. By 1739, there were 430 and by 1790, there were 775.⁵¹ Many of the most valuable plantations were in the western part of the island, especially along the fertile Black River. By the mid-eighteenth century, enslaved people in the four western parishes (St. Elizabeth, Hanover, Westmoreland, and St. James) were producing nearly 45% of Jamaica's sugar production, outstripping production in the other nine parishes.⁵²

Within fifty years of John Vassall's arrival, Jamaica overtook Barbados as the largest and most profitable sugar colony in the British Empire.⁵³ This expansion was possible because white plantation owners like the Vassalls enslaved more than two million Black people. Between 1655 and 1807, slavetraders transported 1,127,657 documented captive Africans to Jamaica. One out of every eight people died during the voyage.⁵⁴ Most of the survivors were sold to white sugar planters like John Vassall, who enslaved their children and grandchildren as well. At least a million enslaved people in Jamaica were "Creoles," meaning they were born to enslaved mothers in the West Indies.⁵⁵

It is impossible to know precisely how many people were directly enslaved by John Vassall, his wife Anna Lewis Vassall, and their descendants. The names of more than 1,500 people enslaved by the white Vassalls survive in legal documents and account books, but the

⁴⁹ Trevor Burnard, "A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in Early Jamaica," *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 1 (Autumn, 1994): 63–82.

⁵⁰ Calder, *John Vassall*, 8.

⁵¹ Kenneth Morgan, *A Concise History of Jamaica* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 119; Marguerite Curtain, *Orchard: Profile of an Estate in North Western Jamaica* (Mill Press, 2004), 30.

⁵² Curtain, *Orchard*, 30; Clinton Vane de Brosse Black, *History of Jamaica* (Collins Clear-Type Press, 1975).

⁵³ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 21.

⁵⁴ The Trans-Atlantic Slave Voyages Database counts 1,127,657 African people who embarked on ships bound for Jamaica between 1655 and 1807, of whom 153,191 (13.6 percent) died during the voyage. The remaining 974,466 people disembarked in Jamaica, where the majority were sold to sugar planters like the Vassalls. Some historians report a lower total number of captives transported from Africa to Jamaica. Trevor Burnard, an eminent historian of slavery in Jamaica, writes that "915,204 Africans landed in Jamaica," and 701,046 were kept there permanently rather than being re-transported to other colonies. Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 15.

⁵⁵ The exact number of people born into slavery in Jamaica is difficult to estimate with precision due to the extreme infant mortality rate, which is discussed later in this chapter.

vast majority of names were not recorded.⁵⁶ The financial documents that record enslaved people as numbers or monetary values are dehumanizing. The very act of estimating how many people were enslaved by the white Vassalls is complicit in this dehumanization, but that must not prevent recognition of the fact that the white Vassalls enslaved at least twenty thousand—and perhaps as many as forty thousand—people between 1669 and 1834.⁵⁷

One of the reasons the white Vassall family was able to accumulate so much wealth and power was the mere fact of their survival. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jamaica was a place of “demographic disaster,” where mortality rates were extremely high and few children survived to adulthood.⁵⁸ White settlers in Jamaica did not face the same violence, overwork, and malnutrition as the people they enslaved, but they were still vulnerable to the diseases that contributed to Jamaica’s reputation as “the grave of the Europeans.” Among white residents of eighteenth-century Kingston, there were six funerals for every baptism.⁵⁹

John Vassall and Anna Lewis Vassall bucked this demographic trend. In the eighteen years between their marriage in 1670 and John’s death in 1688, Anna gave birth to many sons, at least six of whom survived to adulthood: John, William, Lewis, Samuel, Leonard, and Florentius.⁶⁰ Several of these sons married the daughters of other sugar planters or wealthy

⁵⁶ John Vassall’s 1757 inventory lists 254 people by name (Jamaica Archives and Records Department [JARD]). A 1752 inventory for Leonard Vassall’s estate lists 131 people (JARD). Over 1,100 people are named in the Slave Registers for Vassall-owned plantations in 1817–1832. Occasional references to individual enslaved people, like Sabina the washerwoman, can be found in financial records (William Vassall Account Book, Houghton). Thomas Thistlewood’s diary names forty-two people enslaved by Florentius Vassall at Vineyard Pen. The people enslaved by the Vassalls in Massachusetts are the subject of subsequent chapters in this report.

⁵⁷ The direct descendants of John Vassall and Anna Lewis Vassall owned at least twenty-three sugar estates and pens (plantations devoted mostly to raising livestock) in Jamaica, Antigua, and Barbados between 1670 and 1834. There are at least five additional plantations that may have been owned by members of the white Vassall family, as well as other enslaved people who are not accounted for in the above estimates because they were enslaved in non-plantation settings, because they were hired temporarily from other plantations, or because genealogical records make some branches of the white Vassall family difficult to trace. See Appendix C for more information about the plantations and Appendix D for details of the estimate.

⁵⁸ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2008); Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves* (1972).

⁵⁹ Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 2, 58.

⁶⁰ John Vassall’s 1688 will names three older sons (John, William, Lewis), as well as “my four youngest sonnes,” for a total of seven. Calder gives only six names (John, William, Lewis, Samuel, Leonard, and Florentius). He argues that the seventh son may have been the “Lt. Vassall” who was killed during a battle with a French invasion force at Carlisle Bay on July 19, 1694. Other sources record the soldier who was killed in 1694 as “Captain Vassall,” but give no first name (W.J. Gardner, *History of Jamaica* [1873], 156). While it is possible that Lt. Vassall was the unnamed seventh son, it is more likely that he was Lewis Vassall. Calder gives no birthdate for Lewis Vassall, but he must have been older than Samuel, who was among the younger sons and graduated from Harvard in 1695. If Lewis was

widows, and at least three (John, Leonard, and Florentius) fathered children who went on to become plantation owners and enslavers.

These second- and third-generation white Vassalls spread out across western Jamaica, purchasing thousands of acres and thousands of African captives.⁶¹ Some of their plantations were sugar-producing “estates,” while others, called “pens,” primarily produced cattle for powering the mills that squeezed raw juice out of sugar cane.⁶² By 1739, John and Anna Vassall’s descendants owned more than a dozen plantations, which collectively produced about 2 percent of Jamaica’s total annual sugar crop.⁶³

The Vassall family’s wealth bought political power. Two of John and Anna Vassall’s sons, William and Samuel, served in the Jamaica House of Assembly. Samuel—who graduated from Harvard in 1695—was president pro tempore of the Assembly in 1711–2.⁶⁴ Several of their children and grandchildren also married into the families of powerful colonial officials, including their son Florentius, who married into the family of Jamaica’s governor, Peter Beckford.⁶⁵

born around 1673 or 1674, he would have been 20 in 1694, a plausible age for a young militia officer. If Lewis was the militia officer, there may have been only six surviving Vassall sons: John, William, Lewis, Samuel, Leonard, Florentius, and a young son who was alive in 1688 but died in childhood.

⁶¹ For example, John and Anna’s grandson Florentius Vassall (1709–1778) owned 8,357 acres in 1754. (Legacies of British Slavery database [LBS], citing the 1754 Quit Rent books). LBS contains some confusion over the identity of Florentius Vassall, calling him the youngest son of John and Anna Vassall. In fact, their son Florentius (before 1688–1711) was the father of this Florentius (1709–1778). Calder, 20–21.

⁶² Many “pens” also produced small amounts of sugar and rum, but they primarily raised livestock. Some plantations, including Top Hill (belonging to Lewis Vassall) and Lower Works (belonging to John Vassall [1738–1797]), started out as sugar estates, but were converted into pens in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

⁶³ The descendants of John and Anna Vassall owned many sugar estates and pens in Jamaica, including Newfound River (Hanover), Green River (Hanover), Abingdon (Hanover), Friendship (Westmoreland), Greenwich (Westmoreland), Sweet River Pen (Westmoreland), Luana/Pond Pen (St. Elizabeth), New Savannah (St. Elizabeth), Top Hill (St. Elizabeth), Middlesex Pen (St. Elizabeth), Lower Works (St. Elizabeth), Content (St. Elizabeth), Vineyard Pen (St. Elizabeth), Cherry Garden (St. Dorothy), and Douce’s Ballard’s River (Clarendon). They also owned estates in Antigua (Friar’s Hill, Hart’s and Royall’s, Long Lane/Delap’s, Gravenor’s, Montpelier, Mount Estate/Goble’s) and Barbados (Brighton, Chatley Lodge). This is a partial list. It is biased toward properties owned in the nineteenth century, which are identified by name in the Legacies of British Slavery (LBS) database. Properties owned in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were often broken up for inheritance or sale over the subsequent decades, often changing names. The ownership details of these plantations are included in Appendix C.

⁶⁴ Calder, 11–12. Another member of the family who served in the Jamaica Assembly was Samuel Smith, the husband of Anna Vassall (daughter of John Vassall [1670–1701]). Several of the women who married into the Vassall family were daughters of Assembly members (Ruth Gale, Anne Herring, Mary Foster).

⁶⁵ Florentius Vassall (1688–1711) married Anne Herring, whose sister, Bathshua Herring, was married to Peter Beckford Jr., son of the wealthiest planter in Jamaica. Peter Beckford served as governor of Jamaica in 1702, and Peter Beckford Jr. was Speaker of the Jamaica Assembly. Three of Peter and Bathshua’s sons became Members of Parliament in the UK, one was Lord Mayor of London, and one daughter married an Earl and became a lady in waiting to Queen Charlotte. Her son, Thomas Howard, 3rd Earl of Effingham, was Governor of Jamaica in 1790–1.

After John Vassall's death in 1688, his wife, Anna Lewis Vassall, became the head of the family. The seven living Vassall sons were all under 18, so John left his whole estate to Anna, "my children being young and the estate in debt and not fitt to be divided, nor they to receive it."⁶⁶ Like many other white women in the slave economies of the Atlantic World, Anna Vassall became a powerful enslaver in her own right.⁶⁷ Until her death in 1720, she maintained formidable power over her children and grandchildren—and the thousands of people they enslaved.

Anna Vassall's will illustrates one of the ways white women enabled violence against enslaved people.⁶⁸ In addition to other bequests related to her plantations and human property, Anna intended to leave £1,500 to her grandson William.⁶⁹ Instead of giving him cash, Anna specified that William's legacy would be paid out in the form of young, enslaved women. The executors were directed to spend £500 on between twenty and twenty-five of "the most choice young negro women out of the first Ship of negroes that arrives in this Island for sale after my aforesaid grandson William shall arrive at the age of 22 years."⁷⁰ Anna envisioned William repeating the purchase twice more, spending £500 on "choice young negro women" for

After Florentius Vassall's death in 1711, his widow remarried Hon. Richard Mill, Chief Justice of Jamaica. Mill counted Vassall's children among his own and left them plantations and enslaved people in his 1739 will. Calder, 11; LBS database.

⁶⁶ Calder, 10.

⁶⁷ Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slaveowners in the American South* (Yale Press, 2019).

⁶⁸ Anna Vassall's will of 1717 was superseded by a later will written in 1719. It appears that William Vassall (son of John [1670-1701]) died between 1717 and 1719 because he is not mentioned in the second will, which refers to Leonard's son William as if he is Anna's only grandson by that name. William (son of John) is mentioned in the will of his uncle William (1672-1720), though that will may have been written before Anna Vassall's second will (both Anna and William died in 1720). Given Anna's 1719 will and the younger William's possible death, it is likely that this particular bequest was never carried out as intended. Last will and testament of Anna Vassall, Jamaica, 19 Jun 1717, Temple, Nelson, Lloyd, Vassall, and Borland family papers, 1611-1862 (inclusive), 1700-1831 (bulk), MS Am 1250 (12), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Last will and testament of Anna Vassall, Jamaica, 20 Feb 1719, MS Am 1250 (13). Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁶⁹ This William Vassall (c.1698–c.1717) was the son of John and Anna Vassall's eldest son, John (1670–1701) and Mary Wilmott.

⁷⁰ Between 1715 and 1724, the average price for newly arrived captives in Jamaica was between £18 and £25. Most surviving Vassall financial records do not make a distinction between prices paid for women vs. men. Burnard finds different average values for enslaved men and women in the 1770s and 1780s (£51 for men, £38 for women), but this is mostly due to the greater proportion of men who were trained in specific skills (enslaved tradesmen averaged £84). When women had specific skills, their values were also higher than average. For example, in 1755, William Vassall paid £60 for an enslaved washerwoman named Sabina. Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, table 4.9; William Vassall Account Books, 15, seq. 35, Houghton Library, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl.hough:33962538?n=35>.

his 23rd and 24th birthdays. Furthermore, Anna Vassall ordered that all these young women should be branded on the shoulder with a hot iron bearing her own mark, a capital A and V that shared a diagonal line in the middle.⁷¹ She imagined the Black women enslaved by her grandson bearing scars in the shape of her initials long after her death. In addition to this physical disfigurement, the specification that William's inheritance should be paid out in young women, rather than in the healthiest captives of either sex, is freighted with implications of sexual violence. Enslavers like William Vassall hoped to profit from the children born to enslaved women, some of whom were fathered by the enslavers themselves.

Life and Death on Vassall-Owned Plantations

Enslaved people did many kinds of work in Jamaica, but the top priority on "estates" was the production of sugar. The process began with clearing tropical vegetation by hand with machetes, axes, and saws to make room for sugarcane. This was extremely difficult labor, particularly in remote, mountainous places like John Vassall's Newfound River estate. After they cleared the land, enslaved people hoed, planted, weeded, and harvested sugarcane. This process involved intense labor in extreme heat, along with the constant threat of injury and infection from cane knives and the sharp leaves of the canes themselves. After harvest, enslaved people squeezed the cut canes through cattle-powered mills to extract cane juice. Skilled enslaved people boiled this liquid in vast copper pots. They skimmed off imperfections and ladled the concentrated juice into trays to crystallize into sugar. This process produced a brown sugar called "muscovado" that was sometimes further treated with clay to transform it into more expensive white sugar. Molasses, a byproduct of sugar refining, was sold both as a cheaper sweetener and as the primary ingredient for distilling rum.⁷²

Enslaved men worked in a wide variety of jobs on sugar plantations. About half worked in the fields, while the other half did specialized work in the refinery, raised livestock, worked as artisans—blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers—or served as valets, cooks, and gardeners. A few

⁷¹ Will of Anna Vassall, Jamaica, 19 Jun 1717, Houghton Library.

⁷² Leonard Vassall, Directions for boiling of sugar. A.M.S.s., Jamaica, 17--?, Temple, Nelson, Lloyd, Vassall, and Borland family papers, 1611-1862 (inclusive), 1700-1831 (bulk), MS Am 1250 (88), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

were “drivers,” enslaved people who oversaw the daily work in the fields.⁷³ A 1752 inventory of Susanna Vassall Ruggles’s property in Jamaica listed 131 enslaved people, of whom three were drivers, eight were carpenters or coopers, and three had other specific jobs (“1st boiler,” “2nd boiler,” “Penkeeper”).⁷⁴

Meanwhile, most enslaved women—up to 80 percent—worked in the sugarcane fields.⁷⁵ Some women worked in enslavers’ houses, but many Jamaican sugar planters—including John Vassall (1738–1797)—were absentees, meaning that they did not live in Jamaica and did not keep elaborate households there. Some enslaved women did have specific skills, such as a “Negroe Washer Woman named Sabina” purchased by William Vassall for £60 in 1755.⁷⁶ Enslaved children who survived infancy generally started working in the fields around age eight.⁷⁷

The lives of enslaved people in Jamaica were brutal and short. One in eight captives who embarked on fetid slave ships in Africa died before reaching Jamaica.⁷⁸ Those who survived long enough to reach a sugar plantation went through a three-year period called “seasoning” in which they were subjected to a new life of harsh labor with inadequate food and the ever-present threat of diseases like yaws, smallpox, and tuberculosis. A third of new arrivals died during these first three years.⁷⁹

Infant and child mortality was even higher. Historians estimate that 50–80 percent of babies born to enslaved mothers in Jamaica died within their first year.⁸⁰ Prenatal death and

⁷³ Randy M. Browne, *The Driver’s Story: Labor and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

⁷⁴ Leonard Vassall Inventory, 1752, JARD, IB/11/3/37.

⁷⁵ Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 148; Christer Petley, *White Fury: A Jamaican Slaveholder and the Age of Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 54–55.

⁷⁶ William Vassall, 1715-1800, Account book, [V.p.] 1747-1761. 1v. Original vellum binding. Temple, Nelson, Lloyd, Vassall, and Borland family papers, 1611-1862 (inclusive), 1700-1831 (bulk), MS Am 1250 (92), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, page 15, digital seq. 35.

⁷⁷ Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

⁷⁸ Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007); Sowande M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (2016); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007).

⁷⁹ Christer Petley, *White Fury: A Jamaican Slaveholder and the Age of Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸⁰ Colleen A. Vasconcellos, *Slavery, Childhood, and Abolition in Jamaica, 1788–1838* (University of Georgia Press, 2015), 18; Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden* (2008).

stillbirth were also extremely common, both because of the dismal conditions on sugar plantations and because many enslaved women used abortion to limit the number of times they gave birth.⁸¹ According to historian Vincent Brown, it is difficult to provide a precise estimate of infant mortality in Jamaica because “planters often did not bother to record a birth before the baby had survived for nine days.”⁸² Babies died of malnutrition, parasites, disease, and inadequate care when their mothers were forced to return to field work shortly after giving birth. One contemporary observer remarked that while their mothers labored in the sugar cane fields, infants lay in the “furrow, near [them], generally exposed naked, or almost naked, to the sun and rain, on a kid skin, or such rags as [they] can procure.”⁸³ When historian Trevor Burnard traced the lives of sixty-six babies mentioned in the diaries of Thomas Thistlewood, an overseer employed by Florentius Vassall, he found that fifty-one (77 percent) died before age seven.⁸⁴

The white Vassalls sometimes tried to increase survival rates among the people they enslaved, not as a humanitarian measure, but because babies were less expensive than new captives. In 1770, William Vassall (1715–1800) was eager to expand sugar production at his Green River plantation to keep up with his nephew John’s Newfound River plantation, which meant purchasing eighty new captives over a two-year period at a cost of £50–55 for each new person. To save money, Vassall resolved to “make my Negroes increase by breeding.”⁸⁵ The survival of babies at Green River was a frequent topic of discussion in William Vassall’s letters. “I have thought a great deal about the best way of encouraging the propagation of Negro children on my estate and am very anxious the effect it,” he wrote to his agents.⁸⁶ “Encourage marriage & Conjugal fidelity among the Negroes as much as [you] possibly Can, and to be very Careful and Tender of the pregnant Negro Women Before, At, and after Childbirth, And also of the young children after they are born, That I may as soon as possible have a fine Gang of Creole Negroes, and have the Increase exceed the Decrease.”⁸⁷

⁸¹ Morgan, *Laboring Women* (2004); Turner, *Contested Bodies* (2017).

⁸² Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*, 55.

⁸³ Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 24, 73, 222.

⁸⁴ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 220.

⁸⁵ William Vassall to James Wedderburn, 13 July 1770, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

⁸⁶ William Vassall to John Graham, 28 April 1794, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

⁸⁷ Over the next several decades, William Vassall exhorted his agents in Jamaica to increase the birth rate on his plantation. In 1790, he ordered his attorney James Wedderburn to purchase “six young Negro women” age 17 or

Despite these orders, the birth rate at Green River remained low and the mortality rate remained high. William Vassall typically purchased twelve to twenty-four new captives each year to replace enslaved people who died of violence, disease, and exhaustion. Typical entries in his ledgers read, “Paid Bailey & Co for 12. Negroes at £55 per head & duty 20 [shillings] Each” and “By 8 Women Girls @£38. By 4 Men Boys @35. By duty 20 [shillings] Each.”⁸⁸ William Vassall purchased lots of a dozen captives from the slaving ports of Lucea and Montego Bay, but was wary of the high death rate among new arrivals. After he purchased fifty “New Negroes” in 1770, Vassall grumbled, “I lost in the course of two years about 20 of them.”⁸⁹

John Vassall (1713–1747)

The white Vassalls were an extensive and powerful family in Jamaica, but the history of 105 Brattle Street is most closely connected to one branch of the family tree: the descendants of John Vassall and Anna Lewis Vassall’s grandson, John Vassall (1713–1747). John’s son, John Vassall (1738–1797), commissioned the building of the mansion in Cambridge in 1759. In order to understand the younger John Vassall’s life and fortune, it is necessary to examine his father’s property in some detail.

John Vassall (1713–1747) was born in Jamaica to John and Anna Vassall’s son Leonard (1678–1737) and Ruth Gale (1685–1733), the daughter of a neighboring sugar planter. When John was six years old, he became heir to a large part of his grandmother Anna’s estate.⁹⁰ This

18, but if he could not buy them, he could buy twelve newly arrived captives of any age or sex. In 1794, he asked Wedderburn to buy “the first good lot of 10 Ebo women not under 16 years old and not exceeding 19 years” he could find. William Vassall to James Wedderburn, 3 May 1773, 6 October 1790, 1 October 1784, Sheffield Archives.

⁸⁸ William Vassall Account Book, February 7 and 14, 1747, 1757, and October 11, 1749, Houghton Library.

⁸⁹ William Vassall to James Wedderburn, 19 July 1791, Sheffield Archives.

⁹⁰ In her will of 1719, Anna Vassall left the majority of her estate to her son William (1672–1720), specifying that her grandson John Vassall (1713–1747) should inherit if William died without heirs. William Vassall died without surviving children six months after his mother. The bulk of the estate was entailed to six-year-old John. Another part went to William’s widow, Sarah Paine Vassall, for her lifetime. After she married Henry Stout, there was conflict over the exact terms of the inheritance. This was adjudicated through a Chancery Court case in Jamaica, *Vassall v. Stout* (Calder, 12). John Vassall seems to have prevailed. It should be noted that John inherited Anna Vassall’s estate because of a deal between Leonard and Anna. Leonard’s eldest son, Lewis (1709–1743), would be Leonard’s own heir, inheriting a lifetime use of 1,000 acres that Anna sold to Leonard for five shillings in 1699. Meanwhile, John, the second son, would inherit the portion of Anna’s estate that she would otherwise have left to Leonard. This is why Leonard Vassall left John only five shillings in his own will in 1737. Deed to Leonard Vassall of land in Jamaica by Anna Vassall. Jamaica, 30 Dec 1699, Temple, Nelson, Lloyd, Vassall, and Borland family papers,

included at least one fully functional sugar estate—Lower Works in St. Elizabeth Parish—and the beginnings of another, Newfound River in Hanover Parish.⁹¹ It was an enormous inheritance in both land and enslaved people.

By the time Anna Vassall died in 1720, Leonard Vassall and Ruth Gale Vassall had already moved their family to Philadelphia, where Ruth's older sister, Mary, was married to the mayor, Jonathan Dickinson.⁹² The Vassalls arrived in Pennsylvania in June 1719, but soon moved to Boston.⁹³ By 1731, they were living in a new house in Braintree, which would one day become the home of John and Abigail Adams. The three eldest Vassall sons—Lewis, John, and William—attended Harvard. During their student days, they were frequently disciplined for breaking the college rules against dancing, card-playing, skipping class, and general carousing. John Vassall

1611-1862 (inclusive), 1700-1831 (bulk), MS Am 1250 (9), Houghton Library; Will of Anna Vassall (1719); Will of William Vassall (1720).

⁹¹ The Vassall family wills refer to their property in "Luana," the region near the mouth of the Black River, including Luana Point and the Luana Mountains. In later decades, there was a plantation called Luana owned by the Gale family (Ruth Gale's brother Isaac and his heirs). The Vassall family properties adjacent to the Gale's Luana estate were called Lower Works, Tophill, and simply "Vassalls" (on the 1763 Craskell map). A 1734 survey of these properties can be found at Houghton Library at Harvard: Survey of lands patented by John Vassall, Jamaica, 26 Aug 1734. Contemporary copy of plot and description made by William Dunbar and Alexander Skeen. Temple, Nelson, Lloyd, Vassall, and Borland family papers, 1611-1862 (inclusive), 1700-1831 (bulk), MS Am 1250 (16), Houghton Library. <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl.hough:41367586>

⁹² Mary Gale (1673–1719) married Jonathan Dickinson (1663–1722) in Jamaica. In 1696, Mary, Jonathan, their son, and eleven enslaved people set sail for Philadelphia, but were famously shipwrecked in Florida and held captive for a year. Calder and other Vassall biographers place Leonard and Ruth Vassall's move to the mainland colonies in the early 1720s, but Jonathan Dickinson's correspondence shows that they arrived in the summer of 1719. Jason Daniels, "Atlantic Contingency: Jonathan Dickinson and the Anglo-Atlantic World, 1655-1725," dissertation, University of Warwick (2013); Charles M. Andrews, "God's Protecting Providence: A Journal by Jonathan Dickinson," in *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Oct. 1942), 107-126.

⁹³ Calder dates the move after the birth of Henry Vassall (25 December 1721) in Jamaica, but before the birth of Mary Vassall (23 June 1723) in Boston. However, Jonathan Dickinson's papers show that Leonard Vassall arrived in Philadelphia in June 1719. This agrees with a brief autobiographical sketch by William Vassall, which states that he "was removed at about two years of age from Jamaica to Philadelphia, & at about 4 years of age I was removed from Philadelphia to Boston." William Vassall was born 23 November 1715, and Jonathan Dickinson mentions him being taken on a journey to New York in 1720. Samuel Batchelder's *Notes on Henry Vassall* further confuses the timeline by claiming, somewhat implausibly, that Henry Vassall "seems to have lived until nearly twenty years of age" in Jamaica. Henry Vassall may have been born in either Philadelphia or Boston. Calder, 13; Batchelder, 9; Mr. Vassalls case [Vassall, William, 1715-1800], [n.p., 1785?], Tudor family papers, 1740-1869, A.MS (unsigned), MS Am 1197 (255), Houghton Library; Mary Vassall's baptism (24 July 1723) is noted in J.L. Bell, *The Colonial Records of King's Chapel, 1686-1776*, volume 2. Sarah Vassall's birth in Jamaica in 1720 is confirmed by Jamaican baptismal records, *Jamaica, Church of England Parish Record Transcripts, 1664-1879*, film 1368561, 4, FamilySearch.

was particularly fond of playing cards. After repeated warnings, he was fined 20 shillings “for playing cards at a Tavern in Cambridge” in 1733.⁹⁴

After graduating from Harvard, John Vassall managed his Jamaican plantations from his home in Massachusetts. In 1734, he married Elizabeth Phips, daughter of Massachusetts Lt. Governor Spencer Phips. They had three children: Ruth Vassall [Davis] (1737–1774), John Vassall (1738–1797), and Elizabeth Vassall [Oliver] (1739–1779). After his wife Elizabeth died in 1739, John Vassall married Lucy Barran and had another daughter, Lucy Vassall [Lavicount] (1747–1797).⁹⁵ The family lived on the fifty-six-acre estate John amassed in Cambridge.⁹⁶ As one of the town’s leading gentlemen, John Vassall was elected several times as a Selectman and Representative to the General Court, though many of his neighbors thought he was too reckless and profligate to serve their interests. Samuel Wittemore, the deputy sheriff of Middlesex County, proclaimed that John Vassall was “no more fit to discharge the said trust than the horse that he rode.”⁹⁷ Vassall took offense and sued Wittemore for slander, one of many petty lawsuits the white Vassalls brought against their neighbors in Massachusetts.⁹⁸

John Vassall did not live long. He was only 34 years old when he died in 1747. An inventory of his property in Jamaica at the time of his death shows that John Vassall left an enormous estate that included multiple plantations and 1,167 enslaved people.⁹⁹ This was an astonishing number of people for one individual to enslave. A few years later, a census found 989 Black adults living in Boston—647 men, 342 women, and an unknown number of children—

⁹⁴ Official minutes, September 24, 1725–March 3, 1752, Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Early Faculty minutes, 1725–1806, UAlII 5.5, Volume 12 (Box 8), HUA, 60, seq. 72; Clifford K. Shipton, “John Vassall, Class of 1732” in *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, vol. 9 (1731–1735), (Harvard University Press, 1956).

⁹⁵ Calder, 17.

⁹⁶ John Vassall bought several tracts of land in Cambridge, beginning 26 July 1736, when he bought seven acres on the Watertown road from Mercy Frizzell. Some of the parcels were across the river in what is now Brighton. John Vassall kept some of the parcels and sold others to his younger brother, Henry Vassall. Calder, 16.

⁹⁷ This comment led to a series of lawsuits and countersuits brought by John Vassall and Samuel Wittemore. Ralph J. Crandall, “Metropolitan Boston Before the American Revolution” in *Contested Commonwealths: Essays in American History*, ed. William A. Pencak, John Lax, Ralph J. Crandall (Lehigh University Press, 2011); Shipton, “John Vassall,” *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*.

⁹⁸ Beginning in 1733, when William Vassall sued his Harvard tutor for slapping him, the white Vassalls filed many lawsuits against their neighbors, many of them for insulting the Vassalls’ honor or daring to oppose them in politics or business. Clifford K. Shipton, “John Vassall, Class of 1732,” “William Vassall, Class of 1733,” in *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, vol. 9 (1731–1735), (Harvard University Press, 1956).

⁹⁹ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, table 4.1, data from 1674–1784, IB/11/3/1–64, Jamaica National Archives.

meaning that John Vassall personally enslaved as many as Boston's entire enslaved population.¹⁰⁰ Even by Jamaican standards, John Vassall enslaved an extraordinary number of people. On a list of Jamaican sugar planters who enslaved the most people before 1784, John Vassall ranks eighth. At the time of his death in 1747, he ranked fourth.¹⁰¹

When John Vassall died, his son, John (1738–1797), was nine years old. The younger John inherited his father's plantations in Jamaica, the estate in Cambridge, and at least 585 men, 583 women, and 270 children.¹⁰² Though young John was both a child and a resident of Massachusetts, he instantly became one of the leading enslavers in eighteenth-century Jamaica. Over the next fifty years, he would enslave thousands more people to keep his plantations running and his profits growing. The mansion that became 105 Brattle Street was built on their stolen labor and the systematic violence perpetrated against them.

John Vassall's Plantations: Newfound River Estate

John Vassall (1738–1797) owned two sugar plantations in Jamaica: Newfound River in Hanover Parish and Lower Works Pen in St. Elizabeth.¹⁰³ Newfound River was a mid-sized sugar estate in the mountains near the border of Westmoreland and Hanover Parishes.¹⁰⁴ On modern maps, the abandoned site is about equidistant between the resort towns of Negril and Lucea,

¹⁰⁰ 1754 Massachusetts Census of Enslaved People, MSA.

¹⁰¹ Trevor Burnard lists the nineteen plantation owners who enslaved the largest number of people at the time of their death, 1684–1784. John Vassall (1713–1747) is #8 on the list. Four of the enslavers higher on the list died after 1767, when the plantation system in Jamaica was at its peak. At least four other enslavers on the list were closely connected to the Vassall family: Peter Beckford (#2) was the brother-in-law of Florentius Vassall (1688–1711); Richard Beckford, #12, was Peter's son; John Foster (#15) was the father of Mary Foster, who married Florentius Vassall (1709–1778); Isaac Gale (#19) was John Vassall's first cousin (Isaac's father, Isaac, was the brother of John Vassall's mother, Ruth Gale Vassall). Caveat: Burnard's list is a snapshot of how many people were enslaved at the enslaver's time of death, so there may have been planters who enslaved more people during their lifetimes but sold them or conveyed them to their heirs before their deaths. Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, table 4.1.

¹⁰² John Vassall Sr.'s Massachusetts estate included two enslaved men, Cyrus and Caesar. Cyrus was bequeathed to Lucy Barran Vassall; Caesar was presumably included with the majority of the estate inherited by John Vassall. Legacies of British Slavery database; Newfound River and Lower Works crop returns, IB/11, Jamaica National Archives; John Vassall Probate, 1747, Middlesex Probate #23337.

¹⁰³ An inventory dated 3 June 1757 (coinciding with John Vassall's journey to Jamaica with Henry Vassall), lists 254 enslaved people by name. It is possible that executors sold most of the people enslaved by the elder John Vassall, or that some of them were living on other properties. The executors of John Sr.'s estate mentioned in the inventory are John Gale, William Gale, Robert Sayers, and James Minot. Inventory of John Vassall (1757), IB/11/3/37, 160, Jamaica National Archives.

¹⁰⁴ Newfound River was 815 acres; the average sugar plantation in Jamaica was 900. Curtain, *Orchard*, 30.

just southwest of the tiny hamlet of Glasgow. Unlike the white Vassall estates along the rich Black River, Newfound River was an upland plantation. It was hilly and heavily forested, so enslaved people had to clear dense tropical vegetation before they could plant sugar cane. On the southern edge of the plantation, the land rose into the higher mountains, growing too steep and rocky for sugar cultivation.¹⁰⁵ On its northwestern edge, Newfound River abutted Green River estate, a similar-sized plantation owned by John's uncle, William Vassall. Both plantations had access to the Green River, which flowed down the mountains into Orange Bay. The river allowed the Vassalls to ship huge barrels called hogsheads—each of them holding up to 2,000 pounds of sugar—to buyers in Boston and London.

By the time John Vassall (1713–1747) inherited Newfound River, the plantation has been operating for at least a decade.¹⁰⁶ Both Newfound River and Green River appear in a list of thirty-eight functional sugar plantations in Hanover that Leonard Vassall compiled before his death in 1737.¹⁰⁷ Both plantations had “stock, Negroes, and implements,” along with cattle-driven sugar mills.¹⁰⁸ The first official crop return for Newfound River is dated February 25, 1741. It shows that in the previous year, the people enslaved at Newfound River produced 78 hogsheads of sugar, 1,671 gallons of rum, and 4,500 gallons of molasses.¹⁰⁹ This was less sugar than Green River produced in the same year (105 hogsheads), but 78 hogsheads was almost exactly the average number of hogsheads (77) produced on Jamaican plantations in the late 1730s. Newfound River was an average plantation producing an average crop.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ John Vassall owned an additional 135 acres of this “mountain land.” Map of Newfound River, National Library of Jamaica (NLJ), Hanover 18.

¹⁰⁶ Leonard Vassall does not call it “Newfound River,” but he does mention the plantation owned by his son John that is adjacent to the plantation he is leaving to William Vassall on “Green Island River.” Last will and testament of Leonard Vassall, Boston, 10 Jun 1737, Temple, Nelson, Lloyd, Vassall, and Borland family papers, 1611–1862 (inclusive), 1700–1831 (bulk), MS Am 1250 (19), Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

¹⁰⁷ Leonard Vassall, Directions for boiling of sugar. A.MS.s., Jamaica, 17--?, Temple, et al. family papers, MS Am 1250 (88), Houghton Library.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Craskell, Henry Moore, James Simpson, and Daniel Fournier. *Map of the county of Cornwall, in the island of Jamaica*. London: D. Fournier, 1763. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/73691849/>

¹⁰⁹ Newfound River Crop Returns, 1741, JARD, IB/11/1, folio 117.

¹¹⁰ In 1737, the average production for Jamaican plantations was about 77 hogsheads. William James Gardner, *The History of Jamaica: From Its Discovery by Christopher Columbus to the Year 1872*, (1872), 156; Burnard, *Mastery Tyranny, and Desire*, 15; Curtain, *Orchard*, 30–1.

After John Vassall died in 1747, his agents and overseers managed the property on behalf of his son.¹¹¹ The younger John Vassall (1738–1797) did not take control of his plantations until he turned 21 in 1759, but he did take an active interest as he approached adulthood. In December 1756, when he was an 18-year-old student at Harvard, John requested a leave of absence to travel to Jamaica with his uncle Henry Vassall because he was “having some considerable difficulties about the rents of his estate at Jamaica & desired leave to go thither to look after them.”¹¹²

During this trip, Henry Vassall requested official appraisals of John’s property. The resulting inventory of Newfound River gives a detailed picture of the plantation, including the names of 128 people enslaved there in 1757.¹¹³ There were 56 men, 14 boys, 44 women, and 10 girls, as well as two additional men—Essex and Robin—who had recently run away. Six of the adults (Eve, Nanie, Kittah, Sarah, Dunnu, and Asberry) were appraised at £5 or less, suggesting that they may have been elderly or disabled. Most of the other adults were appraised at values between £50–80, but two men, Pompey and Dick, had had much higher valuations. They may have had valuable skills as drivers or craftsmen. Perhaps they used the “parcell of Carpenters tools” or “parcell of Smiths tools and Bellows” in the Newfound River cooper’s shop.

Newfound River had multiple buildings, including the cooper’s shop, a sugar-boiling facility, and a “Great House,” inhabited by the white overseer, Patrick Hunter. The inventory portrays this house as a stark, utilitarian space with none of the luxury items that adorned the Vassall family’s houses in Massachusetts. Henry Vassall’s kitchen in Cambridge contained more than three dozen specialized copper pots, chafing dishes, toasting irons, coffee pots, and a

¹¹¹ John Vassall turned 21 on 12 June 1759. The last crop return calling him a minor is dated 10 February 1759. JARD IB/11/3, folio 79.

¹¹² The President and Fellows of Harvard College granted this request on 14 December 1756, noting that John Vassall’s grandfather and guardian, Lt. Gov. Spencer Phips, supported the request. They gave permission for John Vassall to be absent for four months, ordering him to return by 1 May 1757. Harvard University Corporation records: minutes, 1643–1989, Corporation records volume 2, September 17, 1750–April 23, 1778, UAI 5.30 Box 2, HUA.

¹¹³ The two surviving inventories from 1757 name 128 enslaved people at Newfound River and 126 at Lower Works (254 people in total). This is substantially fewer people than counted in the inventory of John Vassall (1713–1747), which suggests that the adults who administered the estate may have sold or transferred much of the estate before John Vassall (1738–1797) reached adulthood.

marble mortar for spices.¹¹⁴ By contrast, the “Cook Room” and “Buttery” at Newfound River contained only one kettle, one iron pot, one gallon pot, and “sundry utensils.” Patrick Hunter and other white employees ate their salt beef from pewter and earthenware dishes, not china and silver. The “great Room” at Newfound River did have furniture—six Windsor chairs, four tables, and a bed with a “Musketo net”—along with sheets, towels, and pillowcases made of linen or Osnaburg, a coarse fabric often used for enslaved people’s clothing. Nearby, a “Little Room” had a second bed, this one with a feather mattress, as well as more mosquito netting, but no other furniture. Most of the other objects in the house were either agricultural tools—hoes, axes, saws—or implements used to control and discipline the enslaved people: a “Speaking Trumpet” to magnify voice commands, several firearms, and a collar with a padlock.¹¹⁵

The 1757 inventory does not include any information about the homes and possessions of the people enslaved at Newfound River. On most Jamaican plantations, enslaved workers lived in wattle-and-red-earth huts with thatched roofs that they built themselves. They were also expected to feed themselves. Enslaved Jamaicans tended their own “provision grounds,” where they grew cassava, yams, plantains, potatoes, and vegetables, and often raised chickens, pigs, or goats. Enslavers sometimes distributed supplementary rations, but the expectation was that enslaved people would provide their own food in addition to producing sugar.¹¹⁶ Almost all the food listed in the 1757 Newfound River inventory was in small quantities—a firkin of butter, a jar of oil, a barrel of flour—suitable for the use of a handful of white employees. The only provisions that might have been distributed to 128 people were ten barrels of mackerel, a cask of salt, and three mostly empty barrels of ginger. Indeed, John Vassall’s uncle William made

¹¹⁴ Henry Vassall Inventory, 1769, Middlesex Probate #23336; Batchelder, *Notes on Henry Vassall*, 80.

¹¹⁵ John Vassall Inventory, 1757, JARD, IB/11/3/37. A full transcription is included in Appendix D.

¹¹⁶ The provisioning ground system predominated in Jamaica, but not in colonies like Antigua where the majority of available land was planted with sugar. Trevor Burnard argues that providing provisioning grounds was an aspect of Jamaican planters’ control over enslaved people, tying them to specific plots of ground and allowing them to accumulate minor goods (clothing, crockery, spices) by selling their surpluses in the Sunday markets. Enslaved people who felt ownership over small plots of land sometimes adopted “the wary conservatism typical of peasants and petty commodity producers.” In other words, people who had invested time and effort in land that they could pass on to their children were less likely to risk losing it by resisting. Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 153–4; James A. Delle, John M. Chenoweth, Lynsey A. Bates, *Archaeologies of Slavery and Freedom in the Caribbean: Exploring the Spaces in Between*, University of Florida Press (2018).

annual purchases of thirty to forty barrels of “Fish for Negroes” to supply protein to enslaved people at his Green River estate, but only provided about five pounds of flour and 7.5 pounds of rice per person each year.¹¹⁷ This paltry amount of flour and rice suggests that enslaved people were probably producing starches and vegetables in their provisioning grounds, but struggled to raise enough animals to feed themselves. Despite their exhausting work in the sugarcane fields, the people enslaved by the white Vassalls had to find time and energy to tend their provisioning grounds to avoid starvation.

In the year leading up to John and Henry Vassall’s 1757 visit, the 128 enslaved people at Newfound River produced about 104 hogsheads of sugar, 8,123 gallons of molasses, and 1,306 gallons of rum. This crop was worth at least £2,800.¹¹⁸ In 1759, after John Vassall returned to Massachusetts, they produced an even larger crop—120 hogsheads of sugar, 8,808 gallons of molasses, and 1,876 gallons of rum worth at least £3,200—which directly financed the building of John Vassall’s new house in Cambridge. The bulk of the sugar products were consigned to wholesalers in Boston and London, but the overseers usually shipped one 112-gallon puncheon of rum and one thousand-pound tierce of sugar directly to Cambridge “for Mr. Vassall’s use.”¹¹⁹

John Vassall spent £2,204 15s 11d building his house in Cambridge.¹²⁰ Much of this money went to carpenters, masons, and other workers, but Vassall also spent lavish amounts

¹¹⁷ William Vassall frequently purchased large amounts of mackerel (38 barrels in 1760; 31 barrels in 1761) and other “Fish for Negroes.” The account book also includes periodic purchases of “mess beef” (2 barrels in 1760), “Castile soap” (50 pounds), flour (6 barrels), and rice (6 tierces). A tierce of rice weighs about 315 pounds, so 6 tierces of rice is about 1,890 pounds. In 1760, the population at Green River was about 250 people, so 6 tierces of rice is about 7.5 pounds of rice per person for the whole year. This was a minor supplement to food that enslaved people grew for themselves, not a regular ration. William Vassall, 1715–1800, Account book [V.p.] 1747–1761, MS Am 1250 (92), Houghton Library.

¹¹⁸ Prices for sugar fluctuated depending on the quality of the sugar, the size of the total crop for that year, and the place of sale. For overviews of sugar prices in London, see Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623–1775* (1994). This value estimate for the Newfound River crop is based on the value of hogsheads of sugar, rum, and molasses in the 1757 inventory. For consistent comparison across disparate records, this number of hogsheads also includes sugar packed in tierces, reckoned at 0.64 hogshead per tierce.

¹¹⁹ They also kept rum and sugar “for the use of the estate”—230 gallons of rum and 2,000 pounds of sugar in 1762, one puncheon of rum in 1763. Newfound River Crop Returns, 1759–1763, JARD IB/11/3, folios 54, 79.

¹²⁰ It is difficult to compare prices in Jamaica, London, and Massachusetts, in part because they used different currencies, all of which fluctuated. A pound of “Jamaica money” or Massachusetts provincial money was worth less than a pound sterling. John Vassall’s 1757 inventories were likely given in “Jamaica money.” His account of the costs of building his house in Cambridge specifies a total cost of £2,939 14s 7d in “Money of the Province of Massachusetts,” which was “Equal to Sterling” in the amount of £2,204 15s 11d. John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

on the objects that the people he enslaved in Cambridge saw and touched every day. There was “Paper from London” for the walls, window glass, locks and hinges, and a water pump. The iron fireback may have been included among “Sundry Iron Work” for which John Vassall paid £110 2s 3d.¹²¹ The marble chimneypiece and whimsical ceramic fireplace tiles in the upstairs chambers cost £32 13s 4p, about the value of one and a half hogsheads of sugar.¹²²

John Vassall’s income in the late 1750s was enough to build a mansion, but he was not satisfied. After taking control of Newfound River in 1759, he oversaw a decade-long expansion that doubled the sugar crop. In 1762, the enslaved people made 121 hogsheads of sugar, increasing to 153 hogsheads in 1765 and 240 hogsheads in 1769.¹²³ This was an extraordinarily rapid increase. After listening to his nephew brag about his record-breaking crop in 1770, John’s uncle, William Vassall, wrote an incredulous letter to his son-in-law and business partner, James Syme, in London with instructions to verify John’s claims: “I shall be obliged to you if you’ll count up the Weights of all [John’s] parcels of Sugar,” William wrote, further inquiring after the dimensions of the hogsheads and asking Syme “to write me of your Opinion of the quality of his sugar.”¹²⁴

Expanding production meant buying more “New Negroes.” The rapid increase of the Newfound River crop in the 1760s indicates that John Vassall was probably buying at least twenty to thirty new captives every year, both to increase production and replace people who died of disease, exhaustion, or violence. The size of the 1769 crop—240 hogsheads of sugar—required a population of around 300 enslaved people.¹²⁵

¹²¹ John Vassall paid two contractors for iron work: [possibly Nathaniel] Jarvis (£57.8.8) and Joseph Scott (£52.13.7). TNA AO 13/90.

¹²² In the 1757 inventory, hogsheads of sugar are reckoned at £21 18s. In William Vassall’s account books, he reckons the “proceeds” of 156 hogsheads of sugar shipped on eight different ships in 1758/9. The amounts vary considerably, from a low profit of £11.45 to a high of £30.19, but five of the eight shipments have prices between £19.45 and £20.90. Overall, the average is £20.98 for the 156 hogsheads. William Vassall Account Books, 33, seq. 70, MS Am 1250 (92), Houghton Library.

¹²³ Newfound River Crop Returns, 1759–1762, JARD, IB/11/4.

¹²⁴ In fact, the hogsheads from Newfound River usually weighed more than the hogsheads from Green River, not less. William Vassall to John Syme, 6 Sept 1770, Sheffield Archives; Newfound River and Green River Crop Returns, 1760–1770, JARD, IB/11.

¹²⁵ The two lists of enslaved people at Newfound River before 1800 show 128 people in 1757 and 201 in 1799. While it is difficult to know exactly how many people were enslaved at the plantation’s peak in the 1760s–1770s, the increase in production suggests a major increase in the number of enslaved people. A useful comparison comes from Richard Dunn’s study of Mesopotamia, a plantation in Westmoreland. Between 1761 and 1790, an average of 267 people were enslaved there, producing an average of 209 hogsheads of sugar per year. This is in

Crop returns are dry documents. Yet, it is useful to examine a single year of the Newfound River returns in detail to document the core of John Vassall's business in the years he resided in his new mansion in Cambridge. In 1763, Newfound River produced over a quarter million pounds of sugar (140 hogsheads) and 7,548 gallons of rum. In addition to the thousand-pound barrel of sugar he had shipped to Cambridge for his family's own use, John Vassall sold a small amount to his neighbors in Jamaica and reserved some sugar (2,000 pounds) and rum (230 gallons) "for the use of the estate."¹²⁶ This left the vast majority of the crop to be consigned to trading firms in Boston and London, who sold it to retailers.

Newfound River's 1763 sugar crop was split among seven ships.¹²⁷ The largest consignment—51,973 pounds of sugar and 1,132 gallons of rum—was sent to Boston aboard the ship *True Briton*. This ship was owned by Edmund Quincy Jr., scion of the Boston Quincys and future brother-in-law of John Hancock. When Newfound River's sugar was unloaded at Wheelwright's Wharf in Boston in August 1763, Quincy advertised the sale of "fine bright sugars" in the city's newspapers.¹²⁸ Ordinary Bostonians sweetened their tea with Newfound River sugar.

Another ship that carried Newfound River's sugar in 1763 was a slave ship called *Phoenix*. *Phoenix* was similar to hundreds of other ships that carried African captives to Jamaica in the eighteenth century. It was built in Virginia, but its home port was London. It was about 100 feet long—the length of two and a half school buses—and about 30 feet wide. It had sixteen cannons and was typically crewed by about forty sailors.¹²⁹

line with William Vassall's estimate in 1770 that eighty additional people at Green River would increase production from 237 hogsheads to 300 hogsheads. In these cases, each additional enslaved person was expected to boost production by 0.78–0.83 hogsheads. Newfound River produced 240 hogsheads of sugar in 1770, implying a population of 290–310 people. Richard S. Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia* (Harvard University Press, 2014). Legacies of British Slavery Database; Balcarres to the Duke of Portland, dated 22 March 1800, Papers Presented to the House of Commons of the 7th May 1804, Respecting the Slave Trade, section G, 25, Houses of Parliament, 1804.

¹²⁶ Newfound River Crop Returns, 28 Feb 1763 and 26 Oct 1763, JARD, IB/11/4.

¹²⁷ These ships were *King of Prussia* (Capt. Darling), *Elizabeth* (Capt. Brown), *Green Island* (Capt. Ratcliffe), *Phoenix* (Capt. Cummings), *Associate* (Capt. Watson), *Brittanea* (Capt. Scott), and *True Briton* (Capt. Dean). The crop return records this last as "Free Briton," but cross-checking with shipping records from Boston and the name of the captain, it is almost certainly *True Briton*.

¹²⁸ *Boston Post-Boy*, 29 August 1763; *Boston Evening Post*, 22 August 1763.

¹²⁹ *Phoenix*, Captain James Cummings, Voyage IDs, 75975, 77751, Slave Voyages Database.

In the summer of 1762, *Phoenix* sailed from London to the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) under the command of Capt. James Cummings. Like many slave ships, *Phoenix* anchored offshore for several months while its captain bargained with traders for the sale of men, women, and children. The first captives boarded *Phoenix* on September 21, 1762, but the ship did not sail until December 27. This meant that hundreds of people spent three months imprisoned within sight of land while Capt. Cummings purchased additional captives. More than 80% of them came from Cape Coast Castle, a slave-trading fort about ninety miles west of Accra. Typically, people held at “slave castles” had been captured inland and spent weeks or months trapped in squalid, pestilential dungeons before they were led through the Gate of No Return and loaded onto ships like *Phoenix*.¹³⁰

Eventually, Capt. Cummings loaded 515 people into *Phoenix*'s hold. With that many bodies crammed together, each person had a space about six feet long and one foot wide. During the seventy-two-day voyage to Jamaica, *Phoenix*'s captives were confined in unspeakable conditions. Thirty-four people died, which was notable only because it was a relatively low death rate (7 percent). On a previous voyage, nearly 20 percent of *Phoenix*'s captives died during the crossing.¹³¹ Two decades later, anti-slavery activists would circulate diagrams showing horrific overcrowding on the slave ship *Brooks*, which was about the same size as *Phoenix*, but carried 487 captives, fewer than *Phoenix*'s 515.

After more than ten weeks at sea, *Phoenix* arrived in Montego Bay, on Jamaica's northwest coast. Capt. Cummings sold the 481 weakened, disoriented survivors. John Vassall's agents may have purchased some of them when they traveled to Montego Bay to make a deal with Capt. Cummings.¹³² After *Phoenix*'s hold was emptied and sluiced to remove the putrid

¹³⁰ Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 2007); Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (University of Illinois Press, 2016); Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (Penguin, 2008).

¹³¹ The white Vassalls did business with *Phoenix* several times. In 1760, William Vassall shipped five hogsheads of sugar on the ship. *Phoenix*, Captain James Cummings, Voyage IDs, 75975, 77751, Slave Voyages Database; William Vassall Account Books, page 38, digital seq. 80, MS Am 1250 (92), Houghton Library.

¹³² William Vassall's account book ends in 1761 and his letterbooks do not begin until 1769, so it is unknown whether he purchased enslaved people when *Phoenix* was in port at Montego Bay.

evidence of human misery, Cummings loaded it with sugar to sell in London, including ten hogsheads (17,801 pounds) from Newfound River.¹³³

Newfound River was an average Jamaican sugar plantation in terms of size, value, production, and the number of people enslaved there. One way to compare it to other Jamaican plantations is to examine the claim that John Vassall's heirs filed after the abolition of slavery in Jamaica in 1834. The British government compensated slaveowners for the value of formerly enslaved people, incurring a debt that was finally paid off in 2015. The British government paid 13,099 slaveowner claims. The vast majority (11,597 or 88.5 percent) were under £1,000, often for a small number of people enslaved in towns like Kingston. The remaining 1,502 claims (7 percent) were for larger groups of people enslaved on Jamaica's 646 sugar estates and provisioning pens.¹³⁴

John Vassall's heirs were paid £2,595 18s 5d for 133 people enslaved at Newfound River. This was the 700th largest claim out of 13,099. A second claim for 72 people enslaved at Newfound River (£1506 11s 2d) was paid to the creditors of the Vassall family's longtime agent, James Wedderburn.¹³⁵ Combined, these claims amounted to £4,102 9s 7d, making Newfound River the 312th largest claim in Jamaica. This means it was in the top 2.5 percent of all claims, and around the middle of claims for the 646 plantations.¹³⁶ In short, the owners of Newfound River enslaved an average number of people when compared to other Jamaican sugar plantations, but a very large number when compared to all enslavers in the British colonies.

Other white Vassall family heirs also filed substantial claims for compensation from the United Kingdom government after emancipation. William Vassall's heirs claimed £3,870 for 198 people enslaved at Green River, the 384th largest claim on the island. They never received the money, which went to the same Wedderburn creditors in payment for a delinquent 1805

¹³³ Newfound River Crop Returns, 26 Oct 1763, IB/11/4, folio 41, JARD.

¹³⁴ The largest claim, for 704 people enslaved at Bushy Park, was £14,597 4s 1d. Only eight claims were over £10,000. Another 169 were between £5,000 and £9,999. Legacies of British Slavery Database.

¹³⁵ The creditors were Andrew Colvile and Andrew Seton. James Wedderburn was William Vassall's agent in Jamaica, and one of his most frequent correspondents in the 1770s–1780s. Wedderburn may also have worked for John Vassall, though some of William Vassall's letters ask Wedderburn to spy on John. It is not precisely clear when or how Wedderburn acquired part of the Newfound River estate, but he died in debt in 1831. See Legacies of Slave Ownership database; also John Stewart, *Byron and the Websters: The Letters and Entangled Lives of the Poet, Sir James Webster and Lady Frances Webster* (McFarland, 2008).

¹³⁶ All claim amounts from the Legacies of Slave Ownership database.

mortgage.¹³⁷ Lady Holland, the granddaughter of John and William Vassall's cousin Florentius, received the largest payout in the family: £7,211 13s 9d, for 401 enslaved people, the 37th largest claim on the island.¹³⁸

John Vassall's Plantations: Lower Works Pen

Newfound River was not John Vassall's only plantation. He also inherited Lower Works Pen, one of the original Vassall family plantations on the land his ancestor purchased in the seventeenth century.¹³⁹ Lower Works occupied the west bank of the mouth of the Black River. In addition to the river, the King's Road also passed through Lower Works. With its convenient location adjacent to multiple modes of transportation, Lower Works served as a muster point and shooting range for the St. Elizabeth militia.¹⁴⁰

When John Vassall visited Jamaica in 1757, Lower Works was about the same size as Newfound River, with 126 enslaved people.¹⁴¹ Yet, because of its location, age, and use as a livestock-raising pen rather than a sugar estate, Lower Works was a very different plantation.

The first major difference was that Lower Works primarily produced livestock, rather than sugar. The 1757 inventory enumerates a dozen mules and more than two hundred cows, calves, heifers, bulls, steers. There was a £2 difference in value between steers that were trained to turn sugar mills and steers "Not Broak."¹⁴² Cattle that were not useful as draft animals or breeding stock were butchered for meat.¹⁴³ Lower Works did have a functional sugar

¹³⁷ Legacies of British Slavery database; TNA, T71/872.

¹³⁸ Legacies of British Slavery database.

¹³⁹ In 1791, a survey of Lower Works Pen assessed it at 854 acres. By 1839, it was listed as 540 acres (LBS). Two Vassall-owned properties (Tophill and Vassall's) are visible on the Figure 4 map, along with the Gale family's Luana. The square on the Craskell map denotes a pen, while Tophill and Luana have the building icon that denotes a sugar estate with a cattle-driven mill. Map of Lower Works (1791), St. Elizabeth 557, NLJ; Craskell Map, 1763, LOC.

¹⁴⁰ *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, 14 Sept 1816, 17 May 1817, 14 October 1826.

¹⁴¹ The 1734 survey of land patented by John Vassall shows many adjacent parcels, including a 700-acre parcel patented in 1673 that includes the road junction located on the land that later became Lower Works. It is adjacent to several other parcels owned or co-owned by Leonard Vassall, so it is not exactly clear which parts became Lower Works. A later map (1791) surveys Lower Works at 854 acres. St. Elizabeth 557, NLJ. John Vassall Inventory, 1757, IB/11/3/37, JARD.

¹⁴² John Vassall Inventory, 1757, IB/11/3/37, JARD.

¹⁴³ The 1759 crop return for Lower Works includes £98 in "cattle to the butcher."

works with all the ladles, skimmers, and pots needed for refining sugar, but its yearly production was less than a fifth of Newfound River's.¹⁴⁴

Another difference was the presence of many enslaved men with valuable skills. Seven men at Lower Works (Scotland, Phillip, Old Man, Hugh, Daniel, Darby, and Mason Quaco) had appraised values of £100, which suggests that they were highly skilled workers; in Mason Quaco's case, probably a mason. Another man, Billy, had an appraised value of £140, the highest valuation for any person enslaved by John Vassall. Another hint about enslaved workers' skills survives in a name for part of the plantation used to raise young cattle: "Quashe's Pen." No one named Quashe appears on the 1757 list of enslaved people, but the name may have commemorated a man who was skilled with livestock.¹⁴⁵

The Great House at Lower Works was also markedly different from Newfound River. On later maps, it is called the "Overseer's House," and sits beside two small ponds with an arbor gate opening onto the King's Road.¹⁴⁶ Unlike the stark barrenness of the Great House at Newfound River, the Lower Works house had many touches of luxury, including gilt sconces, four "pickturs" on the walls, four maps, two oval tables, and a silver spoon. The dishware was not as elaborate as the finery in the white Vassall houses in Massachusetts, but it was not as utilitarian as the earthenware at Newfound River. White workers at Lower Works ate from "6 Delf soop bowls," "6 Tea cups & saucers," and "6 wine Glass's [and] 1 punch Bowl." They were also well armed, with "11 Old Guns" in the garret.

John Vassall owned Lower Works Pen for thirty years. In 1777, when he was short of money during the American Revolution, he sold the plantation to Joseph Royall, a second cousin of Isaac Royall Jr. and Penelope Royall Vassall.¹⁴⁷ At the time, Lower Works was one of

¹⁴⁴ Lower Works produced nineteen hogsheads of sugar in 1755 and sixteen hogsheads in 1759. The 1759 crop was shipped to London on the ship *Amazon* and consigned to Kilby & Barnard, a London firm co-owned by the Massachusetts-born merchant Christopher Kilby, who was appointed by both the Massachusetts General Court and the Selectmen of Boston to represent the colony's interests in London. John A. Schutz, *Legislators of the Massachusetts General Court, 1691–1780: A Biographical Dictionary* (Northeastern University Press, 1997); Charles W. Tuttle, *Christopher Kilby: A Memoir Prepared for the New England Genealogical and Historical Register* (1872); folios 5 and 87, IB/11/3, JARD. Lower Works Crop Returns, 12 March 1759, volume 3, folio 87, IB/11/4, JARD.

¹⁴⁵ John Vassall Inventory, 1757, IB/11/3/37, JARD.

¹⁴⁶ Map of Lower Works, St. Elizabeth 557, NLJ.

¹⁴⁷ Joseph Royall (1721–1814) was the son of Robert Royall (1688–1757) and grandson of Isaac Royall (1643–1729). This Isaac Royall was the brother of William Royall (1639–1724), whose son Isaac Royall (1672–1739) was the Antigua sugar planter, owner of the Ten Hills farm in Medford (Royall House and Slave Quarters), and father of

the few Jamaican plantations producing cotton, meaning that John Vassall was experimenting with another valuable slave-labor crop.¹⁴⁸

The records for Lower Works Pen in the Jamaica National Archives include another significant piece of evidence about John Vassall’s role as an enslaver: a drawing of his brand. The brand was a capital I and V with serifs, the I embellished with a small triangle on its vertical line pointing to the left.¹⁴⁹ Sugar planters typically had two copies of their iron brands, a large version for branding cattle and a smaller set for branding enslaved people.

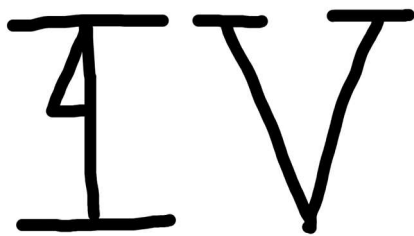


Figure 5. Hand-drawn reproduction of the Vassall family brand. Illustrated by Caitlin DeAngelis; original in the records for Lower Works Pen in the Jamaica National Archives.

Branding enslaved people on one or both shoulders, chest, or cheeks was common practice in Jamaica. The ownership mark was burned into a person’s skin with a red-hot iron, a form of torture that marked the enslaved person for life. Anna Vassall mentioned her brand in the instructions she wrote for grandson, and images of other Vassall family brands survive in the Jamaican National Archives. These marks were often mentioned in advertisements for people who escaped from the Vassalls. For example, an Akan man named Virgil who escaped from William Vassall’s Green River estate in 1811 was “marked WV on right shoulder.”¹⁵⁰ Another man, Henry, was captured and returned to Green River, although his captors were not

Isaac Royall (1719–1781) and Penelope Royall Vassall (1724–1800). In short, Joseph Royall was Penelope Royall Vassall’s second cousin. See Appendix A.

¹⁴⁸ Jamaican crop returns show that a minority of plantations did produce some cotton in the 1780s and 1790s, but only a handful were growing cotton before 1780. The timing of the 1777 crop return for Lower Works suggests that John Vassall may have been experimenting with cotton before the sale, as crop returns usually report the products from the previous year. Legacies of British Slavery Database.

¹⁴⁹ In the eighteenth century, the letters I and J were often used interchangeably, particularly in stylized designs like this brand.

¹⁵⁰ *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, 27 July 1811. In the advertisement, Virgil is identified as “Coromantee,” the common term for Akan people.

sure whether the badly healed brand on his left shoulder was “I or WV.”¹⁵¹ If it was IV, Henry was almost certainly branded by John Vassall’s agents at Newfound River.

Enslaved Families on Vassall-Owned Plantations

While the records kept by white enslavers typically were not created in order to document the lives of enslaved people, a close examination of these records can sometimes reveal glimpses of enslaved people’s families and kinship ties. Among the most important genealogical records are the “Slave Registers” from the early decades of the nineteenth century. After the British government outlawed the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, colonial officials required censuses of the plantations to ensure that enslavers were not secretly buying any illegally imported captives. These lists were recorded every three years, and contain the names of more than a thousand people enslaved by the white Vassalls.

The first Slave Register for Newfound River dates to 1817, when John Vassall’s children owned the plantation. It names 198 enslaved people.¹⁵² For each person, the Slave Register records two names—“Original” name and “Baptised” name— along with their age, birthplace (either “African” or “Creole”), and color (“Negro,” “Mulatto,” “Quadroon,” “Sambo”). In some cases, the recorded names preserve hints about an individual’s birthplace or ethnicity. At least seven African-born people on the 1817 Register have names like “Congo Wilson,” “E James,” or “Cha Phillip,” referencing the common terms for West African ethnicities “Ebo” [Igbo] and “Chamba.”¹⁵³ Other times, the combination of age and birthplace can suggest something of the person’s history. Elders like 71-year-old Clementine Vassall and 76-year-old James Miller were

¹⁵¹ *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, 15 September 1827. The 1817 Slave Register of Newfound River Estate lists two Creole men named Henry: Henry Vassall aka Mingo (born around 1767) and Robert Bassett aka Harry (born around 1771). Two men named Harry also appear in the Green River register for 1817. The records are not detailed enough to match any of these men to the man listed in the newspaper in 1827. *Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1817*, Jamaica, Hanover Parish, T71/190, UK TNA.

¹⁵² *Slave Register for Newfound River, Jamaica, Hanover, 1817*, *Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834*, T 71/190, 702–705, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁵³ “Ebo” was a common spelling of “Igbo.” The Igbo and Chamba are ethnic groups from present-day Nigeria, while “Congo” could refer to people from the Congo River area. Enslavers used these terms imprecisely, often employing sweeping stereotypes about ethnic “types.” While enslaver-ascribed ethnic designations should not be assumed accurate, it is possible that these names may preserve clues about survivors’ ancestry and language. Notations next to names for Jamaica-born people often distinguished two people with the same name (“Old,” “Young,” “Big,” and “Little”). Occasionally, they referenced a profession, skill, or distinguishing physical characteristic, like “Mason Quaco” or “Wooden foot Nancy.”

born in Africa in the 1740s and likely trafficked to Newfound River on ships like *Phoenix* during John Vassall's rapid expansion of the plantation in the 1760s.

For people who were born at Newfound River, their mother's name was also recorded. For example, 26-year-old Robert Stewart was the son of 51-year-old Mary Ann Stewart, and identified by the racial category "Sambo," meaning that he had three Black grandparents and one white grandparent. Stewart's siblings—29-year-old Ann Stewart and 21-year-old John Vassall—were also described as "Sambo."¹⁵⁴

Some families were multi-generational. A 3-month-old baby named Jack was the son of 21-year-old Jean Williams, whose own mother, Myrtila Taylor, was 48. Jack grew up among many relatives: his 25-year-old uncle Pilgrim Taylor, 19-year-old aunt Elin Reid, 15-year-old aunt Eleanor Vassall, 13-year-old uncle William Taylor, 11-year-old aunt Jean Taylor, 8-year-old uncle Malcolm Taylor, and 5-year-old aunt Venus Taylor.¹⁵⁵ He also had a cousin his own age, Elin Reid's 6-month-old daughter, Ruthy.¹⁵⁶ The register does not record marriages between enslaved people, but there was only one man who shared a surname with Jean: 19-year-old John Williams. If John Williams was little Jack's father, the baby also had a paternal grandmother called Nanny.¹⁵⁷

The Williams–Taylor family may also have included other people who were considered kin even if they were not biological family. A 21-year-old woman named Catherine Vassall is also called "Myrtila's Mary," though she was not Myrtila's biological daughter.¹⁵⁸ Her own

¹⁵⁴ Slave Register for Newfound River, Jamaica, Hanover, 1817, Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834, T 71/190, 702–705, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁵⁵ Pilgrim Taylor, Jean Williams, Elin Reid, Eleanor Vassall, William Taylor, Jean Taylor, Malcolm Taylor, and Venus Taylor are all listed in the 1817 Slave Register as the children of Myrtila Taylor. Only one adult man has the surname Taylor: 39-year-old Andrew Taylor. He was very young to be Pilgrim Taylor's father, but it is possible that he was a member of the same family. He may have been Myrtila's brother, or perhaps the father of her younger children, and her older son took his name when he was baptized. Pilgrim Taylor died of dropsy on 25 January 1827, age 36. Newfound River Slave Register, 1829, TNA.

¹⁵⁶ There are two men with the surname Reid: 45-year-old John Reid and 47-year-old George Reid.

¹⁵⁷ John Williams is listed as the "son of Negro Nanny." There are two women in their forties listed in the 1817 Slave Register who could be his mother. One is Ann Williams, 48, who is called "B. Nanny." The surnames match, but "B" usually means "Big," and there is a young boy listed as "son of B. Nanny," so it is not certain that the census-taker would have used both "Negro Nanny" and "B. Nanny" to refer to the same person. The other woman who could be John Williams's mother is Elinor Gardiner, also called Nannie, age 45, whose racial category is listed as "Negro." Another woman, Anne Stewart, age 29, is called "Sambo Nanny."

¹⁵⁸ Catherine Vassall's mother was 42-year-old Susanna Campbell, who was still alive in 1817 and had several other children: Robert Vassall (26), Rosanna Samuells (14), Bacchus Campbell (9), Ann Reid (6). It is not clear why her

one-year-old son, George Taylor, shared Myrtilla's surname.¹⁵⁹ The Slave Register is a stark legal document that can never explain the ties of affection or adoption that connected Myrtilla Taylor and Catherine Vassall, but it does preserve a glimpse of the kinship that lived on in their names.

Resistance and Revolt

One person who appears on the 1817 Slave Register of Newfound River was not actually present when the census was taken. Frankey, a 50-year-old Creole woman, escaped from Newfound River on June 20, 1817, eight days before the list was made. She was still listed as the property of John Vassall's heirs, but she claimed her own freedom. Frankey was one of the many people enslaved by the white Vassalls who resisted by running away or fighting back.

Enslaved people resisted their enslavement in many ways. These ranged from small acts like breaking tools to coordinated campaigns of revolutionary violence like the Maroon Wars (1728–39, 1795–6), Tacky's Revolt (1760–1), and the Christmas Uprising (1831–2). Sometimes, resistance meant running away. Other times, it meant maintaining contact with ancestors via language, music, or ceremonies. Most of these actions were not recorded in the documents created by the white Vassalls, but some were.

As early as the 1670s, when Mary declared that she was not a slave, Black people resisted being enslaved by the white Vassalls. While few were involved in court cases like Mary's, many did everything they could to escape. One fugitive was Monimia, a 36-year-old "Congo" woman who ran away from William Vassall's Green River estate in 1818. According to a notice in the *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, Monimia was branded on the right shoulder, though the wound had healed badly enough that the mark was "not plain."¹⁶⁰ Monimia also had two

daughter Catherine Vassall has the "Original" name Myrtilla's Mary. There are many possibilities: perhaps Susanna Campbell was ill when Catherine was a baby; perhaps Catherine was the partner of Myrtilla's son Pilgrim Taylor; perhaps Myrtilla and Catherine shared a craft, skill, or other affinity. The evidence in the Slave Register hints at possibilities, not conclusions.

¹⁵⁹ Catherine Vassall ("Myrtilla's Mary") had another young son, Richard, who died at age 7 months on 25 November 1828. Newfound River Slave Register, 1829.

¹⁶⁰ *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, 1 August 1818. The people mentioned in this news item were captured and committed to the Westmoreland Parish Workhouse, where they resided on July 21, 1818.

children, 12-year-old Thomas and 9-year-old Ursuly.¹⁶¹ She took Thomas with her when she ran, but Ursuly remained behind. Both Monimia and Thomas were recaptured in July 1818 and sent to the Westmoreland Parish Workhouse until they could be returned to Green River. Monimia died on the plantation on October 1, 1827, but both of her children appear to have lived until Emancipation.¹⁶²

Monimia and Thomas were just two of the many people who ran away from Green River estate, including Virgil (1811), James (1812), North (1820), Mark (1821), Patt (1823), and Henry (1827).¹⁶³ A Chamba man named Dago attempted to join the Maroons in 1817, but he was turned in to authorities along with a companion from a neighboring plantation.¹⁶⁴ Another African-born man, Nero, escaped from John Vassall's Newfound River in the 1820s, but was also returned.¹⁶⁵ Jamaican newspapers from the early nineteenth century show that several people ran away from Newfound River, including Sancho, a creole man belonging "to Mr. Vassall, Newfound River estate, Hanover" who fled in 1812 and Bob Vasal, who managed to reach Clarendon Parish in 1817 despite "a twist on his right leg apparently from a dislocation."¹⁶⁶

While Monimia and Thomas survived being recaptured, some fugitives from the white Vassalls did not. Enslavers frequently inflicted extremely violent punishments on captured fugitives, including cutting off their ears, branding their faces, and whipping them to the point of severe injury or death. In some cases, repeat fugitives were executed. When Thomas Thistlewood was the overseer at Florentius Vassall's Vineyard Pen in 1750, he assisted with the hanging of a fugitive named Robin. After the execution, Thistlewood displayed Robin's head on a pole for four months as a warning to other enslaved people. Thistlewood also tortured an

¹⁶¹ Green River Slave Register, 1817, Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834, T 71/190, T 71/197, United Kingdom National Archives.

¹⁶² The Green River registers for 1820–1832 list all of the enslaved people who left the plantation by death, escape, or sale. Thomas and Ursula are not among them, so it is likely that they lived until Emancipation Day in 1834.

¹⁶³ *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, 27 July 1811, 4 July 1812, 15 September 1827; Green River Slave Registers, 1823, 1829, 1832.

¹⁶⁴ *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, 5 April 1817.

¹⁶⁵ Newfound River Slave Register, 1829.

¹⁶⁶ *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, 4 July 1812, 18 June 1817. Like most enslaved people in Jamaica, both Sancho and Bob Vassal were small in stature (5'4" and 5'2.25" respectively). A combination of poor nutrition, rampant disease, and relentless labor meant that the small percentage of enslaved infants who survived to adulthood were slightly shorter than people born free in Africa. Trevor Burnard, *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 95, discussing a demographic study by J.R. Ward.

older man named Titus until he confessed to helping Robin, then whipped him a hundred additional lashes.¹⁶⁷ Punishments like these were often carried out by overseers, but the white Vassalls also inflicted extreme punishment on enslaved people with their own hands. In 1750, Florentius Vassall whipped a driver named Dick, giving him “300 lashes for his many crimes and negligences.”¹⁶⁸

Another punishment for repeat fugitives or suspected troublemakers was to be sold off the island, disrupting family ties and networks of solidarity. William Vassall’s account books do not record the reason why an unnamed man was “transported to Muskito shore” in Central America and sold in 1759, but they do say that it was done on the orders of George Mackay, the longtime Green River overseer.¹⁶⁹ Transporting a specific person across the sea rather than selling him to another Jamaican plantation demonstrated a desire to prevent him from returning.

No form of resistance terrified enslavers more than armed resistance. During the centuries of Atlantic slavery, enslaved people engaged in organized violence against their persecutors that ranged from rebellions on individual slave ships to the coordinated insurrection of the Haitian Revolution. These uprisings haunted the imaginations of white slaveowners, who deployed their own spectacular forms of violence in order to preempt armed revolt, particularly in the Caribbean colonies where enslaved people outnumbered their enslavers by huge margins.

One slave rebellion that directly shaped the history of 105 Brattle Street was the Antigua Slave Conspiracy of 1736. Elizabeth Oliver [Vassall] (1744-1807), wife of John Vassall (1738-1797) was the granddaughter of Isaac and Elizabeth Royall, sugar planters who lived in Antigua.¹⁷⁰ After the uprising was discovered in 1736, the whole Royall–Oliver family—including Elizabeth Oliver [Vassall]’s parents and older brother, Thomas—moved to Massachusetts, where they intermarried with the Vassalls.

¹⁶⁷ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 6–7, 105, 150.

¹⁶⁸ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 3.

¹⁶⁹ William Vassall Account Books, digital seq. 14, Houghton Library.

¹⁷⁰ Elizabeth Oliver and her brother, Thomas Oliver, were the children of Anne Browne, Elizabeth Royall’s daughter from her brief first marriage. Technically, they were Isaac Royall’s step-grandchildren, though Anne Browne was raised in Isaac Royall’s house from infancy.

In October 1736, Antiguan colonists uncovered a slave rebellion on the island. Led by two enslaved men, Court (also called Tackey), a Coromantee man from the Gold Coast, and a creole man named Tomboy, the rebels planned to kill all white Antiguans, take over the island, and form a new government. The colonists were stunned. “Here has been a general Stop to all Business occasion’d by the Happy Discovery of an accursed Negro plot,” wrote one white Antiguan. “You can’t expect a long letter from one who hath had but two nights sleep since the 17th instant occasion’d by the providential discovery of a plot among the Negroes,” explained another.¹⁷¹

Knowing that “all the People of Distinction in the Island would be present,” the rebels planned to strike at a grand ball celebrating King George II’s coronation. Tomboy, a carpenter by trade, was to obtain the job of making seats for the ball. “Then he was to contrive the laying a Quantity of Gun-Powder in the House, and when the Company was dancing, fire was to be set to three trains (the enslaved musicians and other attendants, who were to be let into the secret would be forewarned by the firing of a gun and the beating of a drum.)” After the blast, as whites fled, slaves would enter the town at different parts “and put all the white people there, to the sword.” Guards were to be placed at the town entrances to prevent relief. “St. John’s Fort [was] to be seized, with all the Shipping in the Harbour,” along with Monk’s Hill, Antigua’s “chief Fort and Arsenal.” All the slaves in the countryside were to rise in arms.¹⁷²

Two enslaved people on the Royall plantation, a driver named Hector and his son, Quou, were implicated in the conspiracy. On a Saturday afternoon, when “Hector with his Gang was Digging Caneholes” on the Royall plantation, he saw Cuffey, from the nearby Langford plantation, “Carting Sugar Down to the Bay,” and told him to come by his house the following

¹⁷¹ The best analysis of the plot is that of David Barry Gaspar in his *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Duke University Press, 1990 [1985]). On the details of the conspiracy according to “judges” who “tried” the accused rebels, see *A Genuine Narrative of the Intended Conspiracy of the Negroes at Antigua* (Dublin, 1737 [repr. New York: Arno Press, 1972]). Quotes in the paragraph above are from Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels*, 3. For other good treatments, see Justin James Pope, “Dangerous Spirit of Liberty: Slave Rebellion, Conspiracy, and the First Great Awakening, 1729–1746” (PhD Dissertation, George Washington University, 2014); James F. Dator, “Search for a New Land: Imperial Power and Afro-Creole Resistance in the British Leeward Islands, 1624–1745” (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2011). Some doubt that there was ever a conspiracy, although a recent treatment too readily dismisses the possibility of a conspiracy. Jason Sharples, *The World That Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), ch. 3.

¹⁷² *Genuine Narrative*, 9, 10.

day. Cuffey arrived around noon, and they conversed. Hector told Cuffey that he disliked his overseer (“we have got a Damn’d Overseer,” he told Cuffey). He was mad because “his Master [Isaac Royall] was going Off, and God Damn my Blood and Hands ... if I will live with the Overseer.” Hector then brought Cuffey into another House, where he was hosting “a Small Dinner.” At the dinner, Hector, Quou, and other guests “Drank to General Tomboy’s health who is to Destroy all the white People.” According to Cuffey, who turned King’s Evidence, Hector had a leading role in the rebellion. When Hector received the signal, he and the rebels he led were “to begin to Destroy the People at [a neighboring plantation]” and from there “to Destroy Downward” until he met a group of conspirators led by a man named Toby at “the Widow Parke’s Windmill.” Hector, Toby, and their conspirators were then to march toward St. John’s, and block exits on the northern side of St. John’s, where they would kill whites who tried to escape in that direction after the killing had started in town. Other parties would be placed around the rest of the perimeter of the town to block the other exits.¹⁷³

Hector would deny everything but would nevertheless be convicted and burned at the stake. His son, Quou, was also sentenced to be burned to death. But he was “rerieved at the Stake upon his Promise to make Discoverys of Great Moment.” What Quou told them we do not know, but his sentence ended up being reduced to banishment from the island.¹⁷⁴

Enslaved and self-emancipated Jamaicans repeatedly organized large-scale rebellions that involved hundreds—sometimes thousands—of resitants. During Tacky’s Revolt in 1760–1, warfare broke out in coordinated pockets across the island. The most significant uprising in western Jamaica was led by Apongo, an enslaved man who had previous military experience in West Africa.¹⁷⁵ Apongo and his allies led an improvised army in a series of lightning attacks on plantations in Westmoreland Parish, killing as many white people as they could and rallying other enslaved people to their cause. A thousand rebels, including women and children, took up a defensive position called the “Rebel’s Barricade,” a fortified place in the heavily forested mountains between Westmoreland and Hanover Parishes, where they stockpiled weapons and

¹⁷³ “Evidence against Royall’s Hector a Driver” (Jan. 26, 1736/7), CO 9/11, pp. 17–19, TNA.

¹⁷⁴ “Evidence against Royall’s Hector a Driver” (Jan. 26, 1736/7), CO 9/11, pp. 17–19, TNA; CO 9/12, pp. 74, 80, TNA; “A List of the Names of the Negro’s that were Executed [in the] Late Conspiracy...” and “A List of Negroes to be Banished,” CO 152/23/X7, TNA.

¹⁷⁵ Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Harvard University Press, 2020).

gunpowder. The Rebel's Barricade was barely three miles from Newfound River, separated by the mountains.¹⁷⁶



Figure 6. Detail of the Craskell map showing the proximity of the Vassalls' Newfound River plantation to the stronghold of the Black rebels during and after Tacky's Revolt. Reproduction by permission of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.¹⁷⁷

At the time, John Vassall's cousin, 25-year-old Leonard Stedman (1735–1761), was in Jamaica working for their uncle, Florentius Vassall.¹⁷⁸ Before Stedman left Massachusetts, William Vassall entrusted him with letters for his agents at Green River, but war broke out before Stedman could deliver them. Stedman sent two letters to Massachusetts detailing the

¹⁷⁶ Vincent Brown argues that the rebels in Westmoreland and Hanover were part of a coordinated campaign by enslaved people with military experience. Some of the participants wanted to establish an autonomous Maroon community in the mountains; others may have hoped for a more "aggressive offensive" that could capture a port and establish a sugar-exporting enclave "emulating the coastal trading states of West Africa." Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*.

¹⁷⁷ Craskell, Thomas, Henry Moore, James Simpson, and Daniel Fournier. *This map of the county of Cornwall, in the island of Jamaica*. Londini: D. Fournier, 1763. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/73691849/>.

¹⁷⁸ Leonard Stedman was the son of Ruth Vassall (1712–1770) and Dr. Benjamin Stedman (1706–1751). Ruth Vassall was William Vassall's sister and John Vassall's aunt. Leonard Stedman did not live long in Jamaica; the *Boston Gazette* printed a notice of his death on 27 June 1761, barely a year after he arrived. Stedman, Leonard A.L.s. to William Vassall. Jamaica, 17 Jun 1760, Temple, et al., family papers, MS Am 1250 (85), Houghton Library.

militia's attacks on the rebel stronghold. "They have made a stand & Repuls'd our parties & beat them off several times," Stedman wrote, "oweing to there advantageous situation and having Arms & Ammunition in plenty." Even more alarming for the white Vassalls was Stedman's report that two white neighbors had given guns to dozens of enslaved men to guard their houses, but the men "Join'd the Rebello the first opportunity they had." Stedman reported that "our party" of militia was chasing down enslaved people, capturing "thirty or forty which they executed as fast as they took them." As the fight went on, the militia, British soldiers, and their Maroon allies killed many rebels in battle and executed prisoners with spectacular violence. "What they bring in a Life we Burn & some we hang in Jebbits."¹⁷⁹

People enslaved at Newfound River and Green River may or may not have joined the rebellion. Leonard Stedman reported that, as far as he knew, the Vassall plantations were "very still," but he was on the wrong side of the mountains to see for himself. There was certainly fighting very close to Newfound River and Green River. In the first week of June 1760, the rebels attacked plantations along two narrow passes through the mountains, capturing the northern pass at Jerusalem and failing to take the southern pass at Campbelltown, which was guarded by British soldiers. People from Newfound River and Green River could have slipped away to join the fighters. They may also have followed the example of people at Salt Spring, a mile from Green River, who refused to work during the rebellion.¹⁸⁰ William Vassall's accounts for Green River's expenses in 1760 include atypical purchases of gunpowder.¹⁸¹

Although the majority of rebels in Westmoreland were defeated in the summer of 1760, the white Vassalls remained on high alert. In October 1761, Lewis Vassall (1741–1777) informed the family in Massachusetts of an armed uprising at Black Morass estate, close to Florentius Vassall's Friendship, Greenwich, and Sweet River plantations. Seventy armed rebels "went over to Sweet River Estate, & there massacr'd a Distiller, one other white person & a Negro Wench," before taking shelter in the mountains. Ten days earlier, enslavers had interrupted a plot on another Westmoreland plantation, in which the rebels planned "cutting ye Overseers throat &

¹⁷⁹ Stedman, Leonard A.L.s. to William Vassall, Jamaica, 7 Jun 1760, MS Am 1250 (85), Houghton Library.

¹⁸⁰ Brown, *Tacky's Revolt* (2020).

¹⁸¹ Gunpowder is not one of William Vassall's usual expenses in the Green River accounts. William Vassall Account Books, page 8, digital seq. 21, Houghton Library.

by that means to get Arms making themselves more formidable.” Lewis Vassall admitted the near-simultaneous plotting on various plantations “makes me apprehensive.”¹⁸²

The white Vassall family’s history is inextricable from the larger history of Atlantic slavery. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, they were enthusiastic agents of empire, champions of the transatlantic slave trade, and drivers of the plantation economy in Barbados, Antigua, and Jamaica. They practiced a form of raw racial capitalism that enslaved, immiserated, and killed tens of thousands of Black people in order to extract profits. John Vassall’s mansion in Cambridge—105 Brattle Street—rested on this foundation.

¹⁸² Lewis Vassall (1741–1777) graduated from Harvard in 1760 and traveled to Jamaica soon after. A.L.s. to William Vassall, Jamaica, 7 Oct 1766, MS Am 1250 (89), Houghton Library.

CHAPTER TWO

CUBA

"We Told Toney of it & he Crept Under Ye Barn Flower to hide ye money ye Next Morning after we Stole it but he never had any part of it as I know of but had ye promise of part of it."

— testimony of Robin, May 5, 1752¹⁸³

"Col. Henry Vassal was a very wicked man; that it was a common remark that he was 'the Devil.' That he was a gamester and spent a great deal of money in cards and lived at the rate of 'seven years in three,' and managed to run out nearly all his property, so that Old Madam when she came back after the peace was very poor. He was a severe and tart master to his people; and when he was dying and asked his servants to pray for him, they answered that he might pray for himself."

— Darby Vassall, 1855¹⁸⁴

Cuba was a little girl—no older than three or four—when she stepped off a creaking wooden ship in Boston harbor.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Testimony of Robin, Case #69278, May 1752, Suffolk County Court files, vol. 428, April–June 1752.

¹⁸⁴ Darby Vassall interview with Rev. Nicholas Hoppin, c.1855, History Cambridge.

¹⁸⁵ The exact date of Cuba Vassall's birth is not recorded in surviving documents. When she died on September 16, 1812, her age was recorded as 78, which would put her birth in 1733–4 (*Records of Christ Church Cambridge*, 513). This fits with other evidence. In 1739, Cuba was named second in a list of Abba's six children, suggesting that she may have been the second-oldest child after Robin (Will of Isaac Royall Sr., 1739). If Cuba had four younger siblings by 1739, she was probably born no later than 1735. Cuba had at least five children of her own, all of them born between the 1750s and the 1770s. This fits with a birthdate around 1733–4, which would mean that her children were born between her early 20s and early 40s. All of this supports a birthdate between 1730 and 1735. One piece of evidence challenging this date is a petition filed by Anthony and Cuba Vassall in 1781, which says that they were enslaved "almost sixty years." If Cuba was born in 1733–4, she would have been 47 or 48 in 1781, not nearly sixty. The language in the petition may refer only to Anthony (who was probably at least a decade older than Cuba). Petition of Anthony Vassall, 1781, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives Collection, v.231-Revolution Resolves, 1781, SC1/series 45X, Mass.v.231: p.114–117, Massachusetts Archives, Boston. See Appendix B for genealogical information.

It was July, 1737. Two weeks earlier, Cuba had boarded the ship with her mother, Abba, her older brother, Robin, and two dozen other enslaved people. In the wake of the 1736 discovery of a planned slave rebellion in Antigua, their enslaver, Isaac Royall, had decided to move his own family from their Antiguan sugar plantation to a chilly hilltop farm in Massachusetts. Where the white Royall family went, Cuba was forced to go as well.

Cuba was born in Antigua. In her earliest years, she lived on the Royall family's plantation on the north coast of the island, where more than a hundred enslaved people labored ceaselessly in the sugarcane fields. After harvesting the cane with machetes, they took it to the boiling house, where other enslaved people filled huge copper vats with cane juice and lime. A handful of the most skilled men on the plantation stood inches from the flames, skimming off crystalized sugar with a hand-held ladle.¹⁸⁶ The whitest sugar went to England to sweeten delicate cups of tea. Meanwhile, the sweet, thick molasses left in the bottom of the copper vat went to Massachusetts, where distilleries turned it into barrels of rum for taverns and sea voyages, and for slavetraders to use as currency when they bargained for new captives in Africa.

If 1737 had been an ordinary year, Cuba would have passed her days with the youngest enslaved children while Abba and Robin worked. Robin was eight years old, the age at which children were usually assigned to the "third gang," a group of children, elderly, and disabled field workers who were responsible for "weeding and picking up foliage from harvested cane."¹⁸⁷ Young children like Robin also ran errands, carried water, and helped tend livestock.

¹⁸⁶ For more on enslaved people's labor on sugar plantations in the Caribbean, see, among others, Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 24, 222; William Jennings, *Dibia's World: Life on an Early Sugar Plantation* (Liverpool University Press, 2023), 77, 84, 98; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the West Indies, 1624–1713* (University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 189–190; David Barry Gaspar, "Sugar Cultivation and Slave Life in Antigua before 1800," in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin, (University of Virginia Press, 1993); James Walvin, *Sugar: The World Corrupted, from Slavery to Obesity* (Pegasus Books, 2018), 43–44; James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660–1800* (New York University Press, 1997), 125–126.

¹⁸⁷ Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 24, 73, 222.

Meanwhile, Cuba and Robin's mother, Abba, probably worked in the white Royalls' house.¹⁸⁸ Working in the "Great House" exposed enslaved women to a different set of dangers than the cane fields. Women like Abba spent their days in close proximity with their enslavers, which made them vulnerable to constant surveillance, punishment for small infractions, and sexual violence.¹⁸⁹ They were also at greater risk of being uprooted at their enslavers' whim. When the white Royalls decided to move from Antigua to Massachusetts, they left the majority of enslaved people behind, but singled out Abba and her children to transport to Massachusetts.

The white Royalls did not record much information about Abba and Cuba beyond their names. Yet their names suggest ties of family and culture that endured despite the violence of the slave trade. "Abba" was a common name among the Akan people of modern-day Ghana. At birth, Akan children were typically given several names, including one for the day of the week on which they were born. A boy born on a Friday was often named Kofi/Cuffee; a girl born on a Sunday might be Kwasiba/Quasheba. Abba (or Yaaba) was the name given to a girl born on a Thursday.¹⁹⁰

If Cuba's mother was born among her Akan family, they probably gave her other names to honor her lineage and her place within the community. The white Royalls recorded only a single name, but that does not mean that enslaved people forgot their other names or their traditions. When Abba had a daughter of her own, the baby also received an Akan name. Cuba or Acooba was the way English-speakers heard Akua, the Akan name for a girl born on a Wednesday.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Isaac Royall bequeathed Abba and her children to his daughter, Penelope Royall [Vassall], who had a large, luxurious house in Cambridge. This suggests that Abba may have had experience working in domestic spaces.

¹⁸⁹ Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slaveowners in the American South* (Yale University Press, 2019).

¹⁹⁰ Walter Rucker, "Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion," *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 1 (Sept., 2001): 84–103; Walter Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Indiana University Press, 2015), 83–84; Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 89–90.

¹⁹¹ Names carry great meaning. Due to both the system of slavery and the vagaries of eighteenth-century spelling, many of the enslaved people discussed in this chapter were referred to by various names and spellings in sources created during their lifetimes. We refer to Cuba Vassall by that name for several reasons. Her first name appears in various records as Cuba, Cuby, Coby, and a possible mishearing/mistranscription, "Auber" (Henry Vassall

It is possible that Abba was born in Antigua, but not likely. She gave birth to Robin around 1725 and had several other children in the late 1730s, which means she was probably born between 1695 and 1710. There were enslaved Africans in Antigua as early as the 1670s, but not as many in later decades.¹⁹² Abba may have been one of the first generation of enslaved people born in Antigua, but it is more likely that she was among the many thousands of captives trafficked to Antigua from West Africa in the 1710s and 1720s.¹⁹³ Scholars have documented more than a hundred slave ship voyages to Antigua in those decades, nearly all of which originated in African ports like Whydah, Cape Coast Castle, Keta, Bonny, or other ports adjacent to Akan territory.¹⁹⁴

The white Royalls recorded very little information about Cuba's mother, but nothing at all about her father. He may have been an enslaved man who was left behind in Antigua in 1737, or perhaps one of the few enslaved men they brought to Massachusetts.

It is also possible that Isaac Royall was Cuba's biological father. Sexual violence against enslaved people was common throughout the British colonies.¹⁹⁵ By the early nineteenth century, approximately 12 percent of the people enslaved in Jamaica had a white biological

Inventory, 1769). When Cuba Vassall signed her mark to a probate document in 1811 in the presence of her sons, Darby Vassall, Cyrus Vassall, and James Vassall, her scribe used the spelling "Cuba Vassall." A petition written in the same year also bears Cuba Vassall's mark, but spells her name "Cuby Vassall." A 1779 petition (not signed with her mark) spells her name "Coby Vassall." In the interest of clarity and consistency with other published works, this report uses the spelling "Cuba," while acknowledging that other spellings may also be considered correct. Several secondary sources (Batchelder and Elise Lemire, *Black Walden*) suggest or state that Cuba was named for the island of Cuba, but there is little evidence of a connection. Cuba/Coba/Cuby/Acooba was a common Akan name given to many enslaved women in the Anglophone Caribbean. #23335 (Antony Vassall), 1811, Middlesex County Massachusetts Probate Records, 1648–1871, MSA; Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions; Passed Resolves; Resolves 1811, c.154, SC1/series 228. Massachusetts Archives. Boston, Mass. Petition 1; Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions; Massachusetts Archives Collection. v.186-Revolution Petitions, 1779–1780. SC1/series 45X. Massachusetts Archives. Boston, Massachusetts. v.186: p.313–314 Petition of Anthony Vassall.

¹⁹² Census records for 1678 put the enslaved population of Antigua at 2,172; by 1708, there were 12,943 enslaved people, most of whom arrived via the Atlantic slave trade, not by birth. Peter James Marshall, Elaine M. Low, *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The eighteenth century* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 402.

¹⁹³ Frank Wesley Pitman, *The Development of the British West Indies, 1700–1763* (Routledge, 2019 [1917]); David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Duke University Press, 1990 [1985]), 82–83.

¹⁹⁴ Slave Voyages database, www.slavevoyages.org.

¹⁹⁵ Thomas A. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men* (University of Georgia Press, 2019); Turner, *Contested Bodies*, 11–12, 51, 63–64, 168–69, 215–18.

parent or grandparent.¹⁹⁶ This was true of the people enslaved by the white Royall, Vassall, and Oliver families in both Jamaica and Antigua. At John Vassall's Newfound River plantation, 11.6 percent of the 198 enslaved people listed in the 1817 Slave Register had mixed-race ancestry.¹⁹⁷ Friar's Hill, Thomas Oliver's plantation in Antigua, was similar, with 12.9 percent of the 178 enslaved people having a white biological father or grandfather.¹⁹⁸

While these records were created in the early nineteenth century, they testify to multiple generations of sexual violence against enslaved women. Terms like "sambo" (a person with three Black grandparents and one white) and "quadroon" (a person with one Black grandparent and three white) referred to people whose grandmothers and mothers had been the victims of rape and sexual exploitation in the eighteenth century. For example, one of the enslaved men at Newfound River in 1817 was 41-year-old George Anderson, who was identified as a "quadroon." This means that George Anderson was born around 1776 to a mixed-race mother and a white biological father. George's mother was probably born between 1730 and 1760 to an enslaved mother and a white biological father. Her own mother (George's grandmother) may have been born any time between 1690 and 1745, probably during the lifetime of Leonard Vassall.

Sexual violence against enslaved people who were connected to the white Vassall family is well documented. Thomas Thistlewood, a white overseer who worked for Leonard Vassall's brother Florentius, kept a detailed diary of his life in Jamaica, which included thousands of acts of rape and sexual exploitation against enslaved women. In some cases, Thistlewood raped enslaved women as punishment for running away or disobeying orders. In others, he exchanged money, food, or other favors for sex. He also had a long-term partner, an enslaved woman

¹⁹⁶ For comparative examples, see Richard Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 63–4, 437; B. W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807–1834* (University of the West Indies Press, 1995 [1976]), 139–140.

¹⁹⁷ Slave Register for Newfound River, Jamaica, Hanover, 1817, Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834, United Kingdom National Archives, T 71/190, 702–705.

¹⁹⁸ Slave Register for Friar's Hill, Antigua, 1824, Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834, T 71/248, 547–550, United Kingdom National Archives.

named Phibbah, who was able to finesse Thistlewood's sexual exploitation into privileges, property, and protection for herself and her mixed-race children.¹⁹⁹

Even for women like Phibbah, sexual exploitation by white men was unpredictable and dangerous. Thomas Thistlewood's white friends frequently beat the women of color they considered their "wives," sometimes so badly that the women died.²⁰⁰ Thistlewood himself sent a previous long-term companion, Jenny, back to the sugarcane fields after he discovered her bringing a knife into the bed they shared.²⁰¹ Enslaved women like Cuba's mother, Abba, who worked in white households, were especially vulnerable to sexual violence because of their daily proximity to white people. Enslavers had free license to abuse enslaved people without consequences, and most did.

Surviving documents do not explicitly say whether Isaac and Elizabeth Royall's decision to transport Abba, Cuba, and Robin to Massachusetts in 1737 was the result of ongoing sexual exploitation, other than the inherent gender-based violence of bearing children in a slave society. Abba had at least six children between 1725 and 1739, four of whom were younger than Cuba and may have been born in Massachusetts.

¹⁹⁹ Phibbah's resourcefulness was not unique among women of color connected to the Vassall family. John Vassall (d.1770), the son of John Vassall (1696–1728) had three children—Elizabeth Vassall, Leonard Vassall, and Mary Vassall—with a free woman of color named Rose, all of whom are mentioned in his will. When Elizabeth Vassall made her own will in 1796, she mentioned land given to her by her father "in the Luana Mountains adjoining Giddy Hall Pen, called Purgatory" (Calder, 11). Giddy Hall was a few miles north of Top Hill Pen, and may have been part of John Vassall's original 5,000 acres. Another free woman of color, Mary Buddle, was the unmarried partner of the white Vassalls' longtime attorney and neighbor, John Blyth. Her children were born free at Kendal estate, a plantation barely a mile from Newfound River and Green River, and educated at the University of Glasgow. One became a professor of chemistry at Queen's College in Ireland. Another free woman of color, Eleanor Vassall (1790s–c.1851), may have been a descendant of the white Vassalls in St. Elizabeth Parish. She was the unmarried partner of Samuel Glanville (1785–1862). Glanville owned several plantations in Jamaica, and Eleanor personally enslaved at least eight people. She also had nine children, all of whom were born free. Several of the Glanville children moved from Jamaica to England, where they lived as wealthy country gentry. People enslaved by Eleanor Vassall: Lewis Vassall (b.1823), Samuel Lewis (b.1793), Caroline Foster alias Rose (b.1781), Bossy (b.1792), Thomas (born c.1787), John (born c.1790), London (born c.1787), Mary (born c.1787), Ned (born c.1785). After emancipation, Eleanor Vassall was compensated for five enslaved people (Manchester 336). It is possible that some of the people she purchased may have been relatives, particularly three-year-old Lewis Vassall, whom Eleanor purchased from Elizabeth Vassall's Content estate in 1826. Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* (2009); Gillian Allen, "Vassall Devon/Jamaica Connections," 2020, https://www.globalcentredevon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Vassall_Devon_Jamaica_connections.pdf; William Vassall's letterbooks contain dozens of letters to John Blyth, who served as his attorney and agent for decades; Legacies of British Slavery Database; Biography of Prof. John Buddle Blyth from Queen's College, Cork, Ireland, <https://www.ucc.ie/en/heritage/history/people/ucc-staff/professor-john-b-blyth/>

²⁰⁰ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* (2009), 237.

²⁰¹ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* (2009), 229.

Massachusetts was foreign ground to Cuba, but not to the white Royalls.²⁰² Isaac Royall was born in Massachusetts and had extensive ties to powerful Massachusetts families. His first wife was born Elizabeth Eliot, a great-niece of John Eliot, the famous Puritan missionary. Isaac Royall's brother was a prosperous merchant who was married to the great-granddaughter of Governor John Winthrop, one of the leaders of the Puritan migration to New England.²⁰³

The Royalls were one of the families who helped run Massachusetts and Antigua as two sides of a single, symbiotic economy. Every possible acre of Antiguan land was used to grow sugarcane, which meant that the island could not feed itself. Massachusetts supplied Antigua with an unending stream of provisions like wooden staves for sugar barrels and corn for making loblolly, the porridge that Cuba and her family ate every day. Massachusetts even shipped fresh water to Antigua. In return, Antigua sent valuable sugar and molasses to keep Massachusetts distilleries running. As historian Wendy Warren has observed, New England “depended on plantation slavery—those plantations were simply offshore.”²⁰⁴

Isaac Royall had contemplated a return to Massachusetts even before the 1736 rebellion. In 1732, he purchased Ten Hills Farm, a 500-acre property in Medford, five miles northwest of Boston.²⁰⁵ He sent his teenage son, Isaac Royall Jr., to Massachusetts for school, and may have intended to move the whole family.²⁰⁶ A letter from Massachusetts Governor Jonathan Belcher suggests that the move was prevented by Elizabeth Royall, who was reluctant to leave Antigua because of the climate. “Let Madam Royall know we have plenty of good wood & can keep our house warm enough in the coldest winters,” he wrote in 1733. “At least she

²⁰² C. S. Manegold, *Ten Hills Farm: The Forgotten History of Slavery in the North* (Princeton University Press, 2010); Alexandra Chan, *Slavery in the Age of Reason: Archaeology at a New England Farm* (University of Tennessee Press, 2007).

²⁰³ Priscilla Adams Royall (b.1702) was a descendant of Governor John Winthrop through her mother, Priscilla Winthrop Adams, whose father, Dean Winthrop, was Governor John Winthrop's son.

²⁰⁴ Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (Liveright, 2015). See also Eric Kimball, “‘What have we to do with slavery?’: New Englanders and the Slave Economies of the West Indies,” in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert & Seth Rockman (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 181–194.

²⁰⁵ Manegold, *Ten Hills Farm*; Chan, *Slavery in the Age of Reason*.

²⁰⁶ Isaac Royall attended school in Cambridge, likely in preparation for enrolling at Harvard, but never enrolled at Harvard.

must come & trye one winter, and I have no doubt but she'll find as good health as ever Antigua gave her."²⁰⁷

When they did finally move to Massachusetts in 1737, Isaac and Elizabeth Royall travelled with two of their children: 12-year-old Penelope and their adult daughter, Anne Browne Oliver. Anne was Elizabeth's daughter from her brief first marriage. She was a young child when her mother married Isaac Royall, and was already grown by the time Isaac Royall Jr. was born in 1719. Two years after her half-brother's birth, Anne married Robert Oliver, who had his own plantation in Antigua. When the Royalls moved to Massachusetts in 1737, Anne's family went with them. Among them was her three-year-old son, Thomas Oliver, who was about the same age as Cuba.²⁰⁸

Over the next four decades, Cuba and Thomas Oliver would live inverse lives. Cuba was enslaved by Thomas's grandparents, then by his aunt, and finally by his sister. While 20-year-old Thomas prepared his Harvard thesis on the subject of natural law permitting polygamy, 20-year-old Cuba confronted the laws of Massachusetts, which allowed her enslaver to sell her away from her husband. When Thomas Oliver had children, they were looked after by enslaved women; when Cuba had children, her enslavers gave them away so that she could spend more time caring for Thomas Oliver's nieces and nephews. Eventually, Thomas Oliver would become the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts, and would be driven out of the colony by Revolutionaries. Cuba would use that same Revolution to secure freedom for herself and her family. But in 1737, they were just two three-year-olds on the same ship, moving toward New England.

Ten Hills Farm

Cuba's life at Ten Hills Farm in Medford was very different from her life in Antigua. On the island, nearly everyone—85 percent of the population—was Black.²⁰⁹ The Royall plantation

²⁰⁷ Jonathan Belcher, Jr. to Isaac Royall, 28 January 1732/3, Belcher Family Papers, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Sixth Series, Volume Six (1893), 256.

²⁰⁸ Robert Tracy Jackson, *History of the Oliver, Vassall and Royall Houses in Dorchester, Cambridge and Medford* (1907), 5.

²⁰⁹ David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Duke University Press, 1993 [1985]), 83.

was home to the four white Royalls and a white overseer, who were vastly outnumbered by the hundred people they enslaved. Even if Cuba lived in the Royall family's house, she would have been accustomed to seeing Black faces wherever she went, to playing with other Black children, to hearing the rhythms of Akan, Yoruba, and Igbo speech, and to living among people whose spiritual life was centered on connections to their ancestors.

In Massachusetts, by contrast, Cuba's family was part of a small minority. At least sixty people were enslaved at Ten Hills Farm between 1737 and 1779, but not all at the same time. Even so, they were by far the largest group of Black people living in rural Medford.²¹⁰ Outside the port cities of Boston and Salem, most of the two thousand enslaved people in Massachusetts lived in scattered ones and twos in white households. They were barely 2 percent of the colony's population.²¹¹ Cuba grew up in a setting where the vast majority of people were white, spoke English, and prayed to a Protestant Christian god.

The work was different, too. There was no sugarcane at Ten Hills Farm. Instead, enslaved people tended cows and sheep, pressed apples for cider, and raised many acres of fodder.²¹² One of its most significant parts of the farm was its dairy. In the early 2000s, Dr. Alexandra A. Chan led an archaeological dig at Ten Hills Farm that recovered the remnants of many large, earthenware vessels used for making cheese.²¹³ Dairying was usually women's work, so young Cuba may have helped Abba and the other women milk cows, churn butter, and produce cheese that could be sold locally or shipped to Antigua.²¹⁴ When Penelope Royall and her husband, Henry Vassall, bought three cheeses from Ten Hills Farm in 1756, they paid Penelope's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Mackintosh Royall, not her brother, Isaac Royall Jr.²¹⁵

So many people were enslaved at Ten Hills Farm that the Royalls had to build sleeping quarters a few steps away from the main house. The two-story building, which also housed a

²¹⁰ A 1754 census of enslaved people over the age of 16 living in Massachusetts found thirty-four enslaved people in Medford, of whom twelve were enslaved by Isaac Royall Jr. 1754 Census; Anne Grady, "Royall House and Slave Quarters," presentation at Royall House and Slave Quarters, 1997, https://royallhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/PDF_supplementary.pdf

²¹¹ Thomas L. Purvis, *Colonial America to 1763* (1998).

²¹² Chan, *Slavery in the Age of Reason*.

²¹³ Chan, *Slavery in the Age of Reason*.

²¹⁴ Jane C. Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760–1860* (Yale University Press, 1994), 199–202.

²¹⁵ Henry Vassall Expense Book, 27 November 1756, History Cambridge.

summer kitchen, was one of the few purpose-built slave quarters constructed in Massachusetts during the eighteenth century.

Enslaved people also slept in the Royalls' house. An inventory from 1739 notes several "negro beds" in the kitchen, near the narrow back stair that connected the working part of the house to the Royall family's bedchambers.²¹⁶ Enslaved women like Cuba's mother, Abba, catered to the white Royalls, day and night.

Yet enslaved people did have some separate space at Ten Hills Farm. The slave quarters were built at a right angle to the main house, which created a separate, screened yard on the far side of the building. During the archaeological excavation, Dr. Chan's team discovered thousands of artifacts in this yard. The hundreds of pieces of clay pipes, game pieces, and pottery sherds suggest that enslaved people used the space for their own leisure. Some of the items were special, like colorful glass beads that may have been part of a festive necklace. One item—a pointed stone carved with grooves—is similar to Akan amulets carried for luck or personal protection. Perhaps young Cuba sat in this very yard, listening to stories, eating meals, or playing marbles with Robin.²¹⁷

Move to Cambridge

In 1739, just two years after Cuba and her family arrived at Ten Hills Farm, their lives were upended by the white Royalls once again. Isaac Royall died on June 7, 1739. In his will, he bequeathed Cuba, her mother, her five siblings, and a girl named Present to his 14-year-old daughter, Penelope.²¹⁸ Penelope also inherited half of his plantation in Antigua, including half of the approximately 140 people enslaved there.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Isaac Royall, Middlesex County Probate #19545 (1739), Massachusetts Archives, www.royallhouse.org.

²¹⁷ Chan, *Slavery in the Age of Reason*.

²¹⁸ Isaac Royall, Middlesex County Probate #19545 (1739), Massachusetts Archives; www.royallhouse.org.

²¹⁹ It is unclear exactly how many people were enslaved on the plantation in 1739. When Henry Vassall mortgaged the property to William Vassall in 1765, there were 137 people enslaved there. See William Vassall to Penelope, 1 Jan 1770, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

Penelope Royall already enslaved four people. Two years earlier, in June 1737, her parents had given her “a young Negro woman named Mary, the daughter of old Sarah,” along with Mary’s baby son, Jack, and two young girls named Placy and Dorinda.²²⁰

Isaac and Elizabeth Royall explained this gift as a sign of their “Love and Natural Affection” for Penelope. Even though 12-year-old Penelope still lived in her parents’ house, her parents thought it was important for her to become an enslaver in her own right. She would not live at home forever. When Penelope married, the twelve enslaved women and children—including Cuba—would serve as both a valuable dowry and as laborers who would do the domestic work in her new home.²²¹

On January 11, 1742, 17-year-old Penelope married 21-year-old Henry Vassall (1721–1769), the youngest son of Leonard Vassall. She moved into a sprawling house near the bend of the Charles River in Cambridge. Henry had recently purchased it from his older brother John.²²² Cuba and her family went, too.

Cuba was eight or nine years old when she arrived in Cambridge. She would spend the rest of her long life there. One day, after decades of toil and strategic legal appeals, Cuba would even own a small piece of it.

Unlike the rural setting of Ten Hills Farm, Henry and Penelope Vassall’s house was on the edge of a thriving town. Cambridge only had about 1,500 residents, but it had taverns, a busy marketplace, a bridge over the Charles River, and Harvard College. People were always coming and going.

²²⁰ Isaac Royall Esq. & Wife to Penelope Royall their Daughter: Deed of Gift for four Negros, Records of Enrolment (ROE) 67, Liber D. Vol. 2 (1737–8), f. 267, Antigua National Archives (NAAB).

²²¹ Other members of the white Vassall family also bequeathed enslaved people to their children in their wills. When Leonard Vassall died in 1737, he ordered that several of his daughters (Elizabeth Vassall Miller, Mary Vassall Prescott, Susanna Vassall Ruggles) should each inherit “one Negro girl the age of fifteen years” to be purchased for the purpose. He also left to his daughter Anna Vassall Borland a married couple named Pompy and Fidelia. For some reason, Anna Vassall Borland did not take possession of Pompy and Fidelia until 1750. An [account] of what is this day deliver’d to Mr John Borland & his lady Anna Borland the heiress to Leonard Vassall deceas’d. Boston, 13 Mar 1749/50, Temple, et al., family papers, MS Am 1250 (25), Houghton Library; Last will and testament of Leonard Vassall, Boston, 25 Sep 1756, MS Am 1250 (18).

²²² John Vassall (1713–1747) lived in this house with his family until selling it to his younger brother, Henry. For a detailed history of the house, see Batchelder, *Notes on Henry Vassall (1721–1769), His Wife Penelope Royall, His House at Cambridge, and His Slaves Tony & Darby* (1917).

Enslaved people were a small but ever-present minority in Cambridge. In 1754, a census counted 33 enslaved men and 23 enslaved women over the age of 16, including 20-year-old Cuba.²²³ Another census in 1765 found 90 Black residents in the town. These records did not count children, so the total number of enslaved people was higher, possibly between 100 and 125. This was a smaller community than nearby Boston—home to 647 enslaved men, 342 women, and an unknown number of children—but about the same percentage of the population (7–8 percent).²²⁴ Cuba grew up in a town where Black and Native enslaved people lived on every street, mostly scattered in ones and twos in the households of their white enslavers.

Cambridge had a relatively large Black population because of the presence of wealthy and influential enslavers associated with Harvard College. Enslaved people had been present on Harvard’s campus since at least 1639, when students accused a man called “the Moor” of sleeping in their beds and eating better food than the students themselves.²²⁵ A century later, when Cuba lived in Cambridge, nearly every person in a position of power at Harvard—the president, the professors, the tutors—was an enslaver. When Cuba visited the Cambridge market, she may have crossed paths with Bilhah and Juba, enslaved by Harvard President Edward Holyoke, or Juba’s wife Cicely, enslaved by Harvard Hebrew instructor Judah Monis. Edward Wigglesworth, the professor of theology, enslaved a man named Hannibal; John Winthrop, the professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, enslaved a man named George. After George died, Winthrop bought a young boy named Scipio. The Harvard steward, Andrew Bordman, enslaved many people, including a woman named Rose and her four children, Jane, Flora, Jeffrey, and Cesar. Cesar was the same age as Cuba, turning nine years old in 1742.²²⁶

²²³ 1754 Census of Enslaved People, MSA.

²²⁴ Batchelder, 63.

²²⁵ “Report of the Presidential Committee on Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery” (2022) <https://legacyofslaveryreport.harvard.edu/>; John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649*, vol. 1, ed. James Savage (Boston, 1853), 372–375; Winthrop’s description of the Moor was reprinted in *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates* (1956), 5.

²²⁶ John Winthrop, Annotated almanac, 1761, HUM 9 Box 6, Volume 6, HUA, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.arch:10354694?n=8>; Cesar was born 5 November 1733. Bordman family Notebook, 1686–1741, Papers of the Bordman family, 1686-1837, HUG 1228 Box 3, HUA, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.arch:23824403>; “Report . . . Harvard and Legacies of Slavery” (2022).

The enslaved people who lived and worked in Cambridge did many different jobs. They worked on farms and in orchards, cooked in the Harvard kitchens, and delivered goods and messages.²²⁷ In 1714, Harvard President John Leverett was “Surprized” by the sudden appearance of an enslaved man named Scipio, not because he was out of place but because he was a well-known carrier of news. Leverett wrote to Scipio’s enslaver, Stephen Sewall, that he had “fear[ed] some of your folk might be not well,” but was much relieved to find that Scipio was there to deliver a gift of brandy.²²⁸ This was a common errand for enslaved people. In 1730, Titus, a Native man enslaved by Harvard president Benjamin Wadsworth, attempted to deliver twenty-seven bottles of wine to Wadsworth’s house on the edge of Harvard Yard, but “One [bottle] Titus broke after twas in His basket.”²²⁹ Henry and Penelope Vassall also entrusted much of the ordinary household errands to enslaved people. The most common entries for enslaved people in Henry Vassall’s expense book for 1756–9 are small amounts of cash he gave them for “marketing” and purchasing “sundrys,” small household items like thread, cloth, pins, candles, soap, and paper sold by local shopkeepers.²³⁰

These daily purchases were a small part of Henry and Penelope Vassall’s extravagant expenditures. They lived in an enormous house with three formal staircases and many rooms filled with elaborate furniture, imported dinnerware, and expensive trinkets. One bedroom—“the Marble Chamber”—had a four-poster bed with lush blue curtains, eight chairs, a cushioned window seat, and a large “dressing glass.” Another bedroom had a bed with green curtains, two mahogany desks, and six carpets. The walls were hung with swords, sconces, and 146 prints and paintings, including portraits of both Henry and Penelope by John Singleton Copley. In addition to an impressive library, they owned an abundance of china, glassware, candlesticks, and over

²²⁷ Harvard Commons Records, 1686–1829 (inclusive), UAI 15.250 Box 1, HUA. Digital Sequence 116. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:14107855?n=116>.

²²⁸ John Leverett to Stephen Sewall, 6 January 1713/14, Papers of John Leverett 1662–1724, UAI 15.866 Box 6, Folder 8, HUA, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:4313237?n=1>.

²²⁹ Diary of Henry Flynt 1723–1747, 4 April 1730, Henry Flynt, 1675–1760, HUG 1399.18, HUA, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:10954446?n=86>.

²³⁰ Henry Vassall Expense Book, History Cambridge. “Sundries” was a catch-all term for any ordinary goods too insignificant or uninteresting to be enumerated specifically. Henry Vassall used it often; his expense book sometimes lists half a dozen entries in a row that say only “sundrys” without specifying either the goods or the purchaser. When an item was particularly valuable or unusual, he often gave it its own line, like the expensive spermaceti candles he purchased instead of ordinary candles in December 1758.

thirty-seven pounds of silver in the form of cups, utensils, and platters. Some of this bounty was displayed in the lavish corner cupboard carved with an elaborate seashell motif and decorated with painted angels.²³¹

Every one of these objects required labor. For enslaved people like Cuba, a “genteel” house like the Vassalls’ meant a never-ending round of dusting, sweeping, and polishing. All households had laundry, but the white Vassalls had mountains of bedsheets, damask napkins, and thirty-four tablecloths in addition to their clothing. Cuba, Abba, and the other enslaved women and girls likely spent countless hours toiling over the big copper boiler, six washtubs, and the “Dumb Betty,” a primitive mechanical washing machine. Those who were not cleaning likely spent their days in the kitchen, where the white Vassalls’ elaborate meals required dozens of specialized pots and pans, a “Fish Kettle,” “Toast Iron,” “Copper Fountain,” and “Tin Ginger bread [pan].”²³²

Cuba’s 14-year-old brother, Robin, would have had his own duties. While he may have worked in the stables, fetched water, or hauled firewood, the white Vassalls also used adolescent boys as personal attendants, valets, and waiters. When a boy enslaved by Henry Vassall’s brother, William Vassall, died of consumption, William wrote to his agent in Jamaica to order a replacement. He wanted, “a sprightly lively healthy young Negroe Lad about 14 years old, that tis handy & capable to tend on me & at table, who speaks good English is good Natured Sober & honest, who does not love Strong Liquor & is fit for a Waiting boy.”²³³ It is unlikely that any boy could fulfill William Vassall’s fantasies of a pliable, placid slave to tend his person and wait his table, but Robin may have been expected to perform similar services for Henry Vassall.

Penelope and Henry Vassall enslaved at least sixteen people at their home in Cambridge between 1739 and 1769, though not all at the same time.²³⁴ They also employed white servants

²³¹ This cupboard is the property of History Cambridge, and can be seen at the Hooper–Lee–Nichols house at 159 Brattle Street, Cambridge. Henry Vassall Inventory, 1769, Batchelder, 79–84.

²³² Henry Vassall Inventory, 1769, Batchelder, 79–84.

²³³ William Vassall to James Wedderburn, 22 April 1771, William Vassall Letter Books, Sheffield Archives.

²³⁴ The sixteen people were: Mary, Jack, Placy, Dorinda (Deed to Penelope Royall [Vassall], 1737); Abba, Robin, Cuba, Walker, Nuba, Trace, Tobey (Will of Isaac Royall, 1739); Anthony, Dick, James (Henry Vassall Probate Inventory, 1769); Flora (daughter of Anthony and Cuba Vassall born before 1769); the baby who was born and died in 1761 (John Winthrop Almanac, HUA). Two other people mentioned in Henry Vassall’s expense book—Jemmy

on a seasonal or part-time basis, including a gardener named Griggs and several white women who occasionally helped with the endless laundry.²³⁵ The two enslaved women, Abba and Mary, would have been responsible for much of the heavy domestic work, as well as supervising and teaching the children who were old enough to work: Robin, Placy, Dorinda, Present, and young Cuba. Both Abba and Mary had babies of their own, but they also had to care for Penelope and Henry Vassall's only surviving child, Elizabeth Vassall [Russell] (1742–1802), who was born less than a year after the wedding.

Unlike enslavers in Jamaica, who thought of enslaved babies as future workers, enslavers in Massachusetts generally considered enslaved infants and toddlers to be nuisances who demanded too much of their mothers' attention. In the words of one observer, Black babies were "given away like puppies."²³⁶ Boston newspapers routinely carried advertisements for infants like "A Negro Child a few Days old, to be given away" in 1739.²³⁷ Separating such young babies from their mothers was sometimes used as a socially acceptable form of infanticide.²³⁸ In other cases, enslavers hoped to keep the children alive until they were old enough to be sold for a profit or until they were old enough to work.²³⁹ For example, Primus

and Merryfield—may have been enslaved by Henry Vassall, but it is likely that "Jemmy" was James Tulip, who was enslaved by other members of the Vassall family. The reference to Merryfield is brief and has not been corroborated with other records. In addition to these enslaved people, Penelope Vassall may have enslaved other people after 1752, when she split the portion of her father's estate left to her mother, Elizabeth Royall, with her brother, Isaac Royall Jr. The inventory of Elizabeth Royall's personal estate lists six enslaved people: an unnamed man (age 70), George (45), Captain, Old Cook, Santo (50), unnamed girl (6). It does not specify how Penelope and Isaac divided the estate between them, though it does direct that it should be "equally divided" (Isaac Royall Inventory, 1752, Middlesex County Probate, 1746–1754, vol. 26, 390). Therefore, Henry and Penelope Vassall may have enslaved more than sixteen people in Cambridge, perhaps as many as twenty-four.

²³⁵ The washerwomen Henry Vassall paid between 1756 and 1759 were Esther Manning, "Robeshaw's daughter," "Colfree," and "sundry persons for washing." There were also payments for unspecified work to Molley Daniel, "Dutch Betty," and Betty Griggs. Many other local women appear in the book, probably as sellers of produce, dairy, or other groceries. Men who worked for wages include Louis Robeshaw, Bartholomew Weining, and a man named Stewart. Two younger boys (surnames Moore and Stanley) were paid as servants in the autumn of 1758. Henry Vassall Expense Book, History Cambridge.

²³⁶ Jeremy Belknap, "Queries Respecting the Slavery and Emancipation of Negroes in Massachusetts..." Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, ser. 1, vol. 4 (1795), 200;

²³⁷ *Boston Gazette*, 11 June 1739, 3.

²³⁸ Historians of early modern Europe recognize the practice of "baby farming" (placing very young infants in the custody of a wet nurse) as a sanctioned form of infanticide. Anne-Marie Kilday, *A History of Infanticide in Britain, c.1600 to the Present* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²³⁹ The case of *Margaret v. Muzzy* (1768), discussed later in this chapter, concerns a child with ambiguous legal status who was given away at age three weeks and sold as an indentured servant at age six months, before later being sold into slavery. *Margaret v. Muzzy* (1768), Middlesex County Court files, Court files v. 1010 cases 147645–147702 (1768–1769), Film # 008296787, via FamilySearch.

Hall (1756–1842), the son of Prince and Delia Hall of Boston, was “bound out” as an infant to a shoemaker who wanted an inexpensive apprentice.²⁴⁰ In some cases, enslavers included money or clothing to lessen the new enslavers’ costs, as in the case of “A young Negro Child to be given away, and Forty Shillings with it,” or “Money and Cloaths to be given away With a Likely, Healthy Female Negro Child, of an excellent Breed.”²⁴¹ Enslaved mothers in Massachusetts were also sold because they gave birth too often for their enslavers’ convenience. One enslaved woman advertised in the *Boston Evening Post* in 1750 was sold because she “breeds like a Rabbet . . . Her only Fault is that she breeds too fast for her present Master.”²⁴² Another woman was sold “for no Fault, but because she brings a Child every Twelve Months, and sometimes oftener.”²⁴³

Most advertisements for enslaved babies did not include the enslaver’s name, so it is impossible to know whether any of these advertisements refer to Abba’s four youngest children: Walker, Nuba, Trace, and Tobey. All four disappear from written records after being named in Isaac Royall’s will in 1739. They may have died, as many young children did. It is also possible that they were given away or sold so that Abba would not spend her time caring for them. In contrast, Mary’s baby son, Jack, appears to have grown up in Henry and Penelope Vassall’s household. It is likely that he is the Jack mentioned several times in Henry Vassall’s expense book for buying household groceries and “sundrys” in the Cambridge market in 1756.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Sebastian Belfanti, Biography of Primus Hall for The West End Museum, Boston, <https://thewestendmuseum.org/history/era/west-boston/primus-hall/>.

²⁴¹ *New England Courant*, 18 May 1724; *Boston Gazette*, 18 March 1771.

²⁴² *Boston Evening Post*, 23 April 1750.

²⁴³ *Boston News-Letter*, 4 May 1758.

²⁴⁴ Henry Vassall Expense Book, History Cambridge, “sundrys by Jack” on 18 February 1756; “marketing by Jack” on 19 March and 18 September 1756; “Jack for a side of pork” on 18 May 1756.

Anthony “Tony” Vassall (c.1713 or 1720s to 1811)²⁴⁵

While most of the people enslaved by Penelope and Henry Vassall were women and children, there also enslaved several men. In addition to Jack and Robin, a man named Dick appears in Henry Vassall’s estate inventory in 1769.²⁴⁶ Another man named Merryfield appears in Henry Vassall’s expense book in 1757, doing the same “marketing” as Jack, but it is not clear whether he was enslaved.²⁴⁷

One man in particular would become a cornerstone of Cuba Vassall’s life: her future husband, Anthony.

Anthony—often called Tony or Toney—was a coachman and farrier, meaning he was skilled in the care, grooming, and shoeing of horses. It is likely that Henry Vassall brought him to Cambridge from Jamaica around 1741, but the oral history of the Black Vassall family says that Anthony was not originally from Jamaica. According to his son Darby, Anthony was “inveigled from Spain under pretence of seeing the country,” but when he arrived in Jamaica, his betrayers “sold him to Henry Vassall.”²⁴⁸

This account of Anthony’s origins cannot be verified with eighteenth-century records, but that does not mean it was not true. The maritime Atlantic world was a place of constant flux, where people of all races and nationalities landed on distant shores, either voluntarily or

²⁴⁵ Anthony Vassall was also known as Tony or Toney Vassall. Documents made by the white Vassalls, white neighbors, and the Middlesex Probate Court before 1778 refer to him as Tony/Toney. There is also good evidence that he called himself Tony; while he was not literate, he signed official documents with a capital T. Documents written after 1778 tend to refer to him as Anthony Vassall. In particular, the petitions he filed in the late 1770s and 1780s call him Anthony Vassall, as do all property records related to land he purchased and court records when he brought lawsuits. His own probate record (Middlesex #23335) is filed under “Antony” Vassall, while a paper within that file signed by Cuba Vassall and their three sons (James, Darby, and Cyrus Vassall) spell the name “Anthony.” Some twentieth-century historians (including Samuel Batchelder) call him Tony Vassall, while some twenty-first-century historians (like Gloria Whiting) call him Anthony Vassall. Anthony Vassall’s use of a capital T for his mark suggests a self-identification as “Tony” that may argue for the use of that name by scholars wishing to respect the name he used for himself. At the same time, the use of a diminutive nickname for a grown man is a common way for white people and institutions to convey disrespect toward Black men. In the case of Anthony Vassall, there is a pronounced shift in the use of the name “Tony” when he was enslaved” to the more formal “Anthony” after he was recognized as free, including in the official petitions, deeds, and official records he signed with the T mark. This report refers to him as Anthony Vassall to convey respect. Other forms of his name are used only where they appear in quotations from primary sources. See Appendix B for genealogical information.

²⁴⁶ Henry Vassall Inventory, 1769, Batchelder, 79–84.

²⁴⁷ Henry Vassall Expense Book, 9 February 1757.

²⁴⁸ Darby Vassall interview with Rev. Nicholas Hoppin, c.1855, History Cambridge.

not. It is entirely possible that Anthony was born in Spain sometime in the 1720s and swept off to sea in circumstances that left him enslaved.

Indeed, in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, “Spanish Negro” was a common term for Afro-Spanish sailors captured at sea and sold into slavery.²⁴⁹ When a British ship captured a Spanish ship, the British generally regarded any Afro-Spanish or Indigenous crew members as “assets of the vessel in question” rather than as prisoners of war.²⁵⁰ White New Englanders typically regarded these “Spanish Negroes” as pirates, rebels, and otherwise dangerous people, always on the edge of reclaiming their freedom.

In 1741, around the time Anthony Vassall probably arrived in Cambridge, public attention to Afro-Spanish people was at a fever pitch due to increased privateering during the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739–1748). In the summer of 1741, Boston privateer Capt. John Rouse captured a Spanish vessel with nineteen men aboard: nine “Spaniards,” for whom he claimed a bounty, and ten “Negroes and Mullattoes” whom he sold into slavery.²⁵¹ Several of these Afro-Spanish captives escaped before they were sold, and were assisted by enslaved people in New England before being recaptured and sold at an auction in November 1741. It is not impossible that Anthony Vassall was one of these men. His skill with horses and apparent fluency in English suggest he probably was not, as does his assertion in a 1781 petition that “himself and his wife have spent almost sixty years of their lives in slavery.”²⁵² Still, Darby’s understanding that Anthony was “inveigled from Spain” means that it is possible that he was betrayed after going to sea at some point in his early life.²⁵³ It is also possible that Anthony Vassall arrived in

²⁴⁹ Enslaved people with recognized Spanish origins were present in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century as well. For example, Rev. Increase Mather enslaved a man named “Spaniard” as early as the 1680s. Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Cotton Mather’s Spanish Lessons: A Story of Language, Race, and Belonging in the Early Americas* (Harvard University Press, 2022).

²⁵⁰ Beatriz Carolina Peña, “Privateering, Slavery, and Resistance: Afro-Spaniards from the Greater Caribbean in Colonial North America,” *Estudios del Observatorio*, ISSM 26-2949/2688-2965 (2024).

²⁵¹ Beatriz Carolina Peña, “Privateering, Slavery, and Resistance.”

²⁵² Petition of Anthony Vassall, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives Collection, v.231–Revolution Resolves, 1781, SC1/series 45X, p.114–117, Massachusetts Archives, Boston.

²⁵³ Most of the captured Afro-Spaniards could not speak English when they were captured in 1741. They almost certainly gained some knowledge of English after being enslaved, but neither contemporary accounts nor Darby Vassall’s 1855 interview mention Anthony Vassall speaking Spanish as a first language or ever having limited fluency in English. Similarly, contemporary documents that mention Anthony Vassall’s race call him “negro,” but not “Spanish Negro.” It is also significant that Anthony Vassall did not mention being born free in his petitions to the Massachusetts General Court in the 1780s and 1790s. Other petitioners did, including Belinda Sutton. The fact that Vassall did not argue that he was born free and captured as an adult suggests that he was probably born into

Massachusetts with a Spanish-sounding name at a time when Boston was in a frenzy over the daring and dangerous “Spanish Negroes,” and associated himself with them, either explicitly or by not correcting other people’s assumptions.

Another possibility is that Anthony Vassall was born somewhere in the Spanish Caribbean, Mexico, or Jamaica. Jamaica was a Spanish colony until 1655, and retained vestiges of its Spanish past. The autonomous Maroon communities in Jamaica’s interior traced their origins to people who seized their freedom from Spanish enslavers and guarded it against the English interlopers. In Jamaica, the term “Spanish Negro” often referred to an enslaved person who hailed from one of the nearby Spanish colonies or was enslaved by someone with Iberian heritage. John Vassall’s cousin, William Vassall (1720–1745) married Valeria Senior, whose father, Bernard Senior, owned several plantations near the Vassall family estates in Jamaica, and whose name—like Anthony’s—suggests ties to the Spanish or Portuguese empire.²⁵⁴ If Anthony Vassall was ever enslaved on one of the Senior family plantations or born in one of the many Spanish or Portuguese colonies, he may have been considered “Spanish” by his contemporaries. Several of the men enslaved by John Vassall on his Jamaican plantations in 1757 were named Anthony, Tony, or Spaniard, so Anthony Vassall’s name and purported Spanish heritage would not have been unusual in that setting.²⁵⁵

Wherever Anthony Vassall was born, he spent his adult life in Cambridge. The historian Samuel Batchelder argues that Henry Vassall brought Anthony from Jamaica to Cambridge in 1741, shortly before Henry’s marriage to Penelope Vassall. While not well documented, this is plausible. Henry Vassall spent considerable time in Jamaica in his youth, and returned to

slavery. It is also possible that he was captured from a Spanish vessel as a young child and sold into slavery in Jamaica before being transported to Massachusetts.

²⁵⁴ Valeria Senior (b.1722) was the daughter of Bernard Senior (1691–1721) and Margaret Dorrill (1700–1757). Her brothers, Christopher and Bernard Senior, owned estates called Mint (in Westmoreland, about five miles southeast of Newfound River) and Salt River (on the coast near Savanna la Mar). Bernard Senior Jr. was married to Elizabeth Gale (1722–1764), who was the daughter of Ruth Gale Vassall’s nephew. Elizabeth Gale Senior died in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1764, which suggests possible Portuguese connections for the Senior family, as there was a large Portuguese–Caribbean community in Newport. Elizabeth Senior was buried in a black walnut coffin “Lined with whit[e] Swan Skins & Covered with Black Broad Cloath Eight Doz of Clasps & 3 par of handles” that cost £100.

Calder; Philip Zea, “The Serpentine Furniture of Colonial Newport,” Chipstone Foundation, <https://chipstone.org/article.php/339/American-Furniture-1999/The-Serpentine-Furniture-of-Colonial-Newport>

²⁵⁵ John Vassall (1757), IB/11/3/37, 160, Jamaica National Archives.

Massachusetts around 1741, when a deed noted that he was “residing in Boston, late of the Island of Jamaica, planter.”²⁵⁶ He may have brought Anthony with him.²⁵⁷

Anthony Vassall specialized in horses and carriages. At times, he cared for as many as ten horses, including a matched pair of carriage horses named Starr and Whitefoot, various riding horses, and a sixteen-hand beast named Bear.²⁵⁸ For occasions when Henry and Penelope wanted to impress, the animals had extravagant “horse furniture,” decorative tack and saddle blankets in “Crimson Velvett.” Depending on the distance, weather, and the number of people traveling, Anthony might drive them in the large, stately coach; the light, two-wheeled chaise; the speedy curricle; or the impressive “Chariott,” which was worth more than all the others combined.²⁵⁹ Anthony was in charge of maintaining these vehicles. In 1756, Henry Vassall gave him money to pay “Tucker ye Wheelright,” presumably for repairs or replacements.²⁶⁰ Anthony would work with horses his whole life, eventually setting up his own business as a farrier long after the white Vassalls fled Cambridge.²⁶¹

Although he worked primarily in the stables, Anthony Vassall did many other types of work as well. Henry Vassall’s account book is full of small payments to Anthony for “marketing” and “sundrys,” as well as a variety of specific foods—salmon, lemons, biscuit, pork, eggs—that he either bought, caught, or raised. Once a year, around Christmas, Anthony received a new

²⁵⁶ Batchelder, *Notes on Henry Vassall*, 10. Although Batchelder says that Henry Vassall was born in Jamaica, this is unlikely. His parents, Leonard and Ruth Vassall, moved their family to Philadelphia in June 1719, then moved to Boston about two years later. Henry Vassall was born 25 December 1721. He was probably born in either Philadelphia or Boston, though this is not recorded in surviving records. Jason Daniels, “Atlantic Contingency: Jonathan Dickinson and the Anglo-Atlantic World, 1655–1725” (PhD diss., University of Warwick 2013).

²⁵⁷ One final possibility was investigated but ultimately judged unpersuasive. In 1738, Harvard College tutor Henry Flynt sold a man named Toney to Thomas Crosbey of Braintree. Given the Vassall family’s residence in Braintree and Toney’s name, we investigated the possibility that this man was Anthony Vassall. However, the Braintree Vital Records show that “Toney and Lois negro servants of Joseph Crosbey” were married on May 9, 1758. Given Anthony Vassall’s many appearances in Henry Vassall’s Cambridge expense book in the period 1756–1759, he was not the Toney enslaved by Crosbey in Braintree. For a detailed discussion of Toney’s sale by Henry Flynt, see Gloria McCahon Whiting, *Belonging: An Intimate History of Slavery and Family in Early New England*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

²⁵⁸ Henry Vassall Expense Book, 1756–9, History Cambridge. In the eighteenth century, horses were generally smaller than they are today. While 16 hands (5’4” at the withers) is an average height for a modern Thoroughbred, it was considered an admirable height in the 1700s. For a detailed discussion of historical horse heights, see *The Medieval Horse and Its Equipment, c.1150 – c.1450*, ed. John Clark (2004).

²⁵⁹ Henry Vassall Probate Inventory, 1769, Batchelder, 79–84.

²⁶⁰ Henry Vassall Expense Book, 27 April 1756.

²⁶¹ Batchelder, 72.

pair of leather breeches, the quintessential garb of a working man in eighteenth-century Boston.

One entry in Henry Vassall's expense book is subtly different from the others. Instead of saying "lemmons by Toney" or "pork and eggs by Toney," it says "paid Toney for a hog, £16."²⁶² This is the wording Henry Vassall used when he bought something, not when he handed out cash for household errands. It implies that Anthony raised and sold hogs for his own profit and the good of his own family.

Indeed, other records show that Anthony Vassall bought goods with his own money and for his own purposes. The account book of Edward Marrett, a tailor and wharf-owner in Cambridge, shows that Anthony Vassall spent 15 shillings and 7 pence buying thirty feet of "Clear" boards in March 1769.²⁶³ The next spring, he bought another sixty-two feet of lumber, this time of a lower quality.²⁶⁴ Marrett recorded these purchases under the name "Toney Vassall," but maintained separate accounts for "Madm [Penelope] Vassall" and "John Vassall, Esqr." Neither of Anthony Vassall's purchases was very large, but the fact that he bought the wood on his own account implies that he was building or repairing something for his family's own use and benefit. Small amounts of lumber could have been used for building furniture, gardening, beekeeping, or repairing a hog pen.

Enslaved people did not earn wages, but that does not mean that they had no money. In Massachusetts, enslaved people frequently earned small amounts of cash for doing odd jobs or selling things they made, or received tips around the New Year. In 1743, the enslaved Boston printer and woodcut artist Peter Fleet wrote an unofficial will in which he left small amounts of money to the children in the Fleet household. Knowing that his enslavers might be suspicious about the source of his legacy, Peter Fleet included an explicit disclaimer. "Master and Mistress, I would not have you think that I got this money by Rogury in any thing belonged to you or any Body else," he wrote. "I got it honestly, by being faithful to people ever since I undertook to

²⁶² Henry Vassall Expense Book, 29 January 1757.

²⁶³ Edward Marrett's family once owned the lot where 105 Brattle Street now stands; Amos Marrett sold the land to John Vassall in 1747. The lower-quality boards were rated "merchantable" rather than "clear." Amanda Womack, "The Marretts of Massachusetts: Life in Cambridge," report on file at Longfellow House—Washington's Headquarters NHS, November 2022.

²⁶⁴ Edward Marrett account books, 1750–1780 (inclusive), Baker Library Historical Collections, Volume 4, Mss:45 1750–1780 M358, Harvard Business School, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hbs.baker.gen:29503555-2016?n=9>.

carry the News-papers, Christmas-days & New-years days, with contribution with Gentlemen.”²⁶⁵ Henry Vassall—an Anglican who celebrated Christmas—was one of the gentlemen who followed the custom of giving cash tips to enslaved people and servants. In 1756, he gave his “Servants” £5.12.6 on Christmas Day.²⁶⁶

The white Vassalls were probably less suspicious of enslaved people’s independent economic activity than some other New Englanders. Anyone familiar with the provision ground system in Jamaica would find it unremarkable for enslaved people to tend gardens, raise livestock, and make a little money at market.²⁶⁷ If Anthony Vassall grew up in Jamaica, he would have shared this expectation. Henry Vassall bought a hog from Anthony in 1757, so it is possible that Anthony had “a little spot of land” he regarded as his own twenty years before the American Revolution.²⁶⁸

Anthony and Cuba Vassall may have been living as husband and wife as early as the 1750s or 1760s. Cuba was born around 1733–4, so she was 23 or 24 when Anthony sold the hog in January 1757. Anthony was at least a decade older. When he died in 1811, his age was recorded as 98, which would mean that he was born around 1713, twenty years before Cuba.²⁶⁹ Anthony may have been 98 years old, but it was also common for elderly people’s ages to be inflated, especially when a lifetime of slavery obscured their birthplaces and birthdates.²⁷⁰ In

²⁶⁵ Will of Peter Fleet, 1743, Eliot Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Massachusetts Historical Society. Fleet noted that he typically received £4-5 a year in tips and offered to “give you a true account” with witnesses if required.

²⁶⁶ Henry Vassall Expense Book, 25 December 1756.

²⁶⁷ Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

²⁶⁸ In their 1781 petition, Anthony and Cuba describe their homestead as “a little spot of land about one an half acre adjacent to their house.” This house and land were on John Vassall’s estate, so it is possible that it was not the same plot of land they used to raise hogs in the 1750s. It is also possible that John Vassall allotted Anthony and Cuba a piece of provision ground as part of his ongoing financial support of his aunt and uncle. Henry Vassall’s 1769 inventory does include “Servants Beds & Bedding,” but they are not located in a specific room. One room in the house—the Kitchen Chamber—does appear to be a bedroom for enslaved people or servants, as it contains beds and furniture that are mostly described as “Old” and is located near the kitchen. However, it is not clear whether all five of the enslaved people listed in the inventory lived in the main house, or if some may have lived in other buildings. At Royall House, enslaved people slept in both the main house and the slave quarters. Petition of Anthony Vassall, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives Collection, v.231–Revolution Resolves, 1781, SC1/series 45X, p.114–117, Massachusetts Archives, Boston.

²⁶⁹ Thomas Baldwin, ed., *Vital Records of Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850: vol. 2: Marriages and deaths* (Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1915), 772.

²⁷⁰ The most famous example of inflating an elderly enslaved person’s age concerned Joice Heth (d.1836), who was exhibited by P.T. Barnum as “George Washington’s nurse” at a purported age of 161 in 1835. Other examples were less outlandish, but part of the same bias toward inflating Black people’s ages. One example from Cambridge is

their 1781 petition, Anthony and Cuba wrote that they were enslaved for “almost sixty years.” Cuba was 47 or 48 in 1781, so “almost sixty” probably applies to Anthony, suggesting he was born or enslaved in the 1720s.

Despite the difference in their ages, Cuba and Anthony were partners in love, parenthood, and freedom-seeking. There is no record of a formal marriage in either the Cambridge civil records or the records of Christ Church, but their petitions from the 1780s show that they were husband and wife.²⁷¹

James Vassall (c.1758–1812) and James Tulip (b.1735)

Cuba and Anthony Vassall’s first child, James, was born in the 1750s, possibly in 1758.²⁷² Later documents refer to James as “A Muletto Boy,” so Anthony may not have been his biological father.²⁷³ Both Anthony and Cuba Vassall were always described as “Black” or “negro” in records made during their lifetimes, while “mulatto” referred to a person with mixed-race ancestry.²⁷⁴

Venus Whittemore, who was supposedly 107 years old when she died in the Cambridge Alms House in 1825. This is not impossible, but her early life in slavery makes it impossible to verify. *Columbian Centinel*, 11 May 1825; Jill Lepore, “What Do We Do With Our Dead?” *The New Yorker*, 16 October, 2017.

²⁷¹ Petition of Anthony Vassall, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives Collection, v.231–Revolution Resolves, 1781, SC1/series 45X, p.114–117, Massachusetts Archives, Boston.

²⁷² James Vassall’s birthdate is unknown. He is referred to as a “boy” as late as 1783, in the Loyalist Claim of John Vassall (AO 13/90), which listed Vassall’s property as it had been in April of 1775. If James was born in July 1758, he would have been 16 years old in April 1775. Furthermore, in the Cambridge poll tax list of 1777, Anthony Vassall is listed, but James Vassall is not, suggesting that James was either not living in Cambridge in 1777 or that he was not yet 21 years of age (i.e. born after 1756). Batchelder assumed that two references in Henry Vassall’s expense book (“marketing by Jemmy” on 27 December 1756 and “leather breeches for Jemmy” on 18 January 1759) refer to Anthony and Cuba Vassall’s son, but this is implausible. Leather breeches were the attire of working men, not children. Even if Jemmy received the leather breeches as an adolescent (January 1759), he would have been born no later than 1745, when Cuba Vassall was only 11 or 12 years old. It is much more likely that there was an adult James and a baby named James in the Vassall household. One possible birthdate for James Vassall is July 1758, when Henry Vassall’s account book shows payments to a nurse for caring for Cuba and to a white woman for household work. Cuba may have been ill, or she may have recently given birth.

²⁷³ It is also possible that Anthony Vassall was James Vassall’s biological father. Although records made during his lifetime all refer to Anthony Vassall as “negro,” the family’s oral history of his Spanish origins may have carried a suggestion of mixed-race ancestry. If James Vassall had a lighter complexion than his parents and siblings, his contemporaries could have assumed that he had mixed-race ancestry even if both his parents were considered Black. John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

²⁷⁴ In New England, the term “mulatto” was used fairly loosely and could refer to anyone with mixed-race ancestry—Black, white, Indigenous—not just people with one Black parent and one white parent. Titus, a man enslaved in Cambridge by Harvard President Benjamin Wadsworth, was described as “Indian” in some records and as “Mulattoe” in others. Official minutes, 24 September 24 1725–3 March 1752, Harvard University Faculty of Arts

James's biological father could have been Henry Vassall or another white man, though his name suggests another possibility. Henry Vassall's expense books contain two references to an enslaved man named Jemmy, a common nickname for James. "Jemmy" was probably James Tulip (b.1735), an Afro-Indigenous man enslaved by John Vassall's grandfather, Spencer Phips, and later by Vassall's uncle, Richard Lechmere.²⁷⁵ There is good reason to believe that James Tulip was James Vassall's father, or that Cuba Vassall considered him close enough kin to name her child after him.

James Tulip definitely lived in Cambridge in the 1750s. He joined the First Church of Cambridge on July 20, 1755, when he was twenty years old, and he is listed in Spencer Phips' 1757 inventory as "Jeme."²⁷⁶ Meanwhile, "Jemmy" made two appearances in Henry Vassall's expense book in 1756 and 1759.²⁷⁷

Spencer Phips died without a will at his estate in East Cambridge in April 1757. His property was tied up in probate proceedings for several years, which created an unstable

and Sciences, Early Faculty minutes, 1725–1806, UAI 5.5, Volume 12 (Box 8), HUA, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:10988781?n=137>

²⁷⁵ James, also called "Jeme" or Jemmy, was born 5 March 1735 to Margaret (Peggy) and Robin Tulip of Lexington, MA. Margaret was the daughter of Kate, an Indigenous woman who was an indentured servant of James Bowdoin of Boston and was warned out of Charlestown in 1728 (see *Margaret v. Muzzy* [1768]). According to the testimony of Nathaniel Matson, Kate was a "mulatto girl" he purchased as an indentured servant from Capt. John Shaw in New York when she was 14 years old (circa 1715). She had two children by "an Indian man that belonged to Long Island." Matson testified that he sold Kate to James Bowdoin of Boston as a servant until age 31 (around 1718–9). According to historian Hiller B. Zobel, a note in a lawsuit Margaret filed against her enslaver in 1768 notes that she "had a Son now called James who was afterwards sold to Lieutenant Gov'r Phips" (Zobel, "Jonathan Sewall" [1966], 135). Lt. Governor Spencer Phips was the grandfather and guardian of Ruth, John, and Elizabeth Vassall. On 20 July 1755, James, "Negro man Servant to Lieut. Governor Phipps," owned the covenant (pledged to adhere to the tenets of the church) at the First Church of Cambridge (CC Records, 171). Spencer Phips died in 1757, leaving his property to his children and grandchildren. In Spencer Phips's probate inventory, the three men he enslaved are called Bristow, Cato, and "Jeme," an alternate spelling of Jemmy (Middlesex Probate). Most of Phips's heirs, including John Vassall, sold their shares of the estate to Richard and Mary Lechmere over the next several years. In 1769, James sued Richard Lechmere for trespass. In the suit, he dates his enslavement by Lechmere to April 1758, one year after the death of Spencer Phips. Stephen Sharples, ed., *Records of the First Church in Cambridge* (1906), 171; Abner Cheney Goodell, *The Trial and Execution for Petit Treason of Mark and Phillis, Slaves of Capt. John Codman* (1883) via Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/llst.023/?st=gallery>; Edward L. Bell, "Research Summaries"; *Margaret v. Muzzy*, 1768, Middlesex Court Records, 1764-1770, pages 374–5, via "Middlesex, Massachusetts, United States records," images, FamilySearch, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSLR-C9BY-2?view=fullText> : Mar 19, 2025, image 211 of 354.

²⁷⁶ James "owned the covenant" at First Church Cambridge on 20 July 1755. Spencer Phips's inventory is dated 13 June 1757. Spencer Phips probate, Middlesex #17400.

²⁷⁷ Henry Vassall Expense Book, History Cambridge.

situation for the three men he enslaved: Bristow, Cato, and “Jeme.”²⁷⁸ Richard Lechmere, who would eventually enslave James Tulip, lived in Salem until 1760, but Tulip was still living in Cambridge in April 1758, a year after Phips’ death.²⁷⁹ It is possible that James Tulip lived in Henry Vassall’s household during this time, while his enslavers divided up Spencer Phips’s estate.

“Jemmy” appears in Henry Vassall’s expense book only twice.²⁸⁰ The only time Henry Vassall gave him cash was for “marketing” two days after Christmas in 1756, a few months before Spencer Phips died.²⁸¹ The week between Christmas and the New Year was a time when many enslaved people were allowed time off to visit family members, and Tulip’s presence in the Vassall house may indicate that Spencer Phips gave him permission to spend a few days with Cuba. At the time, James was two months shy of his 22nd birthday and Cuba was 22 or 23. The other time “Jemmy” appears in the expense book came in January 1759, when he received a pair of leather breeches.²⁸² At the time, Richard Lechmere claimed James Tulip as his property, but Tulip considered this a matter of dispute.²⁸³ The Lechmeres did not move back to Cambridge until 1760, but it is possible that they were never able to force Tulip to move to Salem. He could have been a temporary member of Henry Vassall’s household in the years following Spencer Phips’s death. James Tulip certainly lived nearby after 1760, when Richard and Mary Lechmere built a grand house next to John Vassall’s mansion.

Cuba Vassall’s eldest son, James, was born sometime between 1755 and 1760.²⁸⁴ His exact birthdate is unknown, but he may have been born in the summer of 1758, when Cuba

²⁷⁸ Spencer Phips probate, Middlesex #17400.

²⁷⁹ With thanks to Leslie Masson for her expertise on the history of the Tulip family. In the 1769 lawsuit, *James v. Richard Lechmere*, James asserted that Lechmere’s “trespass” against him began 11 April 1758, and that the initial enslavement took place in Cambridge.

²⁸⁰ By contrast, Anthony Vassall is mentioned by name 22 times in Henry Vassall’s expense book.

²⁸¹ Henry Vassall expense book, 27 December 1756.

²⁸² Henry Vassall expense book, 18 January 1759.

²⁸³ Although James Tulip did not file his lawsuit against Richard Lechmere until 1769, the Tulip family had disputed the enslavement of Margaret Tulip and her children for many years. According to her own lawsuit against her enslaver (*Margaret v. Muzzy* [1768]), Margaret Tulip was a free-born indentured servant who was supposed to be freed when she turned 22 years old around 1740. The first deposition in the case was taken in 1753, indicating that the Tulip family had been collecting evidence of their free legal status for at least fifteen years before Margaret Tulip filed her suit.

²⁸⁴ In his Loyalist claim, John Vassall refers to James Vassall as “a Muletto Boy.” Although the claim was filed in 1783, it refers to Vassall’s property in 1774–5. If James was a “boy” in 1774–5, he was almost certainly born after 1754. John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

was about 24 years old and James Tulip was 23. On July 11, 1758, Henry Vassall paid £6 to a woman named Mary Peak “for nursing Cuba” and paid £3 to another white woman, Betty Griggs, for unspecified work.²⁸⁵ Cuba may have been too ill to do her usual work, perhaps because she had just given birth.²⁸⁶ Whether her son, James Vassall, was born in 1758 or not, he shared James Tulip’s name and his mixed-race ancestry.

Cuba Vassall and James Tulip may have had a second child. On October 17, 1761, a baby was born to one of the enslaved women at “Col. Vassals” and died the same day.²⁸⁷ The Harvard professor who recorded this brief life in his personal almanac did not specify any details regarding the baby’s name, sex, or parentage. Cuba Vassall may have been the bereaved mother, but it is also possible that the baby was Mary’s child or Dorrenda’s. Neither the birth nor the death appears in the official records of the town, and the Harvard professor only recognized one significant person in the baby’s life: their enslaver, Henry Vassall. Given that the baby was born in 1761, between the birth of James Vassall in the late 1750s and Flora Vassall in

²⁸⁵ Henry Vassall expense book, July 1768. He also hired two white boys in the following weeks (surnames were Stanley and Moors/Moore), suggesting that the household needed extra help. It is also possible that James Vassall was born at another time in the mid-to-late 1750s. When he died in 1812, a newspaper announcement recorded his age as 26, but this is almost certainly a mistake. It is possible that he was 56, and an error was introduced by confusing a 2 and 5 when setting the type. If he were really 56 in May 1812, he may have been born in 1756 or 1757. Henry Vassall Expense Book, 11–31 July 1758, History Cambridge; “Mortuary Notice,” *Columbian Centinel*, no. 2937, 30 May 1812, p. [2].

²⁸⁶ There is some confusion over the ages and identities of Anthony and Cuba Vassall’s children. Most genealogies of the Black Vassall family name three children born before 1769: James, Dorinda, and Flora. After examining the available evidence, it seems likely that Dorinda was not Anthony and Cuba Vassall’s child. There are three mentions of Darinda/Dorinda/Dorrenda in eighteenth-century records. The first is from Isaac and Elizabeth Royall’s 1737 deed of gift, which transferred a young girl named Dorinda (along with Placy, Mary, and Jack) to Penelope Royall [Vassall]. The second mention is Henry Vassall’s 1769 inventory, which appraises “Dorrenda” at £12. The third comes from the *Vital Records of Cambridge*, which note the death of Darinda Vassall in 1784. Samuel Batchelder implied that Dorinda was the child of Anthony and Cuba Vassall, and this has been repeated. Unless further evidence comes to light to suggest that Dorinda was the daughter of Cuba Vassall, the three known references to Dorinda Vassall are consistent with a woman who was Cuba’s age or slightly older, rather than her daughter. Isaac Royall Esq. & Wife to Penelope Royall their Daughter: Deed of Gift for four Negros, Records of Enrolment (ROE) 67, Liber D. Vol. 2 (1737–8), f. 267, NAAB; Henry Vassall Inventory 1769 in Batchelder, 82; *Vital Records of Cambridge*, 772; Henry Vassall Expense Book, 11 July 1758.

²⁸⁷ Harvard professor John Winthrop sometimes kept notes about Cambridge deaths in his yearly almanacs. On October 17, 1761, he noted the death of, “a negro child from Col. Vassals just born.” Both John Vassall and Henry Vassall were sometimes referred to as “Colonel” Vassall, but at this early date (1761), John Vassall was more likely to be called “Major” Vassall. John Winthrop (1714–1779), Annotated almanac, 1761, Papers of John and Hannah Winthrop, 1728–1789, HUM 9 Box 6, Volume 6, HUA, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.arch:10354694?n=8>; J.L. Bell, “George Washington’s Headquarters and Home,” Historic Resource Study, Longfellow House–Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site (2012), section 1.2.

1767, it is possible that they were the child of Cuba Vassall and either James Tulip or Anthony Vassall.

The erasure of Black families in the institutional and personal records kept by their enslavers does not reflect the reality of Black family life in Massachusetts.²⁸⁸ The enslaved children born in the white Vassall households had mothers, fathers, and siblings, as well as extended kinship networks. For the Black Vassalls, as for many enslaved families, kinship was expansive, not limited. No formal marriage recognized Cuba Vassall's relationships with either James Tulip or Anthony Vassall, just as the reality of motherhood under enslavement gave her no legal right to keep or protect her children, but that does not mean that these relationships did not exist.

Moreover, the Black Vassalls recognized kinships that eluded colonial definitions of family. Anthony Vassall was probably not James Vassall's biological father, but he treated him as a son.²⁸⁹ When Anthony died in 1811, James Vassall signed the probate documents alongside his brothers, Darby and Cyrus, and his family received an equal share of his father's estate. Indeed, even after James Vassall also passed away in 1815, his younger brother, Darby, continued to treat James Tulip's relatives as kin.²⁹⁰ Like so many other Black families living in slave societies, the Black Vassalls recognized ties of kinship and love even when the law did not.

²⁸⁸ Gloria McMahon Whiting, *Belonging: An Intimate History of Slavery and Family in Early New England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

²⁸⁹ James Vassall signed a probate document for Anthony Vassall's estate on 15 November 1811, placing his name below Cuba Vassall's mark and Cyrus Vassall's signature. James Vassall died in 1812, but when Anthony Vassall's estate was divided in 1813, his widow, Abigail Hall Vassall, received an equal share. Five heirs (Darby Vassall, Catherine Vassall, Abigail Hall Vassall, Eliza Flagg Vassall, and Flora Vassall Maranday) each received \$155. Anthony Vassall, Middlesex Probate #23335. Batchelder and other sources give Abigail's name as Abigail Hill, but the Boston death index for 1810–1848 suggest that she was born Abigail Hall. They show that "Abigail Vassall (col[ore]d)," age 24, died of an apoplexy on 2 May 1816, and was buried at Copp's Hill. Her next of kin was Primus Hall, the son of Prince Hall, the civic leader, educator, and founder of the Prince Hall Freemasons. Boston marriage records show that James Vassall and Abigail Hill or Hall had banns published 1 February 1809, but did not marry until 8 January 1810 (married by Rvd. John Sylvester John Gardiner of Trinity Church, Boston). Abigail Hall was much younger than James Vassall, but James Vassall's probate records do refer to \$156 as James's "proportion of his father's estate," which matches Anthony Vassall's probate. Massachusetts, U.S., Town Vital Records, 1620–1988, Boston, MA Index Deaths 1810–1848, D01 P-Z; Death 1810–1821, North District Vol. 20; Boston Marriages, 1800–1849; Boston Marriage Publications, 1807–1817, Vol. 8, Ancestry.com.

²⁹⁰ In 1820, the town of Lexington paid Darby Vassall for housing members of the Tulip family at his home in Boston. In that era, it was common practice for impoverished people to move in with relatives, who were sometimes compensated by the town responsible for the care of the poor relatives. With thanks to Robert Bellinger and Leslie Masson. Receipt to Darby Vassall from Lexington Overseers of the Poor, 1 April 1820, Overseers of the Poor Records, c0168, Box 1, Lexington Historical Society.

Black Communities

Ties of affection and kinship extended beyond the immediate family and household. The Black Vassalls were part of a wider community of Black and Indigenous people—some enslaved, some bound to service for a time, some free—living in Cambridge, Boston, and the surrounding towns.

Anthony Vassall's position as a coachman was a vital sinew of the enslaved community in eastern Massachusetts. The white Royalls and Vassalls frequently attended balls, teas, and dinner parties hosted by their extensive family network, which stretched from Boston to Medford and Lincoln, and as far south as Bristol, Rhode Island, where William Vassall and Isaac Royall Jr. had summer homes. Wherever they went, Anthony Vassall drove them. This allowed him to carry news and greetings to enslaved people who had been separated from friends and family. Cuba may have traveled as well, particularly on overnight visits when Penelope and Elizabeth Vassall needed attendants. When they traveled to Medford to visit Penelope Vassall's brother Isaac and his family, Anthony and Cuba would have had the opportunity to share news and meals with people who had known Cuba and her family since Antigua.

The white Vassalls' social calendar was an important strand in enslaved people's own networks, but it was certainly not the only way for enslaved people to congregate. They frequently met at markets, taverns, and festive occasions like the multi-day Harvard Commencement in Cambridge, which was traditionally a holiday for enslaved people in the surrounding communities. "This is almost the only day in the year when they are permitted to enjoy the least shadow of liberty," noted Theodore Parsons, a Harvard senior who argued against the institution of slavery in a debate during the 1773 Commencement.²⁹¹

In Boston, the town's selectmen complained that enslaved people flocked to the Boston market on the Sabbath, not with prayer books, but "with corn, apples, and other fruit of the earth to the great disturbance of the public peace and scandal of our Christian profession." Goods were bought and sold at the market, but it was also a place of camaraderie, drinking,

²⁹¹ Theodore Parsons (1751–1779), "Forensic dispute between Theodore Parsons & Eliphalet Pearson," 1773, MS Am 1423, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Cf. also Edward L. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery and Emancipation in Historical Andover* (Shawsheen Press, 2021), 35–36.

gaming, gossiping, and catching-up.²⁹² Boston officials sometimes tried to limit enslaved people's economic activity, as in a 1746 ordinance that decreed, "no Indian negro or molatto shall be permitted to Keep any Hog or Swine whatever."²⁹³ According to the selectmen, keeping hogs—as Anthony Vassall did—took up enslaved people's time and provided "great Temptations to Steal and purloin from their several Masters," as well as giving them "an opportunity of Meeting and conferring together." Anyone who allowed a person of color to raise hogs on their land or rented out land for that purpose was subject to a 20-shilling fine.²⁹⁴

White Bostonians were particularly frustrated by their inability to control gatherings of enslaved people after dark. As early as 1703, the Massachusetts General Court forbade unfree people of color to be out past nine o'clock to prevent "great Disorders, Insolencies and Burglaries [that] are oft times raised and committed in the Night-time by Indians, Negro and Mulatto Servants and Slaves."²⁹⁵ In 1723, Boston officials banned funerals for people of color after sunset because funerals were important community-building events with significant spiritual and social meaning for enslaved people.²⁹⁶ White authorities feared that any outdoor gathering of people of color could not be easily observed after dark. In 1753, the General Court passed a law ordering that any "negro, Indian, or molatto servant" caught breaking, damaging, or extinguishing lamps on the streets should be "publicly whipped."²⁹⁷ Enslaved people felt able to act more freely at night, as in the case of an enslaved man in Boston who, after an argument with a group of white men, said: "If it was Night, and I had a good Cudgel in my hand, how would I make them rascals run." But it was day, so he was instead arrested for insulting the white men.²⁹⁸

²⁹² William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 102–3.

²⁹³ City Document 170, 14 May 1746, *Report of the Record Commissioners, Boston Town Records, 1742–1757, Vol. 14*, ed. William H. Whitmore and William S. Appleton (1885) 97.

²⁹⁴ This was a Boston ordinance, so it did not apply to Henry Vassall in Cambridge.

²⁹⁵ *Massachusetts – Acts, Laws and Orders 1701–1703*, 224; David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 125; e.g., *Boston Town Records, 1729–1742*, p. 139 (28 April 1736); *Boston Town Records, 1742–1757*, p. 315 (22 June 1757).

²⁹⁶ *Boston Town Records, 1700–1728*, p.176–7 (4 May 1723).

²⁹⁷ "An Act to Prevent the Breaking or Damnifying of Lamps Set Up in or Near Streets for Enlightening the Same," 6 January 1753, in John Henry Clifford, Alexander Strong Wheeler, William Cross Williamson, eds., *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay*, (Boston, 1878), 646.

²⁹⁸ *New-York Weekly Journal*, 15 May 1738, 4; also in A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: Night in Times Past* (Norton, 2005), 249.

Black and Indigenous New Englanders did not need to be in the bustling port city of Boston, where they had strength in numbers, to congregate. Rural towns had much smaller Black populations, but they had taverns where people of all races and statuses could meet. When a young John Adams arrived at a Wrentham tavern to meet friends, he was repelled at the scene of “Negroes with a fiddle” playing while “young fellows and girls dancing in the chamber as if they would kick the floor thru.”²⁹⁹ In Roxbury in 1740, an enslaver who “went to look for his Negro woman, who had been gone from him a few days,” arrived at a tavern after nine o’clock, where he found “about a dozen black gentry, he’s and she’s in a room, in a very merry humour, singing and dancing, having a violin and a store of wine and punch before them.”³⁰⁰ The hour was significant. The previous year, Roxbury enslavers had petitioned for an ordinance to ban “the unhappy practise of the negro servants of this town to be abroad in the night at unseasonable hours,” but it was evidently ineffective.³⁰¹ In 1744, a similar measure was adopted in Medford—home to the Royalls’ Ten Hills Farm—ordering slaves and servants of color “To be whip[p]ed in ye markit place Not Exceeding Ten Stripes” if they were found out at night. Nighttime frolics seemingly continued, as the town passed the same ordinance a year later.³⁰²

The social connections among enslaved people were a vital part of their resistance to enslavement. Whether they were dancing in taverns, selling the hogs they raised, or gathering to bury loved ones, enslaved people defied efforts to sever their connections to one another. In a world where enslavers routinely separated enslaved people from their families and communities, maintaining ties of love and loyalty—and building networks of communication and solidarity—were nonviolent forms of resistance.³⁰³

²⁹⁹ Sharon V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 234; David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 126–27. Cf. Vaughn Scribner, *Inn Civility: Urban Taverns and Early American Civility* (New York University Press, 2019), 3.

³⁰⁰ *Boston Evening Post*, 14 January 1740.

³⁰¹ Francis S. Drake, *The Town of Roxbury* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1905), 60.

³⁰² Medford Town Records, 1735–1781, vol. 3, pp. 46–50 (im. 79–86), accessed via www.familysearch.org.

³⁰³ Gloria Whiting, *Belonging* (2024).

Resistance to Slavery in Massachusetts

Community ties were a vital precursor to violent resistance as well. Enslavers knew that enslaved people who could share information, resources, and news could also help one another escape or rebel. Of all the rebels in eighteenth-century Boston, one of the most daring was Cuba Vassall's older brother, Robin.

Robin began with nonviolent resistance in his youth, but he did not end there. He was a clever and decisive planner who did not hesitate to rebuke those who disobeyed his orders. Black Bostonians knew Robin on sight by his dashing black wig and blue coat with yellow lining and cuffs.³⁰⁴ By the time he turned 30, Robin had committed at least three overt acts of rebellion, each more audacious than the last.

In the spring of 1747, when he was 22 years old, Robin ran away from Penelope and Henry Vassall.³⁰⁵ Cuba was 13 or 14 years old. None of the surviving records say whether Robin told his mother and his little sister that he was going to try to free himself. Perhaps they helped him pack a bag with food or an extra shirt, or perhaps he slipped away quietly so that they could honestly say they knew nothing. The last time they saw him, he was wearing "a short blue Jacket" and "blue Breeches," garments that they had likely washed many times.

It was probably not unusual for Robin to be away from Cambridge for a night or even a few nights. Henry Vassall did not bother to take out an advertisement in the Boston newspapers until Robin had been gone for three weeks. "All persons are hereby forbid to harbour or carry off said Negro, as they would avoid being prosecuted with the utmost Rigour of the Law," Henry Vassall wrote. He offered £10 to anyone who "conveys him safely to me at Cambridge."³⁰⁶

Those weeks must have been dreadful for anyone who loved Robin. Slavery was still legal everywhere in the Atlantic world, so there was no safe destination. Most successful fugitives from mid-eighteenth-century New England ran away to sea, where the constant

³⁰⁴ Abner Cheney Goodell, *The Trial and Execution for Petit Treason of Mark and Phillis, Slaves of Capt. John Codman* (1883) via Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/lst.023/?st=gallery>

³⁰⁵ Advertisement dated 24 April 1747, *Boston Evening Post*, 11 May 1747.

³⁰⁶ Advertisement dated 24 April 1747, *Boston Evening Post*, 11 May 1747.

movement and presence of many free Black sailors allowed them to blend in.³⁰⁷ A ship might carry Robin to Philadelphia, London, Antigua, or even the Gold Coast of West Africa. If he succeeded in gaining his freedom, Cuba would never see him again.

In the end, Robin was recaptured, but he was not cowed. Five years later, at age 27, he planned a second escape, this time with three other men. In order to finance their flight, they planned to rob Henry and Penelope Vassall's wealthy neighbor, William Brattle, for whom modern-day Brattle Street is named. The conspiracy involved two enslaved men—Robin and Dick—and two white servants, William Healey and Joseph Luke.³⁰⁸ Healey had recently come to live with the Vassalls. He and Robin soon became drinking companions and sometimes discussed vague plans to run away.

In May of 1752, these plans became more concrete. Dick told William Healey that if Healey "Could Carry him off, he Could Get him money Enough."³⁰⁹ According to Dick, his enslaver had "a Vast deal of Gold & A great Many Rings in a Box" as well as "an Iron Chest in ye Closett that was half full of [Spanish] Dollars." This bounty had been gathered for the wedding of William Brattle's daughter, but it was vulnerable because some people in the house were sick with smallpox. Dick told Robin that "if they were Enoculated," they could slip into the house and steal it all. The night before the robbery, the friends gathered to drink and make plans. William Healey suggested that they should steal the Vassall silver, too, "when we were ready to go off," but Robin declined. "Our design was to go to Cape Breton & from thence to France," Healey later testified.

On the night of May 9, 1752, Robin and Healey took a ladder from the Brattle barn and broke in through an upper story window at the back of the house. Joseph Luke was too drunk to help. After they were arrested, both Robin and Healey testified that the other entered William Brattle's bedroom to steal the chest, but the resulting theft was the same. They stole 603 Spanish silver dollars, 170 pieces of eight, 133 other silver coins, 286 copper half-pence,

³⁰⁷ Charles Foy, "Ports of Slavery, Ports of Freedom: How Slaves Used Northern Seaports' Maritime Industry To Escape and Create Trans-Atlantic Identities, 1713–1783" (PhD diss., Eastern Illinois University, 2008); Sowande M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

³⁰⁸ Dick may have been the same Dick who was enslaved by Henry Vassall in 1769. Henry Vassall Inventory, 1769, Batchelder, 79–84.

³⁰⁹ Testimony of William Healey, Case #69278, May 1752, Suffolk County Court files, vol. 428, April–June 1752, via FamilySearch; Batchelder, *Notes on Colonel Henry Vassall*, 65–67.

dozens of silver objects including candlesticks, tankards, porringers, tea tongs, 27 spoons, a “Silver Punch Ladle,” and eight bags of miscellaneous booty.³¹⁰

It was an outlandish haul. Robin and William Healey had difficulty carrying that much silver through Henry Vassall’s garden and to a nearby cornfield, where they buried the loot. A few days later, they split it up between two hiding places, one of which required help from Anthony Vassall. “We told Toney of it & he Crept Under ye Barn Flower to hide ye money,” Robin reported. According to Robin, Anthony did not know of the plan beforehand, but they promised him a share if he would help. Anthony took some of the silver dollars to Boston, where he exchanged them for less-conspicuous “Coppers.” Robin used some of the money to buy three pairs of stockings and two handkerchiefs.³¹¹

Before the friends could escape, they were caught. Robin and William Healey gave statements and pleaded guilty. They were both sentenced to be “whipt twenty Stripes upon his naked back at the public whipping” and to pay William Brattle triple what they stole. The first part of the sentence—a public whipping—was a spectacle of violence intended both to punish Robin and William Healey and to terrify other enslaved people and servants. Cuba Vassall, Anthony Vassall, James Tulip, and other people who loved or knew Robin may have been forced to watch him being whipped. The second part of the sentence—paying treble damages—was manifestly impossible for Robin and William Healey. In recognition of this, the court empowered William Brattle to indenture Healey for twenty years and to sell Robin “for the term of his natural life.”³¹²

This was a turning point for Cuba’s family. William Brattle could have sold Robin to Antigua or Jamaica, though the white Royalls and Vassalls may have been reluctant to send a known resistor to their plantations. Perhaps this is why Brattle did not send Robin far away, or perhaps Robin’s loved ones pleaded for mercy. In the end, Robin was sold to Dr. William Clarke, a physician living near Dock Square, near Faneuil Hall.³¹³

³¹⁰ Batchelder, *Notes on Colonel Henry Vassall*, 65; Case #69278, May 1752, Suffolk County Court files, vol. 428, April–June 1752.

³¹¹ Batchelder, 65.

³¹² Batchelder, 65.

³¹³ During a smallpox epidemic in 1752, Dr. William Clarke lived in Wing’s Lane, near Dock Square. Samuel G. Drake, *The History and Antiquities of Boston* (1856), 632. The trial documents relating to Mark and Phillis’s trial in 1755 refer to Robin being enslaved by Dr. William Clarke, but do once say “John Clarke.” This may be an error, as the

This was yet another forced separation for 18-year-old Cuba. Boston was not as far as Antigua, but Robin had always been with her through every move, from the time she was a toddler. By this time, their mother, Abba, had disappeared from surviving records, suggesting she may have died. Cuba came to Cambridge with a mother and five siblings, but by the mid-1750s, she had probably lost them all.

Robin stayed in Massachusetts, but he did not stop fighting. In 1755, just three years after the Brattle robbery, Robin used his place in Dr. Clarke's household to help three people poison their enslaver. It was one of the most notorious acts of rebellion in the history of Massachusetts.

Robin's co-conspirators were Mark, Phillis, and Phoebe. They lived in Charlestown, where they were enslaved by Captain John Codman, a merchant and saddler. They considered Codman particularly cruel, and had fought back against him for years. Around 1749, they set fire to Codman's workshop. When questioned, Phillis confessed that she set the fire, though Mark "gave me no rest till I did it." She explained that Mark "wanted to get to Boston" and believed that they could force Codman to sell them if they ruined his business.³¹⁴

After the fire, Codman did hire Mark out to work in Boston, but he did not sell him. In the winter of 1754–5, Codman brought Mark back to Charlestown, which separated Mark from his child, who lived in Boston. This was the last straw. Over the next few weeks, Mark, Phillis, and Phoebe made a plan to kill their enslaver.

Along with fire, poison was one of the most common weapons that enslaved people in Massachusetts used to strike at their enslavers. If they were careful and lucky, the deaths would seem natural. Mark assured Phillis and Phoebe that "Mr. Salmon's negroes poison'd him, and were never found out, but had got good masters, & so might we." He meant John Salmon, a prosperous Boston merchant who died on February 21, 1754. Indeed, no one suspected foul play in Salmon's death at the time. Given the upheaval that followed an enslaver's death, the

remainder of the documents agree that he was enslaved by William Clarke. Abner Cheney Goodell, *The Trial and Execution for Petit Treason of Mark and Phillis, Slaves of Capt. John Codman* (1883) via Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/llst.023/?st=gallery>

³¹⁴ Quotations from this section are from the transcription of testimony in the trial of Mark, Phillis, Phoebe, and Robin. Abner Cheney Goodell, *The Trial and Execution for Petit Treason of Mark and Phillis, Slaves of Capt. John Codman* (1883) via Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/llst.023/?st=gallery>

people who killed him must have been desperate to change their circumstances, just as Mark, Phillis, and Phoebe were. A month after Salmon's death, seven of the people he enslaved—six men and a young girl—were auctioned off at the Royal Exchange Tavern on King Street, on the exact spot where the Boston Massacre took place sixteen years later.³¹⁵

Some poisoners did not get away with their attacks. In 1749, a 14-year-old enslaved girl named Phillis used arsenic to kill her enslaver's child, one-year-old Elizabeth Greenleaf. The death of a baby was not unusual in eighteenth-century Boston, so no one suspected Phillis until 1751, when she poisoned another Greenleaf baby in the same way. Phillis eventually confessed to killing both children. She was hanged in Boston on May 16, 1751, at age 16. According to the Boston newspapers, Phillis's mother "died with Excess of Grief" when she heard that her child would be executed.³¹⁶

Mark, Phillis, and Phoebe knew that poisoning John Codman might mean their own deaths or an unpredictable sale. They still decided to take the risk.

Poisoning Codman was not as easy as they hoped. At first, they mixed lead into his sago, a soft porridge made of cassava. Unfortunately, Codman "complain'd it was gritty" and did not eat enough to kill him. In search of a more potent poison, Mark approached a man named Carr, who was enslaved by Dr. John Gibbons. Carr had access to Gibbons's pharmacy, but he was reluctant to help "until he had seen Quaco [Phoebe's husband]." Quaco was also skeptical of the plot. He advised Phoebe to stay out of it.

The next person Mark asked was Cuba's brother Robin. Unlike the cautious Carr, Robin was willing to help kill John Codman. His enslaver, Dr. Clarke, kept plenty of arsenic on hand, both to prescribe in small doses for diseases like syphilis, and for use as a rat poison. Robin stole a large quantity of "ratsbane"—"near an ounce," according to Phillis—and folded it carefully into a white paper. Then, he wrapped the white paper in brown paper to make sure that no one touched it accidentally, and tied it with twine. Robin gave the arsenic powder to Mark and told him to "give it in two Doses." He assured Mark that it would have "no more taste in it than cold water."

³¹⁵ See Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (Columbia University Press, 1942).

³¹⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, 22 April 1751; *Boston Evening Post*, 21 Jan 1751.

Mark, Phillis, and Phoebe did not follow Robin's instructions. Instead of mixing the arsenic into Codman's food in two doses, they spread it out over several days. Codman sickened, but did not die. When Robin heard this, he cursed the conspirators for not listening. "Robin said we were damn'd Fools," Phillis testified. "We had not given master that first Powder at two Doses, for it would have killed him and no Body would have known who hurt him, for it was enough to kill the strongest man living."

Robin supplied a second ounce of arsenic. This time, it worked.

As in Antigua, slaveowners in Massachusetts unleashed horrific violence on enslaved people who were suspected of plotting to kill their enslavers. Free people who killed another person could be convicted of murder, but enslaved people who killed their enslavers could be convicted of *petit treason*, a crime of both murder and rebellion. Convicted murderers were usually hanged. Enslaved people convicted of *petit treason* were sometimes burned at the stake.

In their interrogations, Mark and Phillis both testified that they killed John Codman because they hoped to get better masters. This was very similar to Hector's claim in 1736 that he was motivated to join the plot because he did not wish to serve under a particular white overseer. These may have been legitimate motives. But it was also an explanation that flattered white slaveowners, assuring them that enslaved people rebelled against "bad" masters, not "good" masters. It cast the murder as an act of violence specifically against John Codman, not against the system of slavery.

This defense did not save Mark and Phillis from horrible deaths. In September 1755, they were both executed in ways that were intended to terrify every enslaved person in Massachusetts. Mark was hanged on Gallows Hill in Cambridge. Afterward, he was gibbeted, meaning his body was put into a cage that hung from a pole on the road between Cambridge and Charlestown. His corpse was left to rot. This gruesome display lasted for years. In 1758, three years after the execution, a local doctor noted that he had, "viewed the Negro hung on Gibbets for Poisoning his master C[aptain] Codman. His skin was but very little broken altho' he

had hung hanging there near three or four years.”³¹⁷ Mark’s body was still on display, “with the skin largely intact.”³¹⁸ In 1775, when Paul Revere passed through Charlestown on his famous ride to warn that the British regulars were marching to Lexington and Concord, he met two men on horseback under a tree, “nearly opposite where Mark was hung in chains.”

Phillis was burned at the stake. She was taken to Cambridge Common, less than half a mile from the house where Cuba lived. There, she was bound to a post atop bundles of kindling and set on fire.³¹⁹

Cuba may or may not have watched Mark and Phillis’s executions, but she was certainly the intended audience. The Massachusetts authorities burned Phillis and gibbeted Mark in order to terrify other enslaved people into obedience. Cuba—an enslaved woman whose brother had supplied the poison that killed John Codman, and who probably prepared food for the white Vassalls—was exactly the person who frightened slaveowners the most. It is quite likely that Cuba watched Phillis burn to death. Even if she did not witness with her own eyes, the message was clear.

The fates of Phoebe and Robin are not clear. Newspaper accounts of the executions of Mark and Phillis do not mention either Phoebe or Robin. A history of Charlestown published in 1845 says that Phoebe “was transported to the West Indies” in exchange for her testimony against the other conspirators.³²⁰ The same fate may have befallen Robin.³²¹ He may have been sold to new enslavers in the Caribbean or transported to one of the family plantations. Perhaps it is a coincidence that a man named Robin ran away from John Vassall’s Lower Works Pen plantation in Jamaica shortly before the 1757 inventory was made; perhaps not.³²² It is also

³¹⁷ F. M. Ray, *The Journal of Dr. Caleb Rea, Written during the Expedition against Ticonderoga in 1758* (1881), 10–11

³¹⁸ Stuart Banner, *The Death Penalty: An American History* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

³¹⁹ Nikki M. Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge: Enslaved Women’s Lethal Resistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

³²⁰ Richard Frothingham, *History of Charlestown, Massachusetts* (1845), 264.

³²¹ A vaguely worded Massachusetts sales receipt (dated October 26, 1755) mentions the sale of an enslaved man connected to Henry Vassall’s cousin, Florentius Vassall. The receipt says Micheal Follet either paid or was paid “for a Negroe man the sume of thirty pounds for the use of Florentius Vassall.” Florentius Vassall lived on his estate in Jamaica, so it is not clear why he would be connected to the sale of an enslaved person in/to/from Massachusetts five weeks after Mark and Phillis were executed. It is possible that this receipt is connected to Robin being sold to Jamaica, with Florentius Vassall or his associates (Follet, John Wizell) involved in the sale. MSA, Massachusetts Sale Records, 1697–1775, vol. 304, 94.

³²² John Vassall (1757), IB/11/3/37, 160, Jamaica National Archives

possible that Robin remained in Massachusetts. If so, he may have been the Black man named Robin from Charlestown who drowned in Medford in 1760.³²³

Like all enslavers, the white Vassall family lived in constant terror that the people they enslaved would rise up against them. Even in Massachusetts, where a vigilant white majority kept enslaved people under constant surveillance, they never rested easy. When Henry and Penelope Vassall ate a spoonful of soup or sipped a cup of sugar-sweetened chocolate, they must have wondered whether any little paper parcels had passed from hand to hand in Cambridge.

Building 105 Brattle Street, c.1759

Life continued for Cuba Vassall. She gave birth to baby James, and was able to keep him with her as he grew. James Tulip “owned the covenant” at the First Church of Cambridge on July 20, 1755, one week after Robin was arrested for the Codman murder, but Cuba did not join him. She attended church, but was not baptized until the last days of her long life.³²⁴

Meanwhile, across the street, a later chapter in Cuba’s life was beginning to take shape. In 1757, Henry Vassall’s nephew, John Vassall (1738–1797) graduated from Harvard. Flush with profits from his plantations in Jamaica, John Vassall began to build an impressive Georgian mansion just across the street from Henry and Penelope’s house in 1759.³²⁵ The lives of Cuba Vassall, Anthony Vassall, and their children would be bound up in the story of that house for decades to come.

Building the Vassall house was an enormous project. By the time it was finished, it redistributed £2,204 15s 11d sterling from John Vassall’s sugar fortune into the pockets of dozens of Cambridge lumber merchants, carpenters, stone masons, bricklayers, blacksmiths,

³²³ This Robin was enslaved by Capt. Phillip Carteret of Charlestown, but drowned in Medford. The inquest ruled Robin’s death an accident. Inquisition on the Body of Robin, a Negro, 2 June 1760, Suffolk Court Records, 1760, image 691/761, FamilySearch; Abner Cheney Goodell, *The Trial and Execution for Petit Treason of Mark and Phillis, Slaves of Capt. John Codman* (1883) via Library of Congress, page 44, citing 2 Mass. Hist. Coll., vol. ii. p. 166, and note. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/llst.023/?st=gallery>.

³²⁴ Cuba Vassall was baptized at her house on 13 September 1812, three days before her death. First Church of Cambridge Records.

³²⁵ The exact dates of construction are unknown, but the 1759 date on the fireback is consistent with the chronology of John Vassall’s life: he turned 21 in 1759, allowing him to take control of his fortune and commission a large building project. J.L. Bell, 3.

glaziers, and painters in exchange for materials and labor.³²⁶ The principal carpenters on the project, [John and Jotham] Walton and Mr. Hering, were paid £402.1.11 ½ and £240 respectively, with hundreds of additional pounds going to other major contractors like mason [Jonathan] Hill, lumber merchant [Samuel] Bradstreet, and brickmaker Caleb Prentice.³²⁷ The stone carver Henry Christian Geyer, known throughout eastern Massachusetts for his elaborate gravestones, provided £6.10.0 in stone and £26 in carving services, which may have included some of the plaster busts (Homer, Milton) and animals (“Parrots, Cats, Dogs, Lions, Sheep”) he advertised in Boston’s newspapers.³²⁸ Boston merchant Robert Jarvis ordered nearly £250 in wallpaper and other imported “sundries” from London, but the vast majority of the money went to local artisans, laborers, and suppliers.³²⁹

These expenditures infused the economy of Massachusetts in general and Cambridge in particular with money from Jamaican sugar. In 1759, the white Vassalls sold their hogsheads of sugar for about £21 each.³³⁰ That means that the £16 Samuel Hayward earned for providing

³²⁶ The total cost is given as £2,939 14s 7d in “Money of the Province of the Massachusetts” which Vassall reckoned as “Equal to Sterling” in the amount of £2,204 15s 11d. John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

³²⁷ Most of the artisans and suppliers in John Vassall’s lists are identified only by surname. Where the first name is uncertain, the name is given as “Mr. Surname”; where there is a likely candidate who cannot be proven with complete certainty, the first name is given in brackets. John and Jotham Walton were local carpenters who were paid for carpentry work at Harvard in 1773. See Hancock Family Papers II, Receipts 1740–1777, Massachusetts Historical Society; Lucius Robinson Paige, *History of Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1630–1877: With a Genealogical Register* (H. O. Houghton, 1877); Thomas Baldwin, ed., *Vital Records of Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850: Births.– v. 2. Marriages and deaths* (1914); *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, volume 7 (James T. White, 1892), under “Sargent Smith Prentiss,” 477.

³²⁸ In 18th-century New England, stone carvers referred to decorative carving as “cutting,” while cutting a stone to size for a masonry project was usually called “shaping.” John Vassall’s list has separate entries for Geyer as a supplier of stone and as a “stonecutter,” which implies decorative carving rather than masonry work. Geyer began selling plaster sculptures in the late 1760s, so he probably did not provide any dogs or lions in 1759, but John Vassall’s list of expenses was compiled after 1776, and may include improvements and repairs made to the house between 1759 and 1774. See Caitlin Galante-DeAngelis Hopkins, “The Shadow of Change” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2014); Harriette Merrifield Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England and the Men who Made Them: 1653–1800* (1927).

³²⁹ Robert Jarvis was a Loyalist and close associate of the Vassalls. In 1774, Dinah Jarvis, who was enslaved by Robert Jarvis, married Cesar Davis, who was enslaved by Edward Davis and Ruth Vassall Davis (John Vassall’s aunt, sister to William Vassall). *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston: 1902. Boston marriages, 1751–1809* (1903).

³³⁰ In William Vassall’s account books, he reckons the “proceeds” of 156 hogsheads of sugar shipped on eight different ships in 1758/9. The amounts vary considerably, from a low profit of £11.45 to a high of £30.19, likely depending on costs, market price, and quality of sugar. Five of the eight shipments have prices between £19.45 and £20.90, with an overall average of £20.98 for the 156 hogsheads. William Vassall Account Books, page 33, digital sequence 70, MS Am 1250 (92), Houghton Library.

shingles for the Vassall mansion was worth about three-quarters of a hogshead of sugar; the £24.12.1 that glazier Joseph Welch made for putting in windows was worth a little more than a full hogshead.³³¹ These ordinary people used their earnings to buy ordinary things. Some of the money went to farmers selling food, some went to shopkeepers selling cloth, some went to wages for laborers and servants. In some cases, the windfall from such a large building project probably allowed white workers to invest in property and build wealth for future generations.

The new Vassall mansion was even more opulent than Henry and Penelope's house. It had a grand lawn that rolled down to the river, and extensive grounds with manicured formal gardens, set in 105 acres of "Meadow & Orchardng."³³² Inside, a sweeping central stair divided elegant rooms. The estate also included stables and three other houses, one of which may have been the "tenement" that Cuba and Anthony Vassall would one day claim as their own.³³³

The house was probably substantially complete by the time John Vassall married Elizabeth Oliver, the sister of Thomas Oliver, on January 12, 1761. Their first child, John Vassall (1762–1800), was born the next year.³³⁴

The construction of the Vassall mansion in 1759 was part of a building boom in the neighborhood along modern-day Brattle Street. In 1760, John's aunt Mary Phips and her husband, Richard Lechmere, built a house next to the Vassall mansion.³³⁵ Mary was the younger sister of John's mother, Elizabeth Phips, and helped raise John and his sisters at the Phips family's home after their parents died. Another Phips sister, Rebecca, married Joseph Lee and

³³¹ Joseph Welch was a Loyalist who left Cambridge in the 1770s. His shop was near Brattle Square. Alexander Fraser, *United Empire Loyalists: Enquiry Into the Losses and Services in Consequence of Their Loyalty. Evidence in the Canadian Claims* (1905); William Edmund Wall, "The Oldest Paint Shops in Massachusetts," paper read at the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the Society of Master House Painters and Decorators of Massachusetts, the American House, Boston, 13 January 1910.

³³² Between 1759 and 1774, John Vassall continued to buy and sell land in Cambridge. The total of 105 acres is the final amount he owned in Cambridge in 1774, as described in his Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

³³³ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA. John Vassall's estate also included an elegant townhouse in Boston, a forty-acre farm in Watertown, and a house with four acres in Dorchester.

³³⁴ Calder, 23–5.

³³⁵ Mary Phips was the sister of John Vassall's mother, Elizabeth Phips. They were daughters of Lt. Governor Spencer Phips. After the deaths of his parents, John (and his sister Elizabeth) grew up in Spencer Phips's house, so they were probably close with their aunts. Mary was born in 1725, so she was about 13 when John Vassall was born.

lived on the other side of the Lechmeres.³³⁶ The next house along the street toward Watertown was built in 1764 by Susanna Vassall, John Vassall’s paternal aunt, and her husband, George Ruggles, who was a Jamaica merchant. Another Vassall aunt, Anna Vassall, lived closer to Harvard with her husband, John Borland.³³⁷

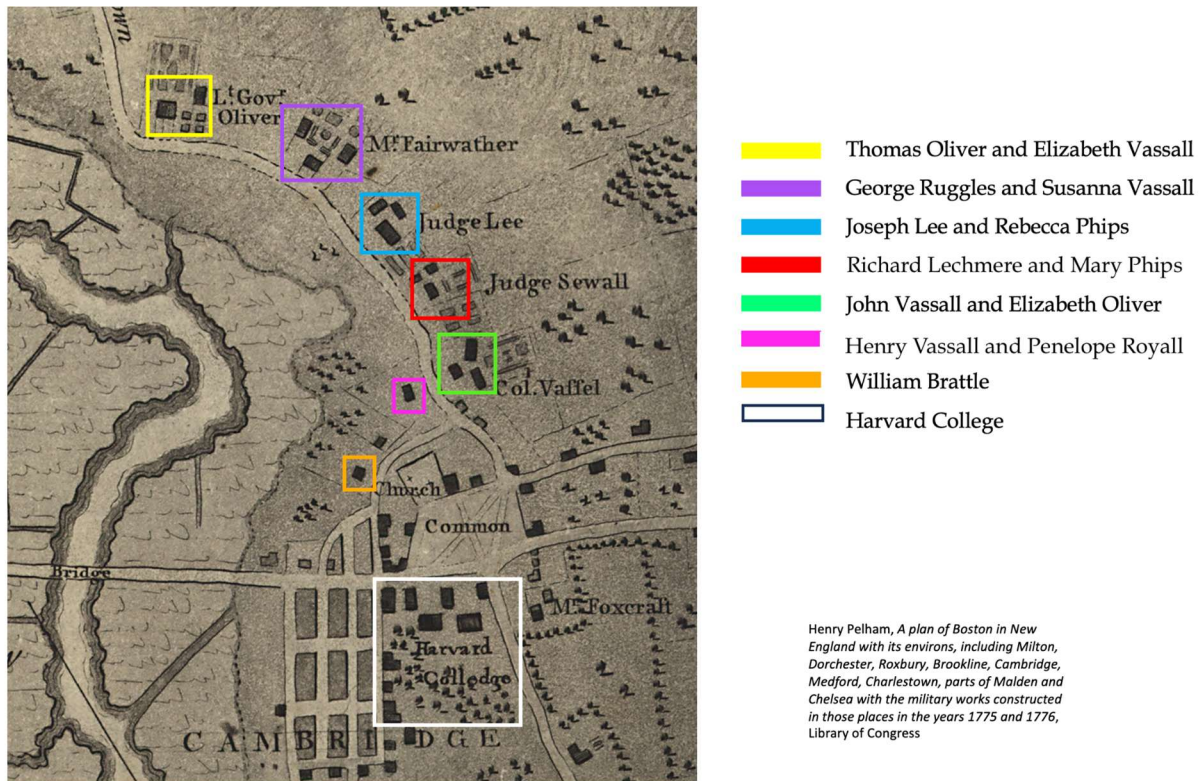


Figure 7. Close-up of Cambridge from historic map of the Boston area, highlighting key sites in Cambridge on present-day Brattle Street as well as Christ Church and Harvard College. Highlights added by Caitlin DeAngelis. Reproduction by permission of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.³³⁸

The mansion at the far western edge of the neighborhood was built in 1767 by Thomas Oliver, the grandson of Elizabeth Royall, who came to Massachusetts on the same ship as Cuba

³³⁶ The Lee house is currently called the Hooper–Lee–Nichols House and is home to History Cambridge. Mary Phips was born in 1725 and Rebecca Phips was born in 1727, so they were young adolescents when Ruth, John, and Elizabeth Vassall came to live with them around 1739.

³³⁷ The Borlands lived in Apthorp House in Harvard Square, which was built 1759–60 and expanded after the Borlands arrived c.1764. Susan E. Maycock and Charles M. Sullivan, *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development* (MIT Press, 2016), page 18-30.

³³⁸ Henry Pelham and Francis Jukes, 1777, 98 x 70 cm, *A plan of Boston in New England with its environs, including Milton, Dorchester, Roxbury, Brookline, Cambridge, Medford, Charlestown, parts of Malden and Chelsea with the military works constructed in those places in the years 1775 and 1776*, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/gm71000619/>.

when they were three years old.³³⁹ In 1760, Oliver married Elizabeth Vassall, John Vassall's younger sister. Six months later, John Vassall married Thomas Oliver's younger sister, also named Elizabeth.³⁴⁰ This ensured an exceptionally close relationship between the two families. Their children—at least fourteen born between 1760 and 1777—were double cousins.

In later years, Vassall family descendant Samuel Batchelder would call the relationships among these Brattle Street families “an indistinguishable mass of cousins and in-laws” that were “enough to dizzy the most indurated genealogist.” It is not necessary to master the details to grasp the essential point: the fine mansions on Brattle Street were built by a large, extended family that financed its luxurious lifestyle by enslaving tens of thousands of people on sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

The building boom also produced an Anglican church—Christ Church—financed and attended by the Vassalls, Olivers, Royalls, and their associates. Henry Vassall served on its construction committee in 1759, and various other white Vassalls filled roles as vestrymen and deacons. Each family purchased at least one box pew for the white family, while enslaved people generally sat in the balcony or side pews. Many of the white Vassalls and Olivers born in the 1760s and 1770s were baptized there, and a Vassall family crypt was dug in the foundations. A 1763 register at the church shows that Henry Vassall headed a household of ten people: himself, Penelope, Elizabeth, and seven others, including Cuba, Anthony, and James Vassall.³⁴¹ John Vassall's household numbered eight: himself, Elizabeth, their eldest son John, and five other people, likely enslaved.³⁴²

³³⁹ Since the 1970s, the Oliver house (Elmwood) has been the official home of Harvard's presidents. At least eleven people were enslaved at Elmwood: Buff, Jerry, Cato, Samuel, Jeffrey, Mira, Jude, Sarah, Violet, Jenny, and Young Jerry (b.1774). Thomas Oliver Loyalist Claim, AO 13/48, TNA. Several of these people were previously enslaved by Thomas Oliver's father, Robert Oliver, in Dorchester. His probate inventory, dated 15 February 1763, includes seven enslaved people: Cato, Buff, Jack (child), Lucey, Miber, Mirah, and Jude (child). Robert Oliver Probate Inventory, 1763, Suffolk County, vol. 64, 369. Sarah may have been the woman named Sarah purchased by Robert Oliver in 1760 from Boston innkeeper Samuel Wetherd (along with a man named Essex). Suffolk Probate, 28 November 1760, vol. 36, 105.

³⁴⁰ Thomas Oliver and Elizabeth Vassall were married 11 June 1760; John Vassall and Elizabeth Oliver were married 12 January 1761. Calder, 25.

³⁴¹ Batchelder, 63; William Stevens Perry, *Papers relating to the history of the church in Massachusetts, 1676–1785* (1873), 502.

³⁴² Other Christ Church households from the extended Vassall family included David Phips (nine people), Richard Lechmere (nine), Joseph Lee (five), and Elizabeth Royall (four). William Stevens Perry, *Papers relating to the history of the church in Massachusetts, 1676–1785* (1873), 502.

Henry Vassall: Debt and Death

While the other Vassalls and Olivers wrung fortunes out of the blood and sweat of enslaved people on their plantations, money ran through Henry Vassall's fingers. He was a lavish entertainer and profligate spender. At times, his tailor's bill grew so large that his older brother William had to step in to keep him from being sued, and his ongoing financial troubles strained relations between the Vassall and Royall families.³⁴³

In 1744, just two years after his marriage to Penelope, Henry Vassall borrowed more than £1,000 from her mother, which he never repaid. When Elizabeth Royall died in 1747, she left £4,000 to Penelope and £1,000 to Penelope and Henry's daughter, Elizabeth Vassall [Russell], in the form of forgiveness of Henry's debt. Even this boon could not keep Henry solvent. By the mid-1760s, he had mortgaged Penelope's property in Antigua—57.5 acres of valuable sugar-producing land and the ownership of "68 1/2 Negroes"—to his brother William Vassall. Henry further mortgaged his house and grounds to his son-in-law, Charles Russell, and borrowed liberally from his nephews, John Vassall and Thomas Oliver.³⁴⁴ When friends began to refuse him credit, William Vassall stepped in, borrowing £600 on Henry's behalf from their brother-in-law, John Borland, and taking personal responsibility for the interest payments to keep Henry from hurtling into ruin.³⁴⁵

It did little good. On March 17, 1769, Henry Vassall died, leaving Penelope drowning in debt.

The death of an enslaver—particularly one with such severe financial problems—was a precarious time in the life of any enslaved person.³⁴⁶ Executors tended to sell enslaved people before they sold durable property like real estate, which meant that enslaved families were

³⁴³ Elizabeth Royall Pepperell to Sir William Pepperrell, 8 April 1769, typescript in the collection of the Portsmouth Athenaeum. This letter, written by Isaac Royall's daughter Elizabeth shortly after Henry Royall's death, notes that Isaac Royall visited his sister Penelope after Henry died, prompting Elizabeth to write, "I hope now all uneasiness between them will be at an end."

³⁴⁴ This mortgage was finalized weeks before Henry's death in 1769, but backdated to 1764. It ensured that even though Henry died impoverished, his house and lands went to his daughter Elizabeth's husband, Charles Russell, rather than other creditors. Calder, 19.

³⁴⁵ William Vassall letter to Penelope Vassall, 1 Jan 1776, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

³⁴⁶ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 105–107.

routinely separated when an enslaver died.³⁴⁷ To an indebted enslaver like Penelope Vassall, enslaved people were a valuable asset. They were also mortal, which made them a riskier form of property than land.

Indeed, William Vassall complained bitterly about holding the mortgage on the “68 1/2” people Penelope enslaved in Antigua because their value decreased every year as they aged, fell ill, and died. “You & Every one who is acquainted with West India Estates must know,” William wrote to Penelope in 1775, that enslaved people “would die, others would grow old, Others would grow sickly & Lame, Others would be disabled & rendered unfit for service & daily growing less & less valuable.”³⁴⁸ William complained that the enslaved people on Penelope’s mortgaged estate were “daily growing worse,” and was annoyed that the mortgage did not give him ownership of “the Increase of sd. Negroes,” meaning that he could not sell their children to stem his losses.³⁴⁹

With all her property mortgaged and so many debts to repay, Penelope Vassall decided to settle some of her accounts with one of the only assets she still owned outright: the people she enslaved.³⁵⁰

For 35-year-old Cuba Vassall, Henry’s death was terrifying. At the time, Cuba had two living children: James, who was about 11 years old, and a 2-year-old daughter, Flora, who was born in 1767. She was also seven months pregnant with another son, Darby.³⁵¹ Little Flora may

³⁴⁷ Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York University Press, 2016), 120, 144; Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 105–107.

³⁴⁸ William Vassall to Penelope, 1 Jan. 1775, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

³⁴⁹ William Vassall to Penelope, 1 Jan, 1775, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

³⁵⁰ In Henry Vassall’s 1769 inventory, the most valuable assets were the silver plate (£200), the chariot (£50), and James Vassall (£40). The five enslaved people (Anthony, Dick, James, Dorinda, and Cuba), valued collectively at £92, represented 5.4% of the total value of property in the inventory (£1,705.11.3). Batchelder, 80–84.

³⁵¹ Most histories of the Black Vassall family count three children in the family in 1769: James, Dorinda, and Flora. Samuel Batchelder argued that Dorinda Vassall was a child of Cuba and Anthony Vassall, born before 1769. This has been repeated, but not corroborated by primary sources. Only three eighteenth-century documents mention Dorinda Vassall: first, Isaac and Elizabeth Royall’s deed of gift transferring a young girl named Dorinda to Penelope Royall [Vassall] in 1737; second, Henry Vassall’s 1769 probate inventory (“Dorrenda”); third, the *Vital Records of Cambridge*, which record the death of “Darinda Vassall” in 1784. While it is possible that Cuba and Anthony Vassall had a daughter named Dorinda (possibly named after the young girl given to Penelope Royall in 1737), the available evidence suggests that Dorinda Vassall may have been an enslaved woman of approximately the same age as Cuba Vassall. Isaac Royall Esq. & Wife to Penelope Royall their Daughter: Deed of Gift for four Negroes, Records of Enrolment (ROE) 67, Liber D. Vol. 2 (1737–8), f. 267, NAAB; Batchelder, 82; *Vital Records of Cambridge*, 772.

have been separated from the family already. She was sold or given to John Nicholas of Billerica, a rural town nearly twenty miles northwest of Cambridge, either as an infant or around the time of Henry Vassall's death.³⁵² Now, Penelope Vassall's precarious finances threatened to take James, who was one of the most valuable assets in Henry Vassall's inventory, and the new baby, who could be given away as easily as Flora had. Cuba knew she might lose Anthony as well. For a woman who had already lost her mother, her brother, all of her younger siblings, and possibly baby Flora as well, Henry Vassall's death threatened more devastating separations.

Nearly a century later, when Darby Vassall was an old man, he told an interviewer that Henry Vassall was "the Devil." Darby was born two months after Henry Vassall died, so his opinion must have been bequeathed to him. Based on his parents' stories, Darby knew that "Henry Vassall was a very wicked man":

He was a gamester and spent a great deal of money in cards and lived at the rate of 'seven years in three,' and managed to run out nearly all his property, so that Old Madam when she came back after the peace was very poor. He was a severe and tart master to his people; and when he was dying and asked his servants to pray for him, they answered that he might pray for himself.³⁵³

Henry Vassall's disastrous financial mismanagement was more than enough reason for Anthony and Cuba Vassall to consider him "the Devil." But their memory of him as "a severe and tart master" implies that their conflicts were interpersonal as well. Anthony and Cuba Vassall may

³⁵² The timing of Flora's departure from Henry and Penelope Vassall's household is unclear. She was born around 1767, but does not appear in Henry Vassall's 1769 inventory, which suggests that she was sold or given to John Nicholas before Henry Vassall died. The Nicholas name is variously spelled Nicholas, Nichols, Nicholls, Nickels, Nickles, etc.

³⁵³ Batchelder, 35. The white Vassalls described Henry Vassall's death in starkly different terms. While Darby Vassall's account focused on enslaved people's refusal to pray for a man they considered a cruel spendthrift, white relatives remembered his death in terms of familial harmony, penitence, and reconciliation. Penelope Royall Vassall's niece, Elizabeth Royall Pepperrell (1747–1775, daughter of Isaac Royall Jr.) described his death in a letter written on April 8, 1769: "My Uncle Vassall who you remember was in very bad health when you left us, is now no more, he died the 17th of March his friends think, a sincere penitent and I hope he did. Mrs. Russell [Henry and Penelope's daughter, Elizabeth Vassall Russell] presented him a granddaughter a few hours before his Death, it was born in the next chamber, and as soon as it was dressed they carried itt to him, he was past speaking but it seems had his sense perfectly, he looked very affectionately at it & stroked its face with his hand; we were all at the Funeral, and my Papa has been to see my Aunt since, so that I hope all uneasiness between them will be at an end." The grandchild born on the same day Henry Vassall died was Penelope Russell (1769-1827), who later married Massachusetts Senator Theodore Sedgwick. Elizabeth Pepperrell to Sir William Pepperrell, 8 April 1769, typescript in the collection of the Portsmouth Athenaeum.

not have shared all of the details with Darby, but there were manifold opportunities for Henry to inflict abuse on the people he enslaved, both during daily interactions and life-changing events like Robin's escape and Phillis's execution. Given the sharp retort that the dying Henry Vassall could "pray for himself," along with James Vassall's uncertain parentage, it is worth considering what types of violence—including sexual violence—Henry might have inflicted on Cuba, Abba, or, indeed, on Robin.³⁵⁴

Cuba and Anthony Vassall did not have the legal right to determine what happened to themselves and their children after Henry Vassall's death, but legal action was very much on the minds of both the Black and white Vassalls in the spring of 1769. In 1768 and 1769, two enslaved people connected to the white Vassall family used the Middlesex County Court in Cambridge to free themselves.

The first case involved an Indigenous woman named Margaret Tulip (also called Peggy).³⁵⁵ Margaret Tulip argued that she was born free and was unjustly enslaved by William Muzzy of Lexington, Massachusetts. In court, she produced a sworn affidavit taken fifteen years earlier, in 1753.³⁵⁶ In it, Jacob and Elizabeth Green swore that Margaret was "Born of the Body of a Spanish Indian Woman" named Kate in Charlestown around 1718 or 1719, and was given to Elizabeth at the age of three weeks "as a gift."³⁵⁷ The Greens kept her for five months and

³⁵⁴ While sexual violence against enslaved women and girls was ubiquitous and has been widely discussed in the historical literature, sexual violence against men and boys is less often acknowledged. Thomas Thistlewood wrote about at least two instances of sexual abuse by white enslavers in Jamaica against men and boys. The intimate contact of housework that made enslaved women particularly vulnerable to sexual violence at the hands of their enslavers also applied to the men and boys who worked in close quarters with their enslavers. William Vassall's phrase that he needed an adolescent boy to "tend on me" carries implications for intimate violence. Thomas A. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men* (2019); Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 216.

³⁵⁵ With thanks to Edward L. Bell and Leslie Masson for their work on Margaret v. Muzzy (1768), James v. Lechmere (1769), and the genealogy of the Tulip family. Edward L. Bell, Margaret v. Muzzy and James v. Lechmere in "Research Summaries of Massachusetts Freedom Suits, 1660–1784." Unpublished draft manuscript last revised December 9, 2022, provided courtesy of the author to Aabid Allibhai and Caitlin DeAngelis, March 25, 2025; Genealogical research by Leslie Masson via <https://www.lexseeher.com>

³⁵⁶ The sworn testimony of Elizabeth and Jacob Green of Stafford, Connecticut, is dated October 29, 1753. Margaret v. Muzzy (1768), Suffolk Files Collection, File #147651, #147830, Supreme Judicial Court Archives, MSA, Film # 008296787 via FamilySearch.

³⁵⁷ There are multiple rounds of testimony from Jacob Green between 1753 and 1768 in the documents filed under Margaret v. Muzzy. In 1753, Green and his wife, Elizabeth, testified that they sold baby Margaret as an indentured servant. Jacob Green gave similar testimony on 17 March 1768, but by 20 October 1768, he changed his story. In a deposition taken "at the request of William Muzzy," Green swore that Margaret was "a slave for life." Elizabeth Green died in 1755.

then “sold said child untill itt was Twenty and two years of Age if itt lived so long and then it was to go free.”³⁵⁸ Margaret was later sold to the Muzzy family as a “slave for life.”³⁵⁹ A lower court initially returned Margaret to Muzzy, but she appealed and won. In October 1768, the Massachusetts Superior Court overturned the decision, declaring that Margaret Tulip was born free.

Margaret’s lawsuit was closely tied to the second lawsuit, brought by her son, James Tulip. This was the same James who was enslaved by Richard Lechmere and who may have been Cuba Vassall’s partner and James Vassall’s father.³⁶⁰ Indeed, Margaret Tulip’s 1768 suit may have been filed specifically to support freedom claims made by her sons, James Tulip and Peter Tulip.³⁶¹

In 1769, James Tulip was enslaved by Richard Lechmere and Mary Phips Lechmere, who lived in the mansion next door to John and Elizabeth Vassall. When the court ruled that his mother was born a free woman, James Tulip argued that his own enslavement was illegal. Enslavement was a status that passed from mother to child, but so was freedom.

On May 2, 1769—two weeks before Darby Vassall was born—James Tulip sued Richard Lechmere for “Trespass.” In the boilerplate language of the law, James claimed that Lechmere, “with Force & Arms assaulted the said James & him took & imprisoned & restrained him of his Liberty to hold him in Servitude . . . against the law of the land and the will of him the said

³⁵⁸ Margaret’s mother, Kate, “an Indian woman,” was “warned out” of Charlestown by the selectmen on 12 February 1728. She was formerly the servant of James Bowdoin of Boston. The Greens sold Margaret as an indentured servant to their brother, Samuel Green, of Woburn, Massachusetts. Further testimony from Jacob Green dated 1768 says that Margaret was named Cate when she was an infant. *Margaret v. Muzzy* (1768), Middlesex County Court, Film # 008296787 via FamilySearch; Edward L. Bell, “Research Summaries.”

³⁵⁹ In 1734, Samuel Green sold “Pegg,” age 15, to his daughter Esther Green (1716–1801) and her husband, Amos Muzzy (1700–1752). After Amos Muzzy’s death in 1752, Margaret was enslaved by their son, William Muzzy. (*Margaret v. Muzzy*, 1768)

³⁶⁰ James Tulip was born on 5 March 1735 in Lexington, MA, to Margaret and Robin Tulip. Robin Tulip was enslaved by John Bridge of Lexington, who later helped Margaret gather testimony for her case. Margaret (Peggy) died in Lexington on 7 January 1794; Robin Tulip died in Lexington on 19 April 1784. Margaret and Robin Tulip had three other children as well: Robin (b.1745, m. Peggy, children Peter and Peggy), Peter (b.1754, m. Martha, children Olive and Patty), and Becky (b.1759). Hiller B. Zobel, “Jonathan Sewall: A Lawyer in Conflict,” in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society*, vol 40, 1966; Edward L. Bell, “Research Summaries”; Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington, Middlesex County, Massachusetts: Genealogies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 490, 489; [original pub. by Lexington Historical Society/printed in Boston, 1868] *Lexington, Massachusetts, Record of Births, Marriages, and Deaths to January 1, 1898* (Boston, 1898), 212.

³⁶¹ Hiller B. Zobel, “Jonathan Sewall: A Lawyer in Conflict”; Edward L. Bell, *Margaret v. Muzzy and James v. Lechmere* in “Research Summaries of Massachusetts Freedom Suits, 1660–1784.”

James.”³⁶² In a strategic move, James did not sue Lechmere for his freedom; he sued for £100 in damages.³⁶³ This was more than the combined appraised value (£92) of all five people enslaved by Henry Vassall.³⁶⁴ Rather than allowing the case to play out in court and risk being ordered to pay James such a large sum, Richard Lechmere settled. James settled for £2 and his priceless freedom.³⁶⁵

James Tulip was kin to the Black Vassalls. By 1769, he may not have been Cuba Vassall’s partner any longer, but the Vassalls still treated the Tulips as family. They almost certainly knew the ins and outs of his lawsuit in much more detail than the surviving documents. This was not the first time enslaved people had appealed to the courts, but James Tulip’s close proximity to Anthony and Cuba Vassall showed them exactly how enslaved people could use the Massachusetts courts in creative ways to achieve their ends. They took this lesson to heart. Over the next two decades, they would use strategic legal action to secure liberty and financial support for their family.

James Tulip filed his lawsuit against Richard Lechmere in the spring of 1769, at the very time Penelope Vassall was weighing the fates of the people she enslaved. It is possible that the suit influenced her decisions. Cuba’s mother Abba was definitely enslaved, but it is possible that Anthony Vassall mentioned his supposedly Spanish origins in a way that implied he might explore the same legal strategy as James Tulip.³⁶⁶

³⁶² James v. Richard Lechmere (1769), Suffolk County Court files (Massachusetts), v. 1011 cases 147703–147752 1769, via FamilySearch; Edward L. Bell, “Research Summaries”; Jared Ross Hardesty, “Disappearing from Abolitionism’s Heartland: The Legacy of Slavery and Emancipation in Boston,” *International Review of Social History* 65, no. S28 (2020); Francis Dana Personal Papers, in the Dana Family Papers, LONG 27037, Professional Legal Records, <https://www.nps.gov/long/learn/historyculture/slavery-related-objects-at-longfellow-nhs.htm>. [Note: This site says that Francis Dana was James’s lawyer, but Dana actually represented Lechmere. James’s lawyer was Jonathan Sewall.]

³⁶³ Jared Ross Hardesty, “Disappearing from Abolitionism’s Heartland.”

³⁶⁴ In Spencer Phips’s inventory, James/Jeme was appraised at £250, but this was in “Old Tenor,” a form of currency that was worth approximately ten times less than the “New Tenor” money used in 1769.

³⁶⁵ James Tulip probably stayed in Cambridge for at least some time after he became free. A letter he wrote on 3 December 1771 (concerning the money William Muzzy owed his mother, Margaret Tulip) says it was written in Cambridge. The letter is signed “James Tulap” and written in the same fluent hand, indicating that James Tulip could both read and write. William Muzzy Probate #15769, 1770, Middlesex County Probate, 1648–1871, reel beginning #15706 via Family Search.

³⁶⁶ James v. Richard Lechmere was not finally settled until October or November 1769, but the case was ongoing in the spring of 1769, and participants were aware of the potential outcomes.

In the end, Penelope Vassall did sell Cuba Vassall and her son James Vassall, but only across the street to her nephew, John Vassall. Previous historians have interpreted this transaction—for which no deed survives—as Penelope settling one of Henry’s many unpaid debts to his nephew. This is probably true. But it is also true that Penelope Vassall had many debts, and could have sold Cuba and James to other creditors, including William Vassall in Boston or her own son-in-law, Charles Russell. Instead, Penelope Vassall made a deal that kept Cuba, James, and Anthony in close physical proximity. Her primary motivations may have been financial, but there is no reason to suppose that the white Vassalls were only negotiating with one another. Cuba and Anthony Vassall had few legal rights, but that does not mean they had no influence.

That influence did have hard limits. A few weeks after James filed his lawsuit, on May 15, 1769, Cuba Vassall gave birth to her son Darby.³⁶⁷ Her new enslavers, John and Elizabeth Vassall, had no use for a Black baby who needed his mother’s time and attention. The white Vassalls may have even demanded the exclusive use of Cuba’s breast milk for their own newborn son, Robert Oliver Vassall, who was born on May 28, 1769, less than two weeks after Darby. Soon after, the white Vassalls gave baby Darby away to George Reed of South Woburn, about six miles north of the Vassall mansion.³⁶⁸

Given the fragile health of infants who were separated from their mothers and the difficulty of maintaining contact with a young child, this could have been a final parting. But Cuba and Anthony Vassall were determined to reunite their family.

In December 1772, three years after Henry Vassall’s death, Anthony Vassall drove to Billerica, where five-year-old Flora lived among strangers. He paid John Nichols £20 and took his daughter home with him. The legal deed confirming Flora’s manumission highlights the legal absurdities of slavery. In it, Flora is called “a certain Negro child named Flora” who was “formerly the Offspring of a woman belonging to John Vassall Esqr. + Tony.” The financial details spelled out in the manumission deed may also be a fiction. Officially, the money that Anthony paid to John Nichols came from Penelope Vassall, “conveyed by the hand of Tony her

³⁶⁷ Gloria Whiting, *Belonging*, Chapter 6; Suffolk Deeds, 9 September 1835, vol. 387, 122.

³⁶⁸ South Woburn is now Winchester, Massachusetts. Batchelder, 74; J.L. Bell, section 2.2; Whiting, *Belonging*, Chapter 6.

servant.”³⁶⁹ Even Samuel Batchelder found this implausible.³⁷⁰ Penelope Vassall’s finances had not improved at all in the three years since her husband’s death. In 1772, she could not even pay interest on the mortgage held by William Vassall, making it extremely unlikely that she had £20 to spend on freeing Flora. A much more likely scenario is that Anthony and Cuba saved the money, penny by penny, to buy their daughter’s freedom. They may have needed Penelope’s imprimatur to convince John Nichols to sell Flora, but Penelope Vassall’s dire finances make it unlikely that she gave them the money.

Anthony and Cuba Vassall were not able to ransom Darby at the same time as his sister, but they did not give up. They stayed in touch with the little boy as he grew, so that he always knew who his parents were and that they wanted him back. When the opportunity came to rescue Darby, Cuba and Anthony were ready.

³⁶⁹ Manumission of Flora Vassall, MA Suffolk Deeds, V73 P457.

³⁷⁰ Samuel Batchelder agreed that it was implausible for Penelope Vassall to have paid for Flora’s manumission. Although he evidently did not have her deed of manumission before him, he surmised that there was “confusion” about Penelope’s role in Flora’s freedom. “We may . . . assume that under the circumstances the payment was made not by, but to [Penelope], and that her object was not so much altruistic as to raise much needed funds.” Batchelder, *Notes on Henry Vassall*, 68.

CHAPTER THREE

1774

“[John Vassall] having zealously supported the Cause of Government in America . . . drew upon himself the Resentment of the People which obliged him in the year 1774 to quit his Estate in Cambridge and take Refuge in Boston.”

— John Vassall Loyalist Claim, 1783³⁷¹

“Some time in ye month of June or July in ye aforesaid year [1774], the said Vassall having a Negro Male Child, born in his House who he enclin’d to be nursed in ye country & Accordingly applied himself to Mr. John Symonds of Lexington, as I afterwards heard, to take the said Negro child to nurse.”

— testimony of Joseph Smith, 1784³⁷²

Americans often date the beginning of the Revolution from the battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775, or the Declaration of Independence in 1776. But for Cuba and Anthony Vassall—and dozens of other enslaved people in Cambridge—the opportunity to pursue liberty for themselves and their families began in 1774.³⁷³

In the summer of 1774, John Vassall and Elizabeth Oliver Vassall enslaved at least seven people at their mansion in Cambridge. There were four adults—Cuba Vassall, Dinah, William, and Malcolm—along with Cuba’s teenage son James and “Two Small Boys.”³⁷⁴ One of these

³⁷¹ 27 September 1783 (Loyalist Claim File AO 13/90, TNA)

³⁷² 24 January 1784 (MSA, Resolves 1784, c.51, passed 5 November 1784)

³⁷³ This chapter is deeply indebted to J.L. Bell’s 2012 Historic Resource Study for Longfellow House—Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site, “George Washington’s Headquarters and Home.” It also builds on research conducted by the staff of the Longfellow House—Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site, including Kate Hanson Plass and Emily Levine.

³⁷⁴ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

boys was probably Cuba and Anthony Vassall's three-year-old son, Cyrus.³⁷⁵ Anthony was still enslaved by Penelope Royall Vassall, across the street. He may have lived with her in the cavernous old house or its nearly empty stables, but the proximity of the Vassall estates meant that he probably saw his wife and children regularly, and may have slept under the same roof.³⁷⁶

Seven-year-old Flora Vassall almost certainly lived with her mother and brothers on John Vassall's estate, but she was not enslaved. After her manumission in 1772, Flora was the first person in the Black Vassall family to be legally free. As such, she is absent from the white Vassalls' legal and financial records. Flora's younger sister, Nancy, was probably not yet born.³⁷⁷

The final person enslaved at the Vassall mansion in 1774 remains difficult to identify. John Vassall's Loyalist Claim mentions "Two Small Boys," but does not name them. One was almost certainly three-year-old Cyrus Vassall, and some observers have wondered whether the

³⁷⁵ When Cyrus Vassall died in 1812, the *Columbian Centinel* published a death notice saying that he was 41 years old. This means he was probably born in 1770 or early 1771. *Columbian Centinel*, 29 April 1812, indexed in *U.S., Newspaper Extractions from the Northeast, 1704–1930*, Ancestry.com.

³⁷⁶ In 1769, the only horses in Henry Vassall's inventory were a "pair of Horses Old" valued at a paltry £12. Batchelder, 79–84.

³⁷⁷ There has been considerable confusion over the identity of the youngest child of Anthony and Cuba Vassall. Most published sources identify her as Catherine Vassall, who married Adam Lewis in 1815. This is unlikely. The 1830 and 1840 Federal Censuses show that the two adults in Adam Lewis's household were a man and woman born after 1785, likely in the early 1790s (the 1820 Federal Census shows their birth years as c.1775-1794). Catherine and Adam Lewis later moved to Canada. The 1861 census of Ontario gives implausible ages for both: Adam (age 63, born c.1798), Catherine (age 55, born c.1806). These birth years are not plausible, since they married in 1815. While the Canadian census underestimates their ages, it is much more likely that Catherine was in her 60s (born in the 1790s), than her 80s (born in the 1770s). This means that the three-month-old infant recorded in the 1778 inventory was probably not Catherine. While the infant's name is not recorded, there are two likely scenarios. One is that the infant died before adulthood and is not recorded by name in any surviving source. Another is that the infant was Nancy Vassall. J.L. Bell lists Nancy Vassall as a possible child of Anthony and Cuba Vassall. While this cannot be confirmed with certainty, there is a good circumstantial case. Nancy Vassall was baptized at the Brattle Street Church in Boston in 1801 (the same church where Darby Vassall was a longtime member and married in 1802), but died of consumption in Cambridge on June 15, 1802, age 27. This connection to Cambridge suggests that Nancy may have been a child of Anthony and Cuba Vassall who came home in her illness. Other family members (James Vassall, Darby Vassall, Lucy Holland Vassall, Lucy Jenkins Vassall) were also buried in Cambridge, suggesting that the family still considered Cambridge home even when they lived in Boston. Nancy Vassall's recorded age at death (27) suggests a birthdate around 1775, rather than 1777, but her age is in the right range to be the infant in the 1778 inventory. It is possible that the inventory taker mistakenly wrote "three months" instead of "three years," or Nancy's age may have been misrecorded on her death. On the balance of evidence, this report refers to the youngest Vassall child as Nancy, rather than Catherine, with the caveat that this is a provisional identification and may be altered by future research or the discovery of other primary sources.

other was his five-year-old brother, Darby. This is possible, but not very likely, because Darby was enslaved by George Reed in 1774, not by John Vassall.

One possibility is that the second “small boy” was a person who has not previously been identified in histories of the Black Vassalls: a baby boy who was born in the summer of 1774.³⁷⁸ This baby’s existence is confirmed by documents in the Massachusetts State Archives, but they do not include his name or his mother’s name.³⁷⁹ He may have been born to Cuba Vassall or to Dinah, the other enslaved woman in the house.³⁸⁰ Little is known of Dinah, but the birthdates of Cuba and Anthony Vassall’s children show that it is possible that the baby born in 1774 was their son. Cuba gave birth to Flora in 1767, Darby in May 1769, Cyrus in 1771, and Nancy in late 1777 or early 1778.³⁸¹ The baby born in the summer of 1774 was born in the middle of the gap between Cyrus and Nancy.

³⁷⁸ The baby born in 1774 is mentioned in two—possibly three—primary sources. The first is the Lexington Vital Records, which note the death of a “negro child out of the family of John Simonds” on 22 July 1775. The second is a 1784 petition by John Simonds of Lexington claiming £13 8s 10d from the estate of John Vassall for eleven months’ care for “Vassell’s negro child” between August 1774 and July 1775 (the claim was paid; see John Vassall Probate #23340, Middlesex County, 1778). The third possible mention is in John Vassall’s 1783 Loyalist Claim. Previous studies have interpreted the “Two small boys” claimed by John Vassall as a reference to Cyrus and Darby, but this interpretation does not entirely hold water. Cyrus Vassall may have been enslaved by John Vassall in 1774–5, but Darby Vassall was enslaved by George Reed, meaning that there would be no reason for John Vassall to claim compensation for him. By contrast, John Simond’s 1784 petition for compensation presupposes that the enslaved infant in his care was still the property of John Vassall. This may have been an opportunistic cash-grab by Simonds, but it is also possible that the agreement between John Vassall and John Simonds was that the child should be fostered by Simonds, not owned. The “two small boys” could very well be Cyrus and the unnamed baby boy, rather than Cyrus and Darby. Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington, Middlesex County, Massachusetts: Genealogies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 489; John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA; Petition of John Simonds, Passed Resolves, Resolves 1784, c.51, SC1/series 228, Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, MSA, Boston MA, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/892BX2>, Harvard Dataverse V4, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/892BX2>.

³⁷⁹ According to Joseph Smith of Charlestown, “some time in ye months of June or July” 1774, John Vassall was looking for someone to nurse “a Negro male child born in his house.” Testimony of Joseph Smith, 24 January 1784, MSA, Resolves 1784, c.51, passed 5 November 1784.

³⁸⁰ Little verifiable information survives about Dinah. She was an adult in 1774, and it is entirely possible that the baby born in the summer of 1774 was her son. It is also possible that she was the mother of the enslaved baby who was born and died at the Vassall house in October 1761. John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA; John Winthrop (1714–1779), Annotated almanac, 1761, Papers of John and Hannah Winthrop, 1728–1789, HUM 9 Box 6, Volume 6, HUA, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.arch:10354694?n=8>.

³⁸¹ The inventory taken on 21 March 1778 includes a three-month-old child, who must have been born at the end of 1777 or very beginning of 1778. This baby is probably Nancy, though it is possible that this is another baby who did not survive. Middlesex Probate #23340.

Whether the baby boy's mother was Cuba Vassall or Dinah, he was born in June or July 1774 and separated from his family around August 1774, when he was just six weeks old.³⁸² John and Elizabeth Vassall decided that the newborn would be "nursed in ye country," and gave him to John Simonds of Lexington.³⁸³ Later, Simonds would claim that he had taken the infant to foster on a temporary basis only, not as his own property.³⁸⁴ Two witnesses confirmed this. Joseph Smith, a farmer who managed John Vassall's land in Cambridge, visited Simonds in 1774, "to carry some articles from sd Vassall to the said Simonds" and saw the baby at Simonds's house. Smith later testified that he, "always understood that the said child . . . was there at the proper charge & expense of ye owner of it, the said Col. Vassall."³⁸⁵ Another witness, Parsons Smith of Cambridge, agreed, adding that John Vassall agreed to pay "a Weekly Consideration" to care for the baby.³⁸⁶

It is possible that John Vassall really did promise to pay John Simonds for raising the baby boy, rather than giving him away. It is also possible that Simonds was misrepresenting their arrangement in order to extract compensation from Vassall's estate. Simonds filed his petition for compensation for the child's care in 1784, years after John Vassall had departed for England, where he could not easily contest the claim. Simonds asked the Massachusetts General Court for £13 8s 10d to compensate him for the baby's room, board, and £1 7s 8d in medical bills.³⁸⁷

If the new baby was Anthony and Cuba Vassall's son, they may have hoped to liberate him one day, just as they had freed Flora. They were certainly hoping to liberate five-year-old

³⁸² Testimony of Parsons Smith, 23 January 1784, MSA, Resolves 1784, c.51, passed 5 November 1784.

³⁸³ John Simonds (1730–1812) married Mary Tufts (1733–1799). They lived in North Lexington, at the intersection of Burlington and Grove Streets. Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington, Middlesex County, Massachusetts: Genealogies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 623.

³⁸⁴ John Simond's petition depends on the understanding that he was fostering the unnamed baby boy on behalf of John Vassall, not owning him outright on a permanent basis. This may have been an opportunistic understanding of the arrangement by Simonds, but if John Vassall did count the baby as one of the "Two small boys" in his Loyalist Claim, he would seem to agree with Simonds. Petition of John Simonds, Resolves 1784.

³⁸⁵ A 1778 receipt in the petition file lists several items that were transferred from John Vassall to John Simonds, which are likely the articles carried by Smith. They are two brass kettles, a feather bed, two copper pots, a half-bushel measure, two small cream-colored dishes, and two similar plates. Petition of Receipt dated 13 July 1778, Thomas Farrington; Testimony of Joseph Smith, 24 January 1784; both in MSA, Resolves 1784, c.51, passed 5 November 1784.

³⁸⁶ Testimony of Parsons Smith, 23 January 1784, MSA, Resolves 1784, c.51, passed 5 November 1784.

³⁸⁷ Petition of John Simonds, Resolves 1784.

Darby, who was still enslaved by George Reed in South Woburn. Cuba and Anthony kept track of Darby's whereabouts and probably visited him or sent him oral messages so that the little boy would know his own family.³⁸⁸ Flora's manumission in 1772 shows that Cuba and Anthony Vassall maintained ties to their children even over long distances, and were already pursuing their freedom long before the revolutionary fervor boiled over in the summer of 1774. If the Massachusetts colonists had not rebelled, Cuba and Anthony probably would have spent the next several years continuing to implement their plans to secure the blessings of liberty for their family.

Instead, they faced a crisis. The tumult that upended the white Vassalls' lives in September 1774 threatened to separate the Black residents of Brattle Street in ways they could never overcome. But it also offered an unprecedented opportunity to control their own future. For Cuba, Anthony, and other enslaved people in Massachusetts, the Revolution offered a chance to claim their own independence.

The Crisis of 1774

The political trouble that upended life on Brattle Street in 1774 had been brewing for years. Conflict between colonists in Massachusetts and British officials had been escalating since the 1760s, when Parliament imposed taxes through the Stamp Act and Townshend Acts. Colonists who opposed these measures organized boycotts and protests that sometimes turned violent. In 1765, an angry mob ransacked the home of Governor Thomas Hutchinson, forcing him to flee.

British officials worried that they were losing control of Massachusetts. In 1768, they sent red-coated troops—the "Regulars"—to police Boston. Instead, the next several years saw many clashes and protests, including the Boston Massacre (1770) and the Boston Tea Party (1773). By 1774, the political situation in Massachusetts was tense and fragile.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁸ In *Belonging*, Gloria Whiting argues that Cuba and Anthony Vassall must have kept in communication with Darby because he knew how to find his own way home to Cambridge. This report argues that Darby may not have walked home on his own; it is more likely that Anthony Vassall went to retrieve him (see chapter 4). Still, it is likely that Cuba and Anthony did keep in contact with Darby in some way, given that they knew where to find him, and traveled frequently throughout the region.

³⁸⁹ The political history of Massachusetts in the period between the end of the Seven Years' War and 1774 is the subject of a robust historiography dating back to Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress, and*

Before 1774, the white Vassalls generally stayed out of politics. John Vassall held a few minor local offices in Cambridge, and several members of the family were vestrymen in their Anglican churches, but few members of the extended white Vassall family held major offices in the Massachusetts colonial government.³⁹⁰ This was somewhat unusual. In the eighteenth century, wealthy men were expected to preside over public affairs, but the white Vassalls preferred to spend their time socializing and inventing new schemes to maximize the profits from their Caribbean plantations.

The white Vassalls did mix with British army officers and government officials socially. They belonged to the Church of England, attending services in Cambridge's Christ Church and Boston's King's Chapel. In 1773, John and Elizabeth Vassall purchased a comfortable box pew at King's Chapel.³⁹¹ On numerous occasions, John and Elizabeth dined with high-ranking officials like General Thomas Gage and Governor Thomas Hutchinson.³⁹²

Still, the white Vassalls also had many friends and business associates among the leading Boston patriots. John Vassall did business with patriot merchant John Hancock until at least 1771, and shipped his Newfound River sugar on ships owned by Edmund Quincy, who was John Hancock's future brother-in-law. The white Vassalls were also frequent clients of Boston's patriot lawyers. John Adams once referred to William Vassall as, "one of my old friends and clients . . . a man of letters and virtues without one vice that I ever knew or suspected, except

Termination of the American Revolution (1805). Key works in this historiography include Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967); Merrill Jensen, *The Founding of a Nation* (1968); Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible* (1979); Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991); T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution* (2004); and Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions* (2016). Other important works that focus on the history of Massachusetts in the years before 1774 include Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and their World* (1976); Fred Anderson, *A People's Army* (1984); Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependency in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (2018); and Serena Zabin, *The Boston Massacre: A Family History* (2020).

³⁹⁰ John Vassall served as a local magistrate and militia officer in Cambridge, a role that J.L. Bell calls "largely ceremonial" and that "involved overseeing periodic drills and parading on public occasions." Various members of the Vassall family also served as vestrymen at Christ Church Cambridge and King's Chapel. William Vassall turned down several local offices in Boston, sometimes incurring a fine for doing so. His biographer for Sibley's Harvard Graduates notes that William Vassall "sometimes complained that he was never entrusted with public office, but the trouble was his unwillingness to begin at the bottom as one was expected to do in any New England town." J.L. Bell, section 1.2; Sibley's Harvard Graduates, 352.

³⁹¹ J.L. Bell, section 1.2.

³⁹² J.L. Bell, section 1.3.

garrulity.”³⁹³ A later historian speculated that William Vassall was a favorite among Adams and his fellow lawyers because they, “fed their children with the fat fees for his absurd suits at law.”³⁹⁴

All of these relationships changed in 1774. That spring, the British Parliament punished Boston for the “destruction of the tea” in December 1773 by closing the port.³⁹⁵ This stopped nearly all trade and threatened the city with financial ruin. Parliament also made major changes to the government of Massachusetts, giving British officials more direct control. Two of these changes were particularly relevant to the Vassall family. First, Parliament appointed Elizabeth Oliver Vassall’s brother, Thomas Oliver, as the new Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts. Oliver had never held a high office before, and his appointment may have been due to officials in far-off London mistakenly believing that he was related to the previous Lieutenant Governor, Andrew Oliver. This was not true, but Thomas Oliver accepted the position anyway.³⁹⁶ Second, Parliament abolished elections for the governor’s council, a small group of advisors who helped rule the colony. The elected councilors were replaced by thirty-six men called “mandamus councilors,” who were directly appointed by King George III. They were chosen for their wealth, influence, and loyalty to the Crown. Several members of the extended white Vassall family were named as mandamus councilors, including William Vassall, Thomas Oliver, and Isaac Royall Jr.³⁹⁷

These changes were extremely unpopular in Massachusetts. “It would be very pleasing to the ministry to deprive the Americans totally of the right of representation,” Dr. Joseph Warren wrote to John Adams in August 1774, “and I am certain, that, unless it is put upon a

³⁹³ “John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 3 May 1816,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-10-02-0003>. [Original source: J. Jefferson Looney, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series*, vol. 10, May 1816 to 18 January 1817 (Princeton University Press, 2013), 5–8.]

³⁹⁴ Sibley’s, “William Vassall,” 356.

³⁹⁵ The destruction of the tea would later be known as the Boston Tea Party, but it was not called that in the 1770s. Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Beacon Press, 1999).

³⁹⁶ J.L. Bell, section 1.3.

³⁹⁷ Other mandamus counselors in the extended family included Thomas Palmer, who was married to Mary Macintosh, the sister of Isaac Royall’s wife Elizabeth, and Joseph Lee, who was married to Rebecca Phips.

better footing, the people themselves will, in a few years, readily consent to throw off the useless burden.”³⁹⁸

Neither William Vassall nor Isaac Royall wanted to court trouble with “the people,” so they declined their appointments to the council. Thomas Oliver accepted. He was sworn in as a mandamus councilor on August 8, 1774. When William Vassall declined his appointment, John Vassall agreed to step in as a mandamus councilor in his place.³⁹⁹ But before John could be sworn in, an angry crowd descended on Brattle Street.

On September 2, 1774—shortly after John Vassall gave away Cuba or Dinah’s six-week-old son—four thousand militiamen from across eastern Massachusetts converged on Cambridge. They had heard that British Regulars had marched out of Boston to seize colonial weapons and gunpowder. By the time the militiamen reached Cambridge Common, the Regulars were safely back in Boston with the captured arsenal. Deprived of their target, the militiamen were still riled and eager to show their displeasure. They agreed to go home, but only if the mandamus councilors who lived nearby would resign. Several councilors—including John Vassall’s maternal uncles, Judge Joseph Lee and Sheriff David Phips—agreed on the spot. But before the militia dispersed, their anger was reignited by a hostile shouting match with one of the King’s tax collectors. While a handful of men chased the customs official back to Boston, the rest decided to march down Brattle Street to the home of Lt. Governor Thomas Oliver to demand that he resign his office.⁴⁰⁰

For the enslaved people living on Brattle Street, the militia’s march was a moment of danger, as well as the beginning of an opportunity. White patriots were not fighting to free their Black neighbors. In fact, colonists frequently used people of color as scapegoats and symbols for their own violence, as they had during the 1773 Boston Tea Party, when the rebels had disguised themselves as Indigenous men.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁸ Joseph Warren to John Adams, 15 August 1774, Samuel Adams Papers 1635–1826, Wells and Bancroft Collection, New York Public Library. Transcription appears in Richard Frothingham, *Life and Times of Joseph Warren* (Boston, 1865), 339–340, <https://www.drjosephwarren.com/>.

³⁹⁹ J.L. Bell, section 1.5.

⁴⁰⁰ J.L. Bell, section 1.4.

⁴⁰¹ Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (Yale University Press, 2010), 143–44.

Something similar happened in Cambridge. The night before the militia's march, a smaller crowd had gathered at the home of Jonathan Sewall, next door to 105 Brattle Street. Someone in the house fired a warning shot. The crowd retaliated by breaking windows. No one was hurt, but the threat of violence was real. In the aftermath of this attack, white colonists downplayed their involvement by dismissing the crowd as a rabble of "mostly boys and negroes."⁴⁰² Blaming Black people for breaking Judge Sewall's windows was particularly dangerous for the Black people who lived next door, for whom an accusation of rebellion was deadly serious.

When the much larger crowd of militiamen arrived on Cambridge Common the day after the incident at the Sewall house, Cuba, Anthony, and the other Black residents must have been alert to the potential for violence. The militia streamed directly between John Vassall's house and Penelope Vassall's on their way to the Oliver house. After witnessing the attack on Judge Sewall's house, Cuba and Anthony knew that the crowd posed a physical threat, not just to the white Oliver family, but also to the eleven enslaved people who lived on the property. What would happen to Cato, the gardener; Jerry, the coachman; Jeffrey, the cook; Buff, the blacksmith; and Samuel, the footman? Would Thomas Oliver expect them to defend the house if the militia attacked? Would they be blamed if something went wrong? What about the enslaved women: Mira, Jude, and Sarah? Would they be expected to protect the five young Oliver children even if their own lives were in danger? And who would protect the enslaved children: Jenny, Violet, and baby Jerry?⁴⁰³

In Thomas Oliver's account of the confrontation, he did not mention the enslaved majority of his household. Instead, Oliver portrays himself as a lone figure, nobly resisting the militia's demands with a declaration that "they might put me to death, but I would never submit." Angry at his refusal to resign, the militia "began to press up to my windows, calling for vengeance against the Foes of their Liberty . . . [and] swearing they would have my blood."⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰² *Boston Gazette*, 5 September 1774; J.L. Bell, section 1.4.

⁴⁰³ Several of the eleven people enslaved by Thomas Oliver were previously enslaved by Thomas Oliver's father, Robert Oliver, in Dorchester. His probate inventory, dated 15 February 1763, includes seven enslaved people: Cato, Buff, Jack (child), Lucey, Miber, Mirah, and Jude (child). Robert Oliver Probate Inventory, 1763, Suffolk County, vol. 64, 369; Thomas Oliver Loyalist Claim, AO 13/48, TNA.

⁴⁰⁴ Thomas Oliver to Secretary Dartmouth, 3 September 1774, transcribed in *Transactions of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 32 (1933–7), <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/496>.

At that point, Oliver claimed that he was still unwilling to give himself up. But, he told British officials, he was moved by “the distresses of my Wife and Children, which I heard in the next room.” Bowing to his frightened family’s wishes, Oliver gave in to the crowd’s demands. He signed a letter of resignation, then wrote across the bottom, “My house being surrounded with four thousand People, in compliance with their commands I sign my name.”⁴⁰⁵

The crowd dispersed. No one was killed.

Even though the militia did not injure anyone on Brattle Street, the experience frightened the white Vassalls and their extended family. Over the following weeks, several members of the family were confronted by colonists in ways that made them feel unsafe. William Vassall and his wife Margaret were traveling in a carriage between Boston and their summer home in Rhode Island when they were “pelted by the Mob in Bristol, to the endangering of their lives.”⁴⁰⁶

Shortly afterward, William Vassall’s son Harry claimed that someone shot at his carriage when he was returning from a visit to his cousin Elizabeth Vassall Russell. Officials investigated, but they doubted Harry’s story. One of the witnesses was a Black man named Luck, who was enslaved by Elizabeth Vassall Russell and her husband. Luck had been in the area around the time that Harry claimed to have been attacked. When officials asked Luck to testify, he undermined Harry’s complaint with a single sentence: “I heard no gun.”⁴⁰⁷

The white Vassalls felt besieged. Their neighbors despised them, and they were increasingly aware that the people they enslaved might have their own loyalties as well. Luck certainly did not feel obliged to give testimony that would benefit Harry Vassall.

While it is certainly true that the white Vassalls were primarily worried about the increasingly rebellious colonists, they were also minutely attuned to the dangers of slave revolts. The 1736 plot in Antigua, Robin’s participation in the killing of John Codman in 1755, and Tacky’s Revolt in Jamaica in 1760 all proved to the Vassalls that the people they enslaved were capable of striking back if they had the opportunity. A crowd of militiamen outside a house was a threat, but a colony that was willing to excuse violence against Loyalists might fan

⁴⁰⁵ Oliver to Dartmouth, 3 September 1774.

⁴⁰⁶ Peter Oliver, *Origin and Progress of the American Revolution*, quoted in Sibley’s *Harvard Graduates for 1733*, 356.

⁴⁰⁷ Elise Lemire, *Black Walden*, 95.

the embers of revolution within the house as well. No one in the Vassall family—white or Black—had forgotten Robin.

Wary of these dangers, the white Vassalls did what they always did when they sensed a threat on the political winds: they left town. John and Elizabeth Vassall moved into Boston sometime after October 1, 1774.⁴⁰⁸ In the city, they had the protection of the King’s appointed government and thousands of armed British Regulars. Most of the extended white Vassall family straggled into Boston over the next few months.

At first, the white Vassalls may not have thought of the move as a permanent retreat from Cambridge. John and Elizabeth Vassall owned a townhouse—purchased for £2,400 in 1772—on Tremont Street in Boston, steps from both William Vassall’s “mansion house” and King’s Chapel. They probably intended to use the Boston house as a winter residence. In 1774, the townhouse was still in the midst of a £700 renovation, but it was already one of the grandest homes in the city, with elaborate furnishings and “extensive Gardens & Stables.”⁴⁰⁹ When the white Vassalls moved to Boston in the autumn of 1774, they may have told themselves that they were merely arriving early for the winter, and would return to Cambridge in the spring of 1775.

Wherever the white Vassalls lived, they relied on enslaved labor. In Cambridge or in Boston, the laundry still needed washing, the floors still needed scrubbing, the dinners still needed to be cooked and served. The “extensive Gardens” may have been dormant in winter, but there were horses in the stables and carriages that required a driver.⁴¹⁰ It is possible that the white Vassalls hired some free workers to staff their Boston house, but they may have brought some enslaved people with them from Cambridge.

Even in the midst of the unsettled winter of 1774–5, some of the white Vassalls were still making plans to transport additional enslaved people from Jamaica to Massachusetts. On January 9, 1775, William Vassall wrote to his agent at Green River to say that he wanted “a Negro Cook very much.” William preferred a male cook for his Boston home, but would accept

⁴⁰⁸ Statement of Robert Treat Paine, dated 1 October 1781, copy made by Ezekiel Price, 5 February 1782, John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁴⁰⁹ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁴¹⁰ When British Regulars marched to Lexington and Concord in the spring of 1775, John Vassall lent one of his most valuable horses to British general Lord Percy. J.L. Bell, section 1.5.

a woman as long as she was not “a breeding Wench, for Breeders are very troublesome in Families here.”⁴¹¹

William Vassall’s comment about enslaved women with children being “very troublesome” may have been a general observation. But it may also have been informed by his intimate knowledge of the mothers and young children who were enslaved by his nieces and nephews. William Vassall almost certainly knew that John and Elizabeth Vassall had given Cuba’s baby Darby away in 1769 and disposed of another of their enslaved workers’ newborns just weeks before the white Vassalls fled to Boston. Perhaps William Vassall meant that giving away enslaved babies was a tedious chore. But his comment that “Breeders are very troublesome in families here” raises the possibility that enslaved mothers were making their own displeasure felt among the white Vassalls. Did the new baby’s mother curse John Vassall when he gave him away? Did she resist the move into the city? Whatever “troublesome” behaviors he was observing, William Vassall hoped to avoid them by mail-ordering a male cook.

John and Elizabeth Vassall may have brought enslaved children with them to Boston, but Thomas and Elizabeth Oliver definitely did. They enslaved three young children: little girls named Violet and Jenny, and a baby named Jerry who was born around 1774. The Olivers brought at least two of these enslaved children to Boston with them. In November 1775, Loyalist physician Dr. James Lloyd charged Thomas Oliver £14 for “Inoculatg & attend 4 Childn, Maid, & 2 Negr Childn.”⁴¹² Since Dr. Lloyd was trapped in besieged Boston with the Olivers at the time, the two Black children he treated must have been with them in the city.

The mothers of these enslaved children spent much of their time caring for their enslavers’ children. Indeed, childcare was one of the white Vassall family’s most pressing labor needs in 1774. Thomas Oliver and Elizabeth Vassall Oliver had five young daughters, all of them

⁴¹¹ William Vassall to James Wedderburn, 9 Jan 1775, Letter Books, Sheffield Archives.

⁴¹² Dr. James Lloyd’s bill in Thomas Oliver Loyalist File, AO 13/48, TNA. It is likely, though not completely certain, that the maid mentioned in this bill was one of the adult women listed in Thomas Oliver’s Loyalist claim (Mira, Jude, Sarah), and the two Black children were two of the three enslaved children (Violet, Jenny, Jerry). Only four of the five Oliver children were inoculated. This may be because the eldest child (Anne) was born in 1764 and may have been inoculated as an infant during the 1764 epidemic, or it may be because another of the children was considered too young or ill to be inoculated.

under the age of eight.⁴¹³ John Vassall's other sisters had young families as well: Ruth Vassall Davis had six living children in 1774, and Lucy Vassall Lavicount had a five-year-old son, John. All of them were living in Boston in the winter of 1774–5, as was Penelope Vassall's daughter, Elizabeth Vassall Russell, who moved into the city with her husband and four daughters under age five.⁴¹⁴ John and Elizabeth Oliver Vassall had six living children of their own. The oldest, John, was 12, and the youngest, Leonard, was an infant.⁴¹⁵

All of these young children required feeding, diapering, washing, and dressing, along with endless laundry. This insatiable demand for childcare work was one of the reasons that white enslavers separated enslaved mothers from their babies. Enslaved women like Cuba Vassall had their own newborns torn from their arms so that they could breastfeed their enslavers' babies and wake in the night to soothe them.

It is not possible to trace the movements of every person enslaved by the white Vassall family during the critical winter of 1774–5. Some—including the two children enslaved by the Olivers—certainly accompanied their enslavers into Boston. Others may have stayed in Cambridge, at least temporarily, to look after the houses and grounds. Still others may have passed back and forth, at least before April 1775, when colonial troops surrounded Boston for an eleven-month siege that drew a hard separation between the city and the surrounding towns.

The white Vassalls may have hoped that they would return to Cambridge. But even before the end of 1774, the family was already discussing the possibility of leaving Massachusetts for good. On November 17, William Vassall wrote to his son-in-law, James Syme, in London, asking Syme to start searching for a property in the English countryside to rent. William wanted, “a pleasant genteel place, somewhere either in Hampshire, Dorsetshire or

⁴¹³ The white Oliver children were Anne (b.1764), Elizabeth (b.1766), Penelope (b.1768), Lucy (b.1772), and Frances (b.1773). Another daughter, Mary Oliver, was born in 1777. Elizabeth Vassall Oliver died in 1779. Thomas Oliver remarried and had a seventh daughter, Harriet, in 1786. Calder, 25.

⁴¹⁴ The youngest of Elizabeth Vassall Russell's children was Catherine Graves Russell (1772–1847), who later gave permission for Darby Vassall to be buried in the Vassall family tomb at Christ Church. Calder, 25.

⁴¹⁵ The white Vassall children were John (b.1762), Spencer Thomas (b.1764), Thomas Oliver (b.1766), Robert Oliver (b.1769), Elizabeth (b.1771), and Leonard (b.1773). An older Elizabeth was born in 1767, but died in infancy. Another child, Mary Vassall, was born in 1777. Ruth and Edward Davis's oldest child, 16-year-old Elizabeth Davis, eventually traveled with John Vassall's family to England. Calder, 23; J.B. Bell, 20, citing King's Chapel death record for Leonard Vassall (7 November 1775), *Records of the Churches of Boston*.

Devonshire whichever is the pleasantest,” with forty or fifty acres and “a good Garden & Fruit.” Boston, he explained, was “in great Confusion.” If the situation in Boston continued in its “unsettled state,” William Vassall planned to “remove with my family to England next Summer.”⁴¹⁶

John Vassall may not have made concrete plans as early as his uncle, but he almost certainly knew what William was thinking. William Vassall’s letters from the winter of 1774–5 mention daily conversations with John about their plantations in Jamaica, including tedious negotiations about their property line and John’s new scheme for using cattle, rather than mules, to turn the sugar mills. They evidently spoke regularly and in-depth about their situation.

In particular, John and William Vassall discussed how the war might threaten their sugar profits. In November 1774, the Continental Congress banned the export of critical “Northern Commodities” to the British West Indies. This was a tremendous policy change, as more than half of all exports from the mainland colonies were shipped to the sugar islands.⁴¹⁷ Plantations like Newfound River and Green River relied on imports of flour, fish, and the all-important barrel staves necessary for shipping sugar. If the Continental Congress was going to sever ties between the mainland colonies and the islands, there was no question that the white Vassalls would choose Jamaica, even if that meant abandoning their property in New England.⁴¹⁸ Their lives were in Massachusetts, but their livelihood was in Jamaica.

The white Vassalls’ plans threatened to tear apart enslaved families. If they left Boston, enslavers might take the Black Vassalls anywhere: to Antigua, to Nova Scotia, to Jamaica, to a genteel estate in Dorsetshire. Before 1774, Cuba and Anthony Vassall could move between their enslavers’ houses merely by crossing Brattle Street, but now they faced the very real prospect of an ocean between them. Early in the summer of 1775, Penelope Vassall departed Massachusetts for Antigua, where she waited out the war with her daughter, Elizabeth Vassall

⁴¹⁶ William Vassall to James Syme, 17 Nov 1774, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

⁴¹⁷ Marc Egnal, *New World Economies: The Growth of the Thirteen Colonies and Early Canada* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 60.

⁴¹⁸ William wrote on 12 December 1774: “It is uncertain whether there will be a Communication between the Continent and the English West Indies, unless the unhappy dispute between great Britain and its Colonies should be settled; and should they not be settled I am determined to leave the Continent & go with my Family to England next summer.” William Vassall to John Wedderburn, 12 Dec 1774, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

Russell, and family.⁴¹⁹ John Vassall and his family stayed in Boston until the next spring, departing with the British troops in March 1776. They travelled first to Nova Scotia and then to England.⁴²⁰ If the white Vassalls had decided to bring Anthony or Cuba with them, the Black Vassalls could easily be scattered to the far-flung margins of the Atlantic.

These dangers were not theoretical. The white Vassalls displaced multiple enslaved people in 1775–6, including a man named York. As a young man, York had lived at Green River, William Vassall’s sugar plantation in Jamaica. Around 1763, he was shipped to New England to work as a house servant in William Vassall’s home. In 1775, when William Vassall moved his family from Boston to Nantucket and then to England, he dispatched York back to Jamaica with letters for the agents at Green River. “This will be handed to you by my Negro man York,” William Vassall wrote just before setting sail for London. He instructed his associate in Jamaica to “keep [York] for an House Negro.” In a subsequent letter, Vassall clarified that if his colleague was not satisfied with York, “you may sell him if you please.”⁴²¹

York had lived in Massachusetts for twelve years. He may have had a wife or children or friends in Boston. If William Vassall had brought him to England, York would have been free under English law. In 1772, a landmark court case (*Somerset v Stewart*) had declared that slavery—while still legal in the colonies—did not exist in England itself. To avoid freeing York, William Vassall sent him back to the plantation.⁴²²

Meanwhile, Thomas and Elizabeth Vassall Oliver transported at least one enslaved person to England. A footman named Samuel traveled with them to their new home on the outskirts of London, and continued to work in their household for many years. Although the Olivers did not formally free Samuel, he was legally free in England due to the 1772 *Somerset* decision. Colonial slaveowners regularly flouted this ruling by bringing enslaved people to

⁴¹⁹ A parcel of Penelope Vassall’s personal possessions was delivered to Boston in May 1775. She likely left soon after, sailing to Salem, then Nantucket, and then to Antigua. Batchelder, 47–9.

⁴²⁰ J.L. Bell, section 1.6.

⁴²¹ William Vassall letters to James Wedderburn, 10 August 1775 and 2 December 1775, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

⁴²² York was not the only enslaved person transported to the West Indies from Massachusetts during the crisis of 1774–6. Samuel Batchelder relates the story of Jess, an elderly man enslaved by the family of Rev. Arthur Browne in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Facing the prospect of separation from loved ones, Jess “threw himself overboard on the voyage and perished miserably.” Batchelder, 68.

England for short periods of time, but the Olivers grudgingly acknowledged Samuel's freedom. When Thomas Oliver applied for compensation from the British government for the property he lost in Massachusetts, he requested £50 in payment for Samuel, "to whom I pay wages as free under the laws of this country."⁴²³

Other enslaved people may also have been trafficked to England or Nova Scotia by the white Vassalls in 1776. John and Elizabeth Vassall made the months-long journey from Boston to Halifax to England with many young children in tow, as did Thomas and Elizabeth Oliver. The Olivers may have brought one of the enslaved women mentioned in their records—Mira, Jude, and Sarah—with them to help with childcare. All three of these women are listed in Thomas Oliver's claim as lost property, but that does not necessarily mean they remained in Massachusetts. They could have been transported across the ocean in 1776 and left the Olivers afterward. Similarly, John and Elizabeth Vassall could have transported Dinah, Malcolm, or William to England with them and still claimed compensation if they were no longer enslaved by the time the inventory was submitted on September 27, 1783.⁴²⁴

Among the people enslaved by the extended white Vassall family, Anthony Vassall was at particular risk of being sold or transported because his enslaver, Penelope Vassall, was bankrupt. In fact, she was so burdened by her late husband Henry's debts that she could not afford to start a new life in England. While most of the white Vassalls settled in England, Penelope decided to go first to Nantucket with her brother-in-law William Vassall's family and later to Antigua with her daughter's family.⁴²⁵ Even in Antigua, her half of the plantation she had inherited from her father—including "68 1/2 Negroes"—was mortgaged to William Vassall. By 1775, Penelope had gone ten years without making a single payment.⁴²⁶ Her last remaining assets were the home on Brattle Street with its land, barn, and furnishings, and Anthony Vassall.

Anthony knew that all enslaved people were vulnerable when their enslavers faced financial problems. After all, Penelope Vassall had transferred Cuba and the children to John

⁴²³ Thomas Oliver Loyalist Claim, AO 13/48, TNA.

⁴²⁴ See chapter 4 for a discussion of Dinah, who probably (but not definitely) stayed in Massachusetts.

⁴²⁵ Batchelder, 49.

⁴²⁶ William Vassall to Penelope Vassall, 1 January 1776, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

Vassall to settle Henry's debts after his death. Now she was desperate for money to fund her travel. Even her wealthy brother, Isaac Royall Jr., was arranging to sell enslaved people at low prices to raise funds quickly. In April 1775, Royall instructed his friend, Simon Tufts, who had been renting Ten Hills Farm since 1769, to sell several enslaved people. Two men, Stephen and George, "each cost £60 sterling," but Royall told Tufts, "I would take £50, or even £15 apiece for them." He was equally desperate to sell two women, Hagar and Mira, writing of Mira, "If Mr. Benjamin Hall will give the £100 for her which he offered, he may have her, it being a good place."⁴²⁷

Penelope Vassall could have decided to follow her brother's example and sell Anthony Vassall at a discount to anyone with ready cash. She also could have decided to bring Anthony to Antigua, either to serve her or to sell him on the island. Either way, Anthony would have been separated from Cuba and their children, perhaps forever.

Anthony Vassall faced several dire possibilities, but there is no reason to assume that he waited passively to see what would happen next. Over the years, Anthony had watched his enslaved relatives and neighbors attempt to influence their own futures with every tactic from subtle persuasion to premeditated murder.⁴²⁸ Several even used the Massachusetts courts to sue for their freedom.⁴²⁹ During the crisis of 1774–6, Anthony would have seen his enslaved friends and neighbors grabbing their freedom however they could. For some, that meant fleeing their Patriot enslavers and taking refuge with the British army. Dozens of Black Bostonians sailed to Nova Scotia with the British fleet.⁴³⁰ For others, it meant fleeing Loyalist enslavers to cast their lot with the rebels.

⁴²⁷ Isaac Royall Jr. to Simon Tufts, 1776, quoted in Walter H. Cushing, "Slavery in Medford," *Medford Historical Society Papers*. Vol. 2 (1899); with thanks to the Royall House and Slave Quarters, Medford, MA.

⁴²⁸ For more on enslaved people negotiating with enslavers over their own sale, valuation, and manumission, see Daina Ramey Berry, "A Fus' Rate Bargain," in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (Yale University Press, 2005).

⁴²⁹ Edward L. Bell, *Margaret v. Muzzy and James v. Lechmere* in "Research Summaries of Massachusetts Freedom Suits, 1660–1784"; Jeanne Pickering, "Suing Slavery: Essex County Freedom Suits, 1765–1783," (master's thesis, Salem State University, 2018); Emily Blanck, "Revolutionizing Slavery: The Legal Culture of Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1765–1789," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University 2003).

⁴³⁰ *Book of Negroes*, Nova Scotia Archives, <https://archives.novascotia.ca/africans/book-of-negroes/>; Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (2012).

When they saw no other way out, some enslaved people resisted in the only way they could. Anthony Vassall probably knew George, one of the men on Isaac Royall's 1775 sale list. George thwarted Royall's effort to sell him by cutting his own throat.⁴³¹

Surviving records do not illuminate exactly how Anthony Vassall managed to stay in Cambridge when Penelope left Boston for Nantucket in May 1775.⁴³² One likely scenario is that he promised the white Vassalls that he would take care of Penelope's house and grounds, and perhaps look after John Vassall's mansion as well. An official report from August 1775 noted that many of the estates on Brattle Street were nominally occupied by "negroes or servants" in order to maintain the pretext that they were not abandoned.⁴³³ Since the white Vassalls were still hoping to return to "Dear Boston" after the "noise, tumult, and war" subsided, they may have considered it prudent to deputize Anthony Vassall to safeguard their property.⁴³⁴

It is also possible that Anthony ran away by staying in place. After the battles of Lexington and Concord, Cambridge was occupied by colonial troops who were not eager to assist the Loyalists. If Anthony Vassall was in Cambridge, Penelope Vassall had no reliable way to force him to come to Boston, even if she wanted to. Perhaps Penelope did give Anthony permission to stay. But it is also possible that he forced her hand, using the Siege of Boston to stay beyond her reach.

For Cuba and Anthony Vassall and their children, the spring of 1775 was an unsettled time. The white Vassalls were trapped in Boston, making inscrutable plans. The Cambridge house was crammed to the rafters with rowdy colonial soldiers who surrounded the city after the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775. The chaotic movements of soldiers and civilians spread diseases like smallpox, typhoid, and dysentery, which swept through Massachusetts communities, killing elders and young children at an awful pace.⁴³⁵ Cuba and Anthony Vassall must have worried about five-year-old Darby, living with the Reeds in South Woburn, and possibly also for the baby boy living near the battlefield in Lexington.

⁴³¹ George died March 11, 1776, "sd to hve Cut his own Throat." Vital Records of Medford, 466.

⁴³² Batchelder, 49.

⁴³³ MSA 154/30 quoted in Batchelder, 68.

⁴³⁴ William Vassall to John Wedderburn, May 29, 1775, William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

⁴³⁵ Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775–82*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); Caitlin Galante-DeAngelis Hopkins, "'Barbarously Murdered': Gravestones and American Innocence, 1775–76," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 109, no. 5, *The Art of Revolutions* (2021), 203–223.

Cuba and Anthony Vassall were probably not living in the crowded mansion house in the spring of 1775. At some point, they moved their family into “a small tenement on Mr. John Vassall’s estate.” Besides the mansion house, there were three smaller houses on John Vassall’s estate, along with stables and barns. Penelope Vassall’s estate also had a barn, carriage house, and a “Summer House.”⁴³⁶ In fact, Anthony Vassall may have sometimes lived in a separate structure as early as 1752. In testimony about the robbery at William Brattle’s house, Robin’s co-conspirator, William Healey, spoke of “Mr. Vassells Little house,” where the friends hid some of the money. Healey testified that he took money from “a napkin in Mr. Vassells Little house, where there were also Some Coppers [tha]t Toney Brought from Boston in Exchange for Some of ye Dollars [tha]t were stole.”⁴³⁷ Henry Vassall’s 1769 inventory also hints at a possible separate living space. Under the heading, “Servants,” it lists five enslaved people (Anthony, Dick, James, Dorrenda, and Cuba), “Servants Beds & Bedding,” and furniture in “ye Summer House.”⁴³⁸ The reference is vague, but Henry and Penelope Vassall’s estate may have had a separate slave quarters like the Royall House in Medford.

In any case, Anthony and Cuba Vassall probably lived in their “small tenement” when Cambridge was overrun with soldiers in the spring of 1775. In their later petitions, they tie their move to this particular house to “the commencement of the present war,” which could mean any time between the march of the militia in September 1774 and the beginning of the Siege of Boston in April 1775.⁴³⁹ It is possible that the house they lived in was “The Farm House East of the Garden,” somewhere between the mansion house and Cambridge Common, which had an acre and a half of land attached to it.⁴⁴⁰

Other Black residents also remained in the neighborhood. In 1776, the Cambridge Committee of Correspondence paid £3 12s “for supporting a Negro man belonging to [Thomas

⁴³⁶ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA; Batchelder, 82.

⁴³⁷ Batchelder, 67.

⁴³⁸ Batchelder, 83.

⁴³⁹ Petition of Anthony Vassall, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, MSA, v.186–Revolution Petitions, 1779–1780, SC1/series 45X, p. 313–314, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:13906058?n=6>.

⁴⁴⁰ The farm house and land are valued at £243.6.0 in the 1778 inventory. The other two houses in the inventory are described as one bought from the heirs of Jacob Hill with ten and a half acres (£460) and one bought from Jonathan Hill with three quarters of an acre (£100). John Vassall Probate, 1778, Middlesex #23340.

Oliver's] Estate" who had remained in Cambridge after the Olivers departed.⁴⁴¹ The Committee did not record the man's name, but it did make clear that the town of Cambridge still considered him to be legal property of Thomas Oliver. This was important because the legal status of enslaved people who had been left behind by their enslavers was an open question. Were they free? Or property belonging to the estate? The 1776 notation by the Cambridge Committee shows that they considered people enslaved by Thomas Oliver to be property. They recorded their relief payment to the unnamed man in hopes of recovering the town's money, either from Thomas Oliver or from the eventual sale of his estate.

The enslaved man still living on the Oliver estate in 1776 could have been Cato, who worked as a gardener; Jerry, who was a coachman; or Jeffrey, a cook. He also could have been Buff, an enslaved blacksmith whom Thomas Oliver inherited from his father. Buff was a skilled artisan valued at £60, the most of any person enslaved by Robert Oliver.⁴⁴² Thomas Oliver could have sold Buff for cash, but instead he rented him out to local craftsmen at a rate of £20 per year.⁴⁴³ This was a common arrangement for enslaved laborers and artisans. Buff's labor became a reliable source of income for Oliver, and for the white blacksmiths or builders who hired him.

Decades later, in 1840, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a famous poem called "The Village Blacksmith," inspired by a blacksmith who lived on Brattle Street. The poem portrays the blacksmith as an honest, hardworking, "mighty man" who epitomized the virtuous independence of the free, white artisan:

His brow is wet with honest sweat,
He earns whate'er he can,
And looks the whole world in the face,
For he owes not any man.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ Cambridge Committee of Correspondence (1776), 130, Cambridge Public Library Special Collections.

⁴⁴² Thomas Oliver's father, Robert, died in 1762. Buff was among the enslaved people listed in his probate inventory. Robert Oliver Probate Inventory, 1763, Suffolk County, vol. 64, 369.

⁴⁴³ Thomas Oliver Loyalist Claim, AO 13/48, TNA.

⁴⁴⁴ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Village Blacksmith" (1840).

Longfellow was inspired by a contemporary, but his poem is grounded in nineteenth-century anxieties about industrialization. Like so many of Longfellow's works, it imagines a virtuous, pre-industrial America where "honest sweat" was inextricably tied to political independence.

But during the true past—not the imagined past—at least one blacksmith who lived and worked on Brattle Street was Buff, an enslaved man whose skilled labor was stolen by Thomas Oliver and exploited by the white craftsmen who hired him. His work must have had substantial value in order to justify such high rent, but unlike the fictionalized Village Blacksmith, Buff was not allowed to keep what he earned. He was also not incorporated into Cambridge's understanding of its own past. Even Longfellow, who held abolitionist views, chose to portray the pre-industrial artisans of Cambridge as noble, free, white counterparts to the idealized "yeoman farmer" rather than enslaved men like Buff or the master craftsmen who paid Thomas Oliver for Buff's labor.

One person enslaved by Thomas Oliver who definitely remained in Cambridge was Jerry, the baby born around 1774. His mother was probably one of the women enslaved by the Olivers (Mira, Jude, and Sarah), and he may also have been considered kin to the adult Jerry ("a Coachman and Groom") named in Thomas Oliver's financial records. Oliver does not record any family relationships. He merely calls the baby, "Young Jerry a Small Boy," valued at £15.⁴⁴⁵ Whether or not he was born to the people enslaved at the Oliver house, they certainly took care of him in his infancy.

Young Jerry may have been living with his parents in 1774, but he was soon separated from them. In 1778, local authorities placed him in the custody of a white woman named Mercy Cooke, who lived in North Cambridge (now Arlington), just west of Spy Pond. Mercy Cooke was a widow with nine children of her own.⁴⁴⁶ She took in foster children in exchange for

⁴⁴⁵ Thomas Oliver Loyalist Claim, AO 13/48, TNA.

⁴⁴⁶ Mercy Hale Cooke (b.1733) married Ephraim Cook/Cooke of Cambridge in 1755. They lived in North Cambridge (now Arlington, MA) in a house on the Watertown Road (now Pleasant St.) near Spy Pond, north of the land owned by Ephraim Frost. When Ephraim Cooke died insolvent 13 November 1773 (Ephraim Cook, 1774, #4979, Middlesex Probate), their nine surviving children were aged 4 to 17, and the three sons were placed under the guardianship of Joseph Wellington (a gentleman) and Thomas Barrett (a saddler), both of Cambridge. (Abraham Cook [#4980], Ephraim Cook [#4981], Thomas Cook [#4982], Middlesex Probate.) While most of the estate was sold to cover Ephraim Cooke's debts, Mercy Cooke retained the traditional widows' third portion, probably including the house, in order to provide for her six daughters.

maintenance payments from local authorities. At least one child, an 18-month-old named J. Dolle, died in her custody in 1776.⁴⁴⁷ After she took in four-year-old Jerry in 1778, Cooke petitioned for more money in exchange for keeping young Jerry, noting, “I have not been able to get rid of said Child.”⁴⁴⁸

The Massachusetts General Court began paying Cooke in 1779 “for nursing and boarding a weakly and sickly negro child belonging to the estate of Thomas Oliver, absentee.”⁴⁴⁹ In 1781, Jesse Putnam, a merchant who was handling the Oliver estate, agreed that Jerry was “very small & rickety,” and convinced the legislature that the child “needs support.” They empowered the selectmen of Cambridge to “bind out said negro child to some suitable person, that will undertake to support him (if any there be) until he shall arrive to the age of twenty-one years.”⁴⁵⁰

These records do not say what happened to Young Jerry’s parents. He would not have survived infancy without a mother or caregiver capable of feeding him. Perhaps she died between 1774 and 1779; perhaps she abandoned Jerry; perhaps she was too ill to care for him herself. But it is also possible that Thomas and Elizabeth Oliver transported Jerry’s mother across the ocean with them when they left Boston, and left her baby behind.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁷ Benjamin and William R. Cutter, *History of the Town of Arlington, Massachusetts, Formerly the Second Precinct in Cambridge or District of Menotomy, Afterward the Town of West Cambridge, 1635–1879, With a Genealogical Register of the Inhabitants of the Precinct* (Boston, 1880), 205–6.

⁴⁴⁸ Petition of Marcy Cooke, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives Collection, v.229-Revolution Resolves, 1780. SC1/series 45X, p.397–399, Massachusetts Archives, Boston.

⁴⁴⁹ “Petition of Mercy Cooke,” Chapter 283 (October 4, 1780) in Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay, Volume XXI, Being Volume XVI of the Appendix, p. 659 (Wright & Potter, 1922).

⁴⁵⁰ “Resolve Empowering the Selectmen of the Town of Cambridge,” Chapter 224 (October 18, 1781) in Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Boston, Benjamin Edes & Sons, 1781; reprinted Wright & Potter, 1890), 746–7; Appeal of Jesse Putnam to the Massachusetts General Court (1781), Massachusetts Miscellaneous Records, 1781–2, via FamilySearch, image 630/1388.

⁴⁵¹ Thomas Oliver’s Loyalist claim does not mention Mira, Jude, or Sarah living with the family in England in 1783. This does not mean that they did not transport an enslaved woman; it just means that she was not still working for them when the petition was filed on 2 October 2 1783. If they did bring a woman on earlier parts of their journey, she may have died between 1776 and 1783, or she may have escaped or been abandoned somewhere along the way. She was probably not sold or sent to Oliver’s plantation in Antigua because in those cases, she would still be enslaved and Oliver would not have been able to claim her value as a loss payable by the Crown. This also raises the possibility that there may have been other people enslaved by the Olivers in Cambridge in 1774 who do not appear in their Loyalist Claim because they were transported to Antigua and thus still enslaved. Thomas Oliver Loyalist Claim File, AO 13/48, TNA.

Only a few of the white Vassalls ever returned to Massachusetts. Penelope Vassall returned with her daughter, Elizabeth Vassall Russell, in the 1780s, but most of the other family members spent the rest of their lives in other parts of the British Atlantic. John Vassall and Elizabeth Oliver Vassall spent their remaining years in England, around Bath and Bristol. Two of their sons became officers in the British Army, while another joined the Navy.⁴⁵² The youngest surviving son, Robert Oliver Vassall, moved to Jamaica, where he purchased a six-hundred-acre plantation called Abingdon on the coast near Half Moon Bay.⁴⁵³ In 1820, he enslaved 340 people.⁴⁵⁴ One of the Vassall daughters, Mary, married John Gittins Archer, a Barbados sugar planter whose country house in Somerset shared a name with one of his plantations, Chatley Lodge. Elizabeth Oliver Vassall died at the house in 1807.⁴⁵⁵

Several members of the Vassall family returned to the West Indies, while others married into the British aristocracy. Florentius Vassall's granddaughter, Elizabeth Vassall, married a baron and became Lady Holland, running a famous literary salon from her home, Holland House, in London.⁴⁵⁶ Meanwhile, William Vassall's 21-year-old son, Harry, took a post with the African Company of Merchants. In 1776, he traveled to the Gold Coast to work at Winneba and Cape Coast Castle, two of the most infamous slaving forts in West Africa. William Vassall sent him a chest packed with black silk breeches and "14 ruffled shirts," and assured Harry that he had urged the governor to take "special care that you are advanced in the Company's employ as fast as the nature of the service will permit."⁴⁵⁷ Like their forebears, the white Vassalls who fled Massachusetts worked to continue and expand the transatlantic slave trade through the end of the eighteenth century.

Unlike John Vassall and Thomas Oliver, who filed claims with the British government to be compensated for their losses in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, William Vassall fought to

⁴⁵² John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA. For more on the military career of Spencer Thomas Vassall, see J.L. Bell, section 1.9.

⁴⁵³ Legacies of British Slavery (LBS), www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/.

⁴⁵⁴ This likely includes people enslaved at Abingdon and at Newfound River, as other LBS counts of people at Abingdon put the population around 164–168 in 1820. Robert Oliver Vassall's wife, Christian, also purchased another thirty-three enslaved people in 1829.

⁴⁵⁵ "Obituary with Anecdotes of Remarkable Persons," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 77, pt 1 (April 1807), 386.

⁴⁵⁶ Miranda Kauffman, *Heiresses: Marriage, Inheritance, and Slavery in the Caribbean* (Pegasus Books, 2025).

⁴⁵⁷ William Vassall to Henry Vassall, 7 December 1776, William Vassall letter books, Sheffield Archives.

regain his property in New England. For years after being exiled to England, he argued that he was no Loyalist, and had merely left Massachusetts in order to maintain contact with his Jamaican plantations. He wrote many angry letters to governors and congressmen, including his nephew-in-law, Speaker of the House of Representatives Theodore Sedgwick.⁴⁵⁸ Stymied at every turn, William Vassall sued. The case, *Vassall v. Massachusetts*, reached the United States Supreme Court in 1793, but was never decided. Instead, it sparked a debate about whether “aliens” could sue states at all. After a lifetime of using the Massachusetts courts to sue their neighbors, business associates, and Harvard tutors, the white Vassalls found themselves blocked from any standing in American courts.⁴⁵⁹

The white Vassalls were gone, but that did not necessarily mean that the Black Vassalls were free. In the years after 1774, Anthony and Cuba Vassall would join other Black residents of Massachusetts in using lawsuits and petitions to secure economic stability for themselves and their families, and to establish their rights as free people and equal citizens. Their pursuit of liberty would take years of ingenuity, tenacity, and courage.

⁴⁵⁸ Theodore Sedgwick (1746–1813) served as a representative from Massachusetts, Speaker of the House, senator, and president pro tempore of the US Senate. His wife was Penelope Russell, the daughter of Elizabeth Vassall Russell, daughter of Henry Vassall and Penelope Royall Vassall. Calder, 29.

⁴⁵⁹ Maeva Marcus, James R. Perry, *The Documentary History of the Supreme Court of the United States, 1789–1800: Suits against states* (Columbia University Press, 1985), 353–450.

CHAPTER FOUR

SECURING LIBERTY

"Untill the commencement of the present war, [Anthony Vassall] was the servant of Madame Penelope Vassall & the said Coby his wife the servant of Mr. John Vassall late of Cambridge, absentees—he & his little family have since that time occupied a small tenement, with three quarters of an acre of land, part of Mr. John Vassall's estate in Cambridge and has paid therefor a reasonable rent, and all the taxes that were assessed upon him."

— Petition of Anthony Vassall and Coby, His Wife, 1780⁴⁶⁰

The departure of the white Vassalls left the people they enslaved in legal limbo. Slavery was still legal in Massachusetts in 1775, and the white Vassalls did not sign manumission papers before they fled. This meant that Cuba and Anthony Vassall, their children, and other Black residents of Brattle Street were still legally enslaved, even though their enslavers were gone. Perhaps they would return one day; perhaps not. In the meantime, the Black residents of Brattle Street had to survive with an ambiguous legal status. There was no guarantee that the emerging Commonwealth of Massachusetts would recognize their freedom unless Black residents forced it to.

The Black Vassalls and their peers navigated three distinct periods in the years after their enslavers left Brattle Street:

- The Siege of Boston, from April 1775 until the final withdrawal of British troops from Boston on March 17, 1776. Almost all of white Vassalls were in Boston at the beginning of this period, but almost all had departed by the end. The people they enslaved were unsure whether they would be sold, transported, left behind, or manumitted. Colonial troops

⁴⁶⁰ Petition of Anthony Vassall, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, MSA, v.186-Revolution Petitions, 1779–1780, SC1/series 45X, Mass.v.186:p.313–314, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:13906058?n=6>.

occupied Cambridge, including 105 Brattle Street, which served as the headquarters of General George Washington.

- The years between 1777 and 1780, when the fighting had moved away from Cambridge. Cuba, James, and Cyrus were legally the property of John Vassall until 1779, when the Vassall estate was formally confiscated by the new Commonwealth of Massachusetts. At that point, they became the property of the people of Massachusetts. Ironically, Cuba and Anthony Vassall were able to use the continuing legality of slavery as an unlikely weapon to force Massachusetts to support them with funds from the rental of John Vassall's estate.
- The first decade of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1780–1790. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 declared that “all men are born free and equal,” but it did not definitively end slavery in the Commonwealth. Neither did the Massachusetts legislature, which did not pass any law formally abolishing slavery. Slavery in Massachusetts ended because Black people like Cuba and Anthony Vassall tore it down, little by little, through a combination of petitions, lawsuits, and participation in the duties of citizenship. Black people forced Massachusetts to recognize their free and equal status under the law.⁴⁶¹

The Siege of Boston (1775–1776)

The first of these three time periods overlapped with the year that the white Vassalls spent in Boston, which is examined in Chapter 3. In order to understand this critical year in the history of 105 Brattle Street, it is also necessary to examine Black residents' experiences in Cambridge while the town was occupied by colonial militia and the Continental Army.

John and Elizabeth Vassall fled to Boston in the fall of 1774, but it was still possible for people to move in and out of the city during the winter of 1774–5. That changed in the aftermath of the Battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775. After confronting the

⁴⁶¹ On the process of emancipation in Massachusetts, see Gloria Whiting, “Emancipation Without the Courts or Constitution: The Case of Revolutionary Massachusetts,” *Slavery & Abolition* 41, no. 3 (2020), 458–78; Gloria Whiting, *Belonging: An Intimate History of Slavery and Family in Early New England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860* (Cornell University Press, 2016); Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts*, (Oxford University Press, 2012); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York University Press, 2016).

British Regulars on Concord's North Bridge and Lexington's Common, colonial militias chased them back to Boston. The colonial forces then took up positions in Cambridge, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Charlestown, surrounding the city on three sides and cutting off all access by land. This encirclement—known as the Siege of Boston—lasted for eleven months.

Cambridge was a critical part of the colonial forces' siege formation. Approximately 15,000 soldiers were stationed in Cambridge, ten times the town's pre-war population of 1,500. Many civilian residents—not just Loyalists—fled to safety in towns farther from the front line. Even so, housing for soldiers was extremely scarce. Men crowded into every available structure, including Harvard College and the abandoned Loyalist estates on Brattle Street.

By mid-May 1775, three companies of soldiers—approximately 150 men—were living in and around 105 Brattle Street.⁴⁶² These soldiers slept wherever they could and got drunk on the wine and rum they stole from the Loyalists' cellars. John and Elizabeth Vassall had taken many of their personal belongings to Boston, but they had left some things in Cambridge, including carpets, andirons and fire tongs, "Blankets & Counter Panes," and "Some Part of the Family Linnen lost at Cambridge."⁴⁶³ The provisional government of Massachusetts tried to put a stop to soldiers' looting by ordering that any furniture and household goods should be "properly secured and disposed of in places of safety," but the linens and blankets had probably already been taken for bandages and bedding.⁴⁶⁴ Soon, the Vassall mansion was stripped bare.⁴⁶⁵ One second-floor bedroom served as a hospital; others were barracks for troops.⁴⁶⁶

At first, the colonial troops occupying Cambridge were local militia, but reinforcements soon arrived from Connecticut, New Hampshire, and other colonies. In June 1775, the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia established the Continental Army to consolidate these colonial forces under the command of General George Washington.

⁴⁶² J.L. Bell, "George Washington's Headquarters and Home," Historic Resource Study, Longfellow House—Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site (2012), section 2.6.

⁴⁶³ A counterpane is a bed covering or bedspread, usually quilted, embroidered, or woven with decorative elements. John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁴⁶⁴ J.L. Bell, section 2.4.

⁴⁶⁵ John Vassall did not always specify which items on his list were in Cambridge and which were in Boston. Of the possessions he specifically identified as being in the Cambridge house in 1774, the only item that appears in the inventory taken 21 March 1778 was a pair of andirons. The linens, blankets, counterpanes, and carpets are not in the later inventory, and may have been used by soldiers or ruined when they occupied the house.

⁴⁶⁶ J.L. Bell, section 2.4.

George Washington arrived in Cambridge to take command of the Continental Army in July 1775. After a short stay at the home of Harvard President Samuel Langdon, Washington decided that John Vassall's mansion would make a "more agreeable" long-term residence and headquarters. On July 15, he paid £2 10s 9d in cash "for cleaning the House which was provided for my Quarters." Washington's household steward, Timothy Austin, oversaw workers who scrubbed the mansion from the "upper Chambers" on the third floor to the "Necessary house"—the outhouse—in the backyard. When the cleaning was done, the house was ready for Washington and his staff to move in.⁴⁶⁷

Timothy Austin's records do not show any payments to Cuba or Anthony Vassall during the nine months (July 1775 to April 1776) that George Washington lived at 105 Brattle Street. They do, however, show that other Black people—some enslaved, some ambiguously free—worked in the house alongside several free white servants while it was General Washington's headquarters.⁴⁶⁸

Dinah, "a negro woman," worked at Washington's headquarters for nearly his entire stay, possibly as a cook.⁴⁶⁹ Some household staff were paid in small amounts every few weeks, but Dinah was not. Instead, she was paid £5.15.0 in wages for eight months and nineteen days of work when Washington departed in April 1776. She also probably received room and board during her time in Washington's household, along with the other servants. Dinah's pay averaged out to around 13 shillings and 6 pence per month, which was about 50 percent more than the white teenage housemaid, Elizabeth Chapman, who earned £2.13.4 for six months' work. This suggests that Dinah may have been cooking or doing other specialized work that commanded a higher wage.⁴⁷⁰

Was this Dinah the same Dinah who was enslaved by John and Elizabeth Vassall in 1774? There is good reason to think so. Dinah would have known the Cambridge mansion well, and

⁴⁶⁷ J.L. Bell, section 6.4.

⁴⁶⁸ J.L. Bell, chapter 6.

⁴⁶⁹ J.L. Bell, section 6.15.

⁴⁷⁰ Dinah was paid £5.15.0 for eight months and nineteen days of work; Elizabeth Chapman was paid £2.13.4 for six months. Austin, Revolutionary War Cashbook of Expenses October 1775–April 76, image 83, George Washington Papers, Series 5: Financial Papers, 1750-1796, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. A typo in J.L. Bell's study of Washington's Headquarters (section 6.10) reports Chapman's pay as £2.3.4, but the LOC digitization shows £2.13.4.

may have had family or friends nearby who provided an incentive to stay. It would be a coincidence if two unrelated Black women named Dinah both worked at 105 Brattle Street in 1774, 1775, and 1776, but it is not impossible. Dinah was a common name for Black women in Massachusetts.⁴⁷¹ Cambridge records show several women named Dinah who could have been adults in 1774:

- Dinah Phillips, wife of Pompey Phillips, gave birth to Cato (“Negro”) in Cambridge on July 2, 1782⁴⁷²
- Dinah Bowen married Darby Miller in Cambridge on December 27, 1789⁴⁷³
- Dianah Steed, “black woman,” died of apoplexy in Cambridge at age 75 on March 30, 1823 (born c.1748)⁴⁷⁴
- Dinah, “negro servant of Thomas Brattle,” died in Cambridge on January 8, 1798 “at a very advanced age”⁴⁷⁵

If Dinah was indeed the Black woman enslaved by John and Elizabeth Vassall, her escape from the Vassalls must have been at least as remarkable as Anthony Vassall’s. When the white Vassalls moved to Boston in 1774, they had a tremendous incentive to bring Dinah, Cuba, or both of them to tend the Vassall children, serve as Elizabeth Vassall’s maid, and do the endless, backbreaking tasks associated with making, repairing, and washing a large household’s clothing. Yet, George Washington’s household records show that Dinah worked for him from August

⁴⁷¹ Many Black women named Dinah appear in Boston records, including several who were congregants at Trinity Church and King’s Chapel in Boston. Records of Trinity Church, Boston, 1728–1830, *Colonial Society of Massachusetts Records*, volume 56; Faye Charpentier, “Slavery and King’s Chapel,” Report of the Ad Hoc Committee (2019).

⁴⁷² Baldwin, *Vital Records of Cambridge*, 557. The Cambridge birth records include a son named Cato born to Pompey and Dinah Phillips on 2 July 1782 and a son named George born to Pompey and Dinah Phillips on 7 July 1782, which may be a mistake, a conflation of birth date and baptismal date for the same child with two different names, or an unusual case of delayed twins. Dinah Phillips is the same Dinah recorded elsewhere as dying “at Judge Dana’s” on 24 October 1802, age 56 (born c.1746). Dinah Phillips was a domestic employee in the employ of Francis Dana between 1791 and 1802, and her death in 1802 is noted in Dana’s records. See ledger in the collection of the Dana Family Papers at Longfellow House–Washington’s Headquarters NHS (LONG 27037 Box 29, Folder 10). *Cambridge Town Records*, Volume 2, 1689–1820, image 102/1,230 via Family Search.

⁴⁷³ *Vital Records of Cambridge*, 271. Dinah Bowen’s race is not recorded.

⁴⁷⁴ *Christ Church Records*, 518.

⁴⁷⁵ *Vital Records of Cambridge*, 805.

1775 until April 1776.⁴⁷⁶ If she was the same woman, she managed to stay in Cambridge or return long before the white Vassalls left Boston in March 1776.

Dinah was not the only woman who worked at George Washington's headquarters. In addition to at least three white women who worked as cooks, maids, and laundresses, a free Black seamstress named Margaret Thomas began working for the household in February 1776. She sewed shirts for a Black man named Peter who worked in the stables, and for William Lee, an enslaved man who had come to Massachusetts from Virginia as George Washington's personal body servant.⁴⁷⁷

Margaret Thomas was probably the same "Margaret Thomas Negro Woman" who lost her house in Charlestown in a fire that consumed much of the town in June 1775. A later historian of Charlestown identified Margaret Thomas as a "negro of Bartholomew Trow," but she may have been free before 1775. She certainly owned her own home. After the fire, Margaret Thomas submitted a claim for the value of the house (£63) as well as her "Bed Bedding Household Furniture & Wearing Apparel" (£5 9s).⁴⁷⁸ Unfortunately, refugees from Charlestown were never reimbursed for their losses. When Margaret Thomas came to Cambridge, she was likely destitute, having lost both the real estate and the possessions she had worked hard to acquire.

Peter, the Black man who wore shirts sewed by Margaret Thomas, worked in the stables, caring for the horses of General Washington and his officers. Peter appears several times in the household accounts and in Washington's "Pocket Book of Cash." Usually, these expenses were horse-related, though some are unspecified, like the £2 Washington paid to "Negro Peter, Servant" on November 16, 1775.⁴⁷⁹ With so little specific information about

⁴⁷⁶ J.L. Bell, section 6.2.

⁴⁷⁷ J.L. Bell, sections 6.15, 9.11.

⁴⁷⁸ For more information about Margaret Thomas and her compensation claim, see Charlestown 250, a project by the Boston Department of Archaeology to create a digital and archival reconstruction of Charlestown in 1775. The project includes property maps and analysis of compensation claims for damages after the burning of the town. <https://www.boston.gov/departments/archaeology/boston-250-archaeology>.

⁴⁷⁹ Notably, Anthony Vassall is not mentioned in any of George Washington's household accounts related to the maintenance of horses and carriages. George Washington Papers, Series 5, Financial Papers: Pocket Book of Cash Expenses, May, 1775 – January, 1776; September, 1783 – December, 1784, digital image 21, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers/articles-and-essays/series-notes/series-5-financial-papers>.

Peter, it is difficult to identify him. He may have been enslaved or free, a local resident or a refugee from elsewhere.

Margaret Thomas also sewed shirts for William Lee, an enslaved man who accompanied George Washington from Mount Vernon.⁴⁸⁰ Other enslaved people from Virginia may also have lived at 105 Brattle, particularly after Martha Washington arrived in December 1775 with her son and pregnant daughter-in-law. Since the surviving household records generally record payments made to free workers, they do not specifically mention the names of any enslaved servants, coachmen, cooks, or other people who may have been brought to Cambridge by the Washingtons.

When George Washington and his entourage left Cambridge in April 1776, Margaret Thomas went with them. She stayed with the Washingtons until at least 1779, working as a seamstress and laundress. During that time, Margaret Thomas and William Lee formed a lasting romantic attachment. They married in Philadelphia before the end of the war.⁴⁸¹

Anthony and Cuba Vassall probably did not work for George Washington while he lived in Cambridge. They are not mentioned in the general's household accounts for 1775–6, and neither are their children. A few entries referring to an unnamed "coachman" could be references to Anthony Vassall, but they provide no details. Historian J.L. Bell has suggested that it is possible that Anthony, Cuba, and their family did work for the Washington household, but went unpaid because "the men in charge perceived them as amenities that came with the house."⁴⁸²

⁴⁸⁰ Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal* (1997); Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage* (2021); Nancy K. Loane, *Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment* (2021).

⁴⁸¹ When George Washington returned home to Mount Vernon in 1784, he left Margaret Thomas Lee behind in Philadelphia in "an infirm state of health." William Lee implored Washington to allow his wife to come to Mount Vernon. Washington had been under the impression that "the connection between them had ceased, but I am mistaken." "They are both applying to me to get her here," Washington wrote in July 1784. This implies that Margaret could write, or that someone helped her write to Washington from Philadelphia. Indeed, a 1778 receipt bearing Margaret Thomas's signature is included with Washington's financial papers at the Library of Congress. In the end, George Washington did give permission for Margaret Lee to come to Mount Vernon, but there is no evidence that she ever arrived. J.L. Bell, section 9.11; Mary V. Thompson, *"The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret": George Washington, Slavery, and the Enslaved Community at Mount Vernon* (University of Virginia Press, 2019).

⁴⁸² J.L. Bell, section 6.11.

There are, however, other records that provide hints about the work that Anthony Vassall did after the white Vassalls left Cambridge. In 1774 and early 1775, Anthony Vassall probably continued to work for Penelope Royall Vassall, possibly by packing household items in Cambridge and transporting them to her brother's house in Medford. In May 1775, colonial troops at Isaac Royall Jr.'s house in Medford seized some household goods, food, and medicine that belonged to Penelope Vassall.⁴⁸³ The record of this seizure does not say specifically that Anthony Vassall transported these items, but it was work that would have been familiar to him as Penelope Vassall's coachman and a frequent visitor to Isaac Royall's house. Anthony certainly had access to the vehicles necessary to transport household goods, including a "chariot" that appeared in a 1778 inventory of Penelope Vassall's property in Cambridge, and an "old cart" belonging to John Vassall.⁴⁸⁴ The same 1778 inventories also mention a 12-year-old mare in John Vassall's barn that escaped requisition by the Continental Army.²⁹ With these conveyances, Anthony may have been able to travel through the occupied towns more easily than the white Vassalls could, especially after the Siege of Boston confined them to the city after April 1775.

Indeed, financial records kept by Simon Tufts, who rented Isaac Royall's farm in Medford, show four payments totaling £9.18.6 to Anthony Vassall in 1776 and 1777. This was a substantial sum, consistent with steady labor over a period of months, rather than occasional deliveries. For comparison, Simon Tufts paid a group of unidentified "men" a total of £1.10.0 for seven and a half days "threshing corn" and £1.11.6 for ten and a half days processing flax.⁴⁸⁵ Tufts did not specify how many men threshed his corn, but if there were two, they were paid about 2 shillings a day; if there were three, they were paid 1 shilling and 4 pence. At similar wages, Anthony Vassall's total earnings of nearly £10 would indicate that he completed between 100 and 133 full days of work at the Royall estate in 1776 and 1777.

The final entry in Simon Tufts's account also hints that Anthony Vassall stood up to Tufts in a dispute over his compensation. His final balance was settled "by Arbitration." It is not clear which of them appealed to an outside arbiter, nor whether Anthony Vassall recovered the full

⁴⁸³ At the time, Ten Hills Farm was rented out to Simon Tufts. J.L. Bell, section 2.1.

⁴⁸⁴ Middlesex Probate Inventories for John Vassall (#23340), Penelope Vassall (#23342), 1778.

⁴⁸⁵ Batchelder, 69; Middlesex County Probate for Simon Tufts, volume 60 (1776-1781), 26-7.

amount he was owed. But the fact that Anthony Vassall pursued a debt that was owed to him by a member of the influential Tufts family demonstrates that he was tenacious, as well as willing and able to use the existing legal system to defend his rights.

Simon Tufts's records do not say exactly what kind of work Anthony Vassall did at Ten Hills Farm, but there was plenty of work to be done on the Loyalists' estates. In the summer of 1775, colonial officials paid local residents to cut hay on John Vassall's land and "fill the widow Vassal's barn with hay" to feed the army's horses.⁴⁸⁶ Similar work would have been necessary at the Royall estate, which faced a labor shortage after Isaac Royall's plan to sell the people he enslaved there ended in their displacement or death.⁴⁸⁷

Whatever work Anthony Vassall did for Simon Tufts, he worked for wages. Tufts's payments underline the point of the following story told by Darby Vassall about George Washington. Whether the story is literally true or not, 1776 was a time when the Black Vassall family—and Black residents of Brattle Street in general—were "feeling the value of [their] freedom."⁴⁸⁸ The law might be ambiguous as to whether they were legally free, but the Black Vassalls demanded payment for their labor. When white men like Simon Tufts did not pay up readily, the Black Vassalls asserted and defended their rights.

The Story of Darby Vassall and George Washington

A century after these events, people in Cambridge told a story about George Washington and the Black Vassalls. The tale may have originated with Darby Vassall, though details are scant and published versions diverge on key points. According to the story, sometime in 1775 or 1776, a young Black child—probably Darby Vassall—was "swinging on the gate" of the Vassall mansion, and was approached by General Washington. On learning that Darby "belonged to the place," Washington "told him to go into the house and they would tell him what to do and give him something to eat." Darby, however, was "feeling the value of his freedom," and "enquired what would be the wages." At this, "Washington expressed surprise at his being so unreasonable at such a time as to expect to be paid." For the rest of his long life,

⁴⁸⁶ J.L. Bell, section 2.7.

⁴⁸⁷ Alexandra Chan, *Slavery In The Age of Reason* (2007).

⁴⁸⁸ *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (1871), volume 25, 45; Batchelder, 75.

Darby supposedly maintained that General Washington “was no gentleman, he wanted [a] boy to work without [a] wage.”⁴⁸⁹

As with all stories about George Washington popularized during the nineteenth century, this one should not be taken as the literal truth in every detail. The earliest published version (1871) tells it as a story about “Tonie” Vassall, who was at least 50 years old in 1775.⁴⁹⁰ But if the story did originate within the Black Vassall family, it may reveal something about their experience during the Siege of Boston.

The story implies that the Black Vassall family were not regular presences at the Vassall mansion during the time it served as George Washington’s headquarters. Within the story, Washington is initially unfamiliar with Darby, and only “learns” that he “belonged to the place” after speaking to him. Perhaps Washington was too busy to recognize every child, or perhaps the incident took place early in Washington’s stay. But the story does not suggest daily, familiar contact between the Black Vassalls and General Washington. Combined with their absence from Washington’s household accounts, and the presence of Peter, who did the same sort of work in the stables as Anthony Vassall, the story does not indicate that the Black Vassalls worked for George Washington.

It is possible, though, that the tale of Darby and George Washington was actually a garbled retelling of the conflict over wages between Anthony Vassall and Simon Tufts. On April 15, 1777, Tufts paid Vassall £1.12.0, but Vassall was not satisfied. The dispute was settled by a mediator or magistrate, leading Tufts to record his payment of “Toney Vassall’s full Ballance by Arbitration” three months later.⁴⁹¹

This conflict bears some broad similarities to the story about Darby Vassall and George Washington. It features a powerful white man who was surprised and displeased when a member of the Black Vassall family demanded a fair wage for his labor. This was not just a disagreement; it was a fundamental reordering of Massachusetts society. The Black Vassalls might not have been fully free, but they were no longer enslaved. They were workers who

⁴⁸⁹ NEHGR, 1871, volume 25, 45; Batchelder, 75.

⁴⁹⁰ NEHGR, 1871, volume 25, 45.

⁴⁹¹ 1777 Apr. 15 To Toney Vassall’s Balance 1.12; 1777 July 28 To Toney Vassall’s full Ballance by Arbitration 0.6.6; Batchelder, 69; Middlesex County Probate for Simon Tufts, volume 60 (1776-1781), 26-7.

knew the value of their labor and were prepared to insist on being paid, whether that meant arguing against Simon Tufts in front of a magistrate, or confronting George Washington face-to-face. Perhaps the famous story of Darby and Washington is based on the dispute with Simon Tufts. Or perhaps the conflict was so fundamental to the changes happening in Massachusetts in 1775–6 that the same type of dispute really did happen twice.

The dispute between Anthony Vassall and Simon Tufts is relevant to the story of Darby Vassall and George Washington in another way, as well. During the years 1776 and 1777, Anthony Vassall's work on the Royall estate in Medford brought him close, geographically, to the place in South Woburn (present-day Winchester) where his son, Darby, was enslaved by George Reed.

Some historians have argued that six-year-old Darby Vassall walked the six miles from George Reed's house in South Woburn to Cambridge to be reunited with his family during the Siege of Boston. Others have suggested that young Darby could have been brought to Cambridge by George Reed Jr., who served with the Continental Army at the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775 and died soon after.⁴⁹²

Either of these scenarios is possible. But another possibility must be considered: that Anthony Vassall went to South Woburn to retrieve young Darby.

This is plausible, given both Anthony Vassall's frequent presence in Medford in 1776–7 and his proven history of driving long distances to free his children. Whenever he worked at the Royall estate, Anthony Vassall was within an hour's walk of George Reed's house, a distance that would have been even more trivial when he drove his horse and cart. Perhaps young Darby did not walk home by himself. Perhaps Anthony Vassall traveled the short distance from Medford to South Woburn to carry his young son home, just as he had traveled a much longer distance to Billerica to free Flora in 1772.⁴⁹³

⁴⁹² In *Notes on Henry Vassall*, Samuel Francis Batchelder writes glibly that, "Little Darby thereupon wandered back to Cambridge" (75). Gloria Whiting gives the story a much more respectful treatment but agrees with Batchelder that Darby did walk home by himself (Whiting, *Belonging*, chapter 6). J.L. Bell considers the possibility that Darby Vassall traveled with George Reed to Cambridge in 1775 (Bell, section 2.2). Neither contemporary documents nor Darby Vassall's 1855 interview mention the exact circumstances of his return to his family.

⁴⁹³ The exact date of Darby Vassall's return to his family is not known. Most previous studies have placed his return sometime in June or July 1775, based on the story of Darby's interaction with George Washington. Washington arrived in Cambridge in July 1775 and left in April 1776. If Darby Vassall really did live in Cambridge during

Anthony and Cuba Vassall succeeded in rescuing Flora and Darby, but no one was able to save the baby boy who was born in 1774. After being given to John Simonds as a six-week-old infant, the baby lived with the Simonds family in Lexington, about a mile and a half from the Battle Green.⁴⁹⁴ He was nine months old during the battle in April 1775, when John Simonds was one of the Minutemen who mustered on the Common to oppose the British Regulars. The next month, May 1775, Simonds came to Cambridge with the Lexington militia.⁴⁹⁵ Cambridge was in chaos, but the Black Vassalls may have searched out men from Lexington to learn of the baby's health. He was still alive in May 1775, but died on July 22, 1775, around the time of his first birthday.⁴⁹⁶

The Black Vassalls Navigate Changing Laws (1777–1780)

In 1777, “Antony Vassall” appeared on the Cambridge list of “polls,” the flat tax levied on every adult man in town.⁴⁹⁷ Though Vassall's name was included, he was not asked to pay the poll tax, nor any taxes on real estate, due to his unusual status. In the eyes of the Cambridge tax collector, Anthony Vassall was still a dependent of Penelope Royall Vassall's estate. Yet, his status was ambiguous enough that they included him on the list of free adult men. This in-between state was an ongoing challenge for the Black Vassalls as they navigated their new circumstances between 1777 and 1780.

Washington's tenure at 105 Brattle Street, he must have returned before April 1776. However, it is also possible that the story is not literally true, in which case, Darby may have returned later. It is certainly possible that Anthony Vassall rescued Darby from South Woburn before Washington departed. Anthony likely delivered Penelope Vassall's possessions in early 1775, and he may have worked at the Royall estate early in 1776. Simon Tufts paid him in December 1776, but this may have covered work done over a period of months, just as George Washington's payment to Dinah did.

⁴⁹⁴ The Simonds family lived near the intersection of modern-day Burlington and Grove Streets. In 1774, the family included 44-year-old John Simonds, his 41-year-old wife, Mary Tufts Simonds, and six children between the ages of 7 and 17. Another enslaved boy, whose name is not recorded in the Lexington Vital Records, died in the house on 9 December 1782. Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington, Middlesex County, Massachusetts: Genealogies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1913); *Lexington, Massachusetts, Record of Births, Marriages, and Deaths to January 1, 1898*, (Boston, 1898) 213.

⁴⁹⁵ John Simonds also spent five days in Cambridge, May 16–21, 1775. “John Simonds,” *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (1896), vol. 14, 242.

⁴⁹⁶ *Lexington, Massachusetts, Record of Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 213.

⁴⁹⁷ James Vassall is not on this list, suggesting that he was either not living in Cambridge or not yet 21 years of age in 1777. Batchelder, *Notes on Colonel Henry Vassall*, 69; Cambridge Tax List, 1777, Massachusetts Treasury Records, 1770–1797, volume 321, MSA, page 123.

By this time, the Loyalists had left Boston with the British army. John Vassall's family resettled in England. His sons would eventually pursue careers in the British military and one—Robert Oliver Vassall—would travel to Jamaica and purchase a new sugar plantation, Abingdon, near Half Moon Bay.⁴⁹⁸ Over the next six decades, while Cuba and Anthony Vassall's descendants helped build a free Black community in Massachusetts, the white Vassalls continued to enslave thousands of people at Newfound River and their other plantations. They also renewed their ancestors' direct involvement with the West African slave trade. In 1776, one of John Vassall's Boston cousins, Henry Vassall (son of William), joined the African Company of Merchants, a slave-trading firm that operated the notorious slave forts along the Gold Coast of modern-day Ghana. Henry worked at Fort Winneba and Cape Coast Castle, overseeing the imprisonment, torture, and sale of tens of thousands of African captives.⁴⁹⁹

Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, the Revolutionary War continued. Much of the fighting shifted away from Boston after the British withdrew in 1776, leaving eastern Massachusetts firmly in the hands of local authorities. Between 1777 and 1780, they would transform Massachusetts from a colony into a Commonwealth.⁵⁰⁰

One of the many pressing issues the Massachusetts government had to address was what to do with the property of exiled Loyalists. Since 1775, these estates had been “sequestered,” which meant they were kept intact and placed under the supervision of probate judges in each county.⁵⁰¹ In 1778 and 1779, the government of Massachusetts took steps to formally seize the Loyalists' estates and eventually sell them.

An important step in this process was the Banishment Act, passed in September 1778. This act officially forbade over three hundred Loyalists—including John Vassall—from returning

⁴⁹⁸ Robert Oliver Vassall purchased Abingdon, an estate of approximately 600 acres near Half Moon Bay in Hanover Parish, around 1815. In 1815, he enslaved 181 people there. After Robert Oliver Vassall's death in 1827, his widow, Christian Barrett Vassall, purchased another 33 enslaved people. Abingdon Estate, Hanover Parish, Jamaica, Legacies of British Slavery Database.

⁴⁹⁹ Henry Vassall (1755–1822) was the son of William Vassall (1715–1800) and Ann Davis (1720–1760). William Vassall wrote several letters to his son at Winneba and Cape Coast Castle, the first of which is dated 7 December 1776. William Vassall Letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

⁵⁰⁰ There were various British raids on Massachusetts territory—Maine, Nantucket, and Fall River in 1778–9—but the bulk of the fighting had moved south.

⁵⁰¹ Richard D. Brown, “The Confiscation and Disposition of Loyalists' Estates in Suffolk County, Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1964).

to Massachusetts. William Vassall, Thomas Oliver, Isaac Royall, and other members of the extended white Vassall family were also banished.⁵⁰² All of them had “manifest[ed] an inimical disposition to the said states, and a design, to aid and abet the enemies thereof in their wicked purposes.” If they returned to Massachusetts without permission from the General Court, they would “suffer the pain of death.”⁵⁰³ Seizing the Loyalists’ property took a while longer. After months of debate, the General Court passed two Confiscation Acts in April 1779. These laws transferred all the property the Loyalists owned in Massachusetts to the new state government.⁵⁰⁴

In short, the new Commonwealth of Massachusetts seized all of John Vassall’s property within its borders, including his mansion house and 105 acres in Cambridge, the townhouse in Boston, the forty-acre farm in Watertown, and additional property in Dorchester and Menotomy (modern-day Arlington).⁵⁰⁵ Further actions in 1780 and 1781 allowed the Commonwealth to sell this property.⁵⁰⁶

For the Black Vassalls, these confiscation laws were a double-edged sword. Like most of the developments since 1774, they presented both a danger and an opportunity.

The Confiscation Acts did not explicitly mention enslaved people. Since the Black Vassalls were legally classed as “chattels,” they were implicitly included among the furniture, tools, and other property seized from the white Vassall estates. In 1778, when the Middlesex County probate court inventoried the Loyalists’ estates, the list of Penelope Vassall’s property included “one Negro man named toney.”⁵⁰⁷ John Vassall’s inventory listed “one negro woman

⁵⁰² Charles Russell, husband of Elizabeth Vassall Russell.

⁵⁰³ “An Act to Confiscate of the Estates of Certain Notorious Conspirators” and “An Act to Confiscate of the Estates of Certain Persons Commonly Called Absentees.” The first was for influential government officials like Thomas Oliver; the second covered ordinary Loyalists like John Vassall, who was never officially sworn into the government; T.N. Ingersoll, *The Loyalist Problem in Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁵⁰⁴ “All goods and chattels, rights and credits, lands, tenements and hereditaments, of every kind . . . shall escheat, enure, and accrue to the sole use and benefit of the government and people of this state.” Full text of the Confiscation Acts available at <https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/server/api/core/bitstreams/8a5da486-edf8-4e67-936b-3d197b47fb0d/content>. Although Massachusetts would officially become the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1779, it was still sometimes called the “State” of Massachusetts, including in these acts.

⁵⁰⁵ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁵⁰⁶ Richard D. Brown, “The Confiscation and Disposition of Loyalists’ Estates in Suffolk County, Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1964): 534–50.

⁵⁰⁷ Penelope Vassall, Middlesex County Probate, #23342, 1778. This inventory is dated 24 June 1778.

of about 40 years of age” (Cuba), “one negro boy of about 8 years” (probably Cyrus), and “another negro child about three months” (possibly Nancy).⁵⁰⁸

Notably, the entry for this youngest child is struck through with a thick black line. Perhaps the probate judge thought that any child born after the departure of the white Vassalls was born free. This theory had no basis in any specific law, but it reflected the unsettled legal status of the Black Vassalls at a time when even the judges were not completely sure what the law demanded. The inventories themselves show this uncertainty. Anthony, Cuba, and one child are listed as property, but, unlike the rest of the property in the inventories, none of them are assigned any monetary value. Whether they could be bought or sold remained an open question.

Anthony and Cuba Vassall’s other children are not mentioned in the inventories. Previous studies have suggested that the 8-year-old boy in the inventory was probably Darby, but there is good reason to believe he was Cyrus. When Anthony and Cuba Vassall rescued Flora in 1772, they arranged to have her legally manumitted. No official manumission papers for Darby have been located, but it is possible that the family told probate officials that the child was free like his sister. Even if the probate court thought that Darby was still legally enslaved, he would have been enslaved by the heirs of George Reed, not by John Vassall.⁵⁰⁹

These inventories also show that some Black residents of Brattle Street achieved freedom by separating themselves from the Vassall estate. Dinah, Malcolm, and William, the three other adults enslaved by John Vassall in 1774, do not appear in the 1778 inventory. Neither does Dorinda, who was still legally enslaved by Penelope Vassall, nor Anthony and Cuba Vassall’s oldest son, James.⁵¹⁰ Without legal manumission papers, Dinah, Malcolm, and William may have freed themselves by leaving the neighborhood. Perhaps Dinah traveled with the

⁵⁰⁸ John Vassall, Middlesex County Probate, #23340, 1778.

⁵⁰⁹ The inventory was taken on 21 March 1778. At the time, Darby was 8 years old, turning 9 in May. Cyrus was 41 years old when he died in April 1812, so he was probably born in either 1770 or early 1771, and was about 7 years old in March 1778. Either child might be “about 8 years” to a probate court official. However, it is unclear why Darby would be counted as John Vassall’s property if he was enslaved by George Reed when John Vassall left in 1774. Since the inventory is counting John Vassall’s property, it is more likely that the child mentioned here is Cyrus, not Darby. Middlesex County Probate, 23340 (1778).

⁵¹⁰ Dorinda Vassall died in Cambridge in 1784. She was still known by the Vassall surname and may have either stayed in Cambridge for the duration or returned after the war. In any case, she is not mentioned in the 1778 inventory.

Continental Army when it left Cambridge, as Margaret Thomas did. Perhaps she remained in Massachusetts, but put physical distance between herself and the Vassall estate.

Dinah, Malcolm, and William may also have gone by entirely different names after their self-emancipation. This was not uncommon. Some “new” names were actually the names the enslaved person had preferred all along. Others carried celebratory meanings. Still others helped self-emancipated people avoid capture. For example, an enslaved man in his fifties who sought refuge with the British army after escaping from his enslavers in Newburyport called himself John Freeman, abandoning the name his enslavers knew him by (“Primus Hoyt”).⁵¹¹ In other cases, newly freed people kept the same first name, but jettisoned their enslaver’s surname either by choosing their own or by marrying. Dinah, Malcolm, or William may have changed their names in the process of safeguarding their freedom and privacy from both their contemporaries and from historians.⁵¹²

In any case, the Middlesex probate court did not pursue Dinah, Malcolm, and William. This could indicate respect for their newfound freedom, but it may also have indicated the government’s interest in limiting the number of people with legal ties to the estate. If Middlesex County formally acknowledged that Dinah, Malcolm, and William were still dependents of the Vassall estate, that might mean that the property’s new owner—the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—was obliged to support them financially. If, on the other hand, Dinah, Malcolm, and William wished to sever their connection to John Vassall’s estate, the Commonwealth would follow their lead.

⁵¹¹ John Freeman’s capture by Continental troops in July 1775 is mentioned in the diary of Moses Sleeper, a manuscript in the collection of the Longfellow House/Washington’s Headquarters National Historic site. J.L. Bell, section 3.8; with thanks to Kate Hanson Plass and Frances Dickinson Ackersley.

⁵¹² A Black woman named Diana Vassal died in Boston on September 26, 1821 (age 58, born around 1763). However, her age indicates that she was probably too young to be the adult Dinah enslaved by John Vassall in 1774. Similarly, two Black men named William Vassall died in Boston in the 1840s, but one was born around 1779 and the other after 1800. Records of Trinity Church, Boston, 1728-1830, *Colonial Society of Massachusetts Records*, volume 56.

Legally, Cuba and Anthony Vassall were still enslaved in 1778. That status was on shaky ground, but it was still the law. The difference was that they were now officially owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, not by the white Vassalls.

Rather than arguing that they were free, Anthony and Cuba Vassall made a strategic plan to use their enslavement to claim financial support from John Vassall's estate. The Confiscation Act of 1779 recognized that some Loyalists' estates might still have dependents living in Massachusetts, specifically wives, widows, and other "relations."⁵¹³ In order to prevent these dependents from needing public assistance, the Act allowed wives and widows to receive a third of the estate, and gave probate judges the power to bestow "a competent allowance, from time to time, for the comfortable support"⁵¹⁴ of other relations. The Act did not specifically mention enslaved people. Still, whether or not the General Court considered the Black Vassalls to be "relations" of the white Vassalls, it could not deny that Middlesex County still regarded Cuba Vassall and two of her children as John Vassall's dependents.⁵¹⁵

Therefore, in April 1780, the probate court of Middlesex County paid "Anthony Vassall" £222 "for supporting a Negro Woman and two children (3 years) belonging to the estate of Vassall."⁵¹⁶ By arguing that Cuba and two of the children were still enslaved, they maintained their financial claims as dependents of the Vassall estate. Historian Gloria Whiting explains that Anthony Vassall, "chose to identify himself as an emancipated man" in 1780, but argued that his wife and children were enslaved "because he understood the power of gendered norms with regard to familial provision." By portraying himself as a guardian and provider for enslaved dependents—just as Mercy Cooke and John Simonds were—Anthony Vassall "assumed a patriarchal role familiar to the people who held the purse strings of the confiscated Vassall estates."⁵¹⁷

⁵¹³ An Act to Confiscate the Estates of Certain notorious conspirators against the government and liberties of the inhabitants of the late province, now state, of Massachusetts, 1779.

<https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/server/api/core/bitstreams/4bbb551e-298b-42bc-8bea-894606d934c2/content>.

⁵¹⁴ Act to Confiscate, 1779.

⁵¹⁵ In his Loyalist Claim, John Vassall also claimed James Vassall as property, but James is not listed in the 1778 probate inventory, which is the state's official document recognizing property.

⁵¹⁶ Middlesex Probate #23340, 1780. It should be noted that the three years mentioned in this probate document are 1778, 1779, and 1780.

⁵¹⁷ Whiting, *Belonging*.

The money paid to Anthony Vassall in 1780—£222—may seem like an enormous sum, but it was not. The ongoing American Revolution created chaotic inflation in Massachusetts between 1777 and 1780. Over those three years, paper money lost 97 percent of its face value. Ordinary goods like corn, wool, and beef cost thirty-two times more in 1780 than they had in 1777.⁵¹⁸ Desperate to stop the economic carnage, Massachusetts experimented with price-fixing and new inflation-indexed bonds, but nothing stopped the runaway inflation.

This monetary crisis means that it is not useful to compare the £222 paid to Anthony Vassall in 1780 with the £4 Simon Tufts paid him in 1776. It is more appropriate to compare the 1780 payout to other expenses paid by John Vassall's estate at the same time. In the same document ordering John Vassall's estate to pay Anthony Vassall, the probate court ordered the estate to pay £301.11.3 for "repairing windows" and £115.2.0 for "repairing a Dyke & Fences."⁵¹⁹ All of these bills were paid out of the money the Commonwealth collected from renting out the Vassall estate for three years, which brought in the hugely inflated paper sum of £12,889.2.0. The £222 paid to the Black Vassalls was about 1.7 percent of this rent. The money helped, but it was no fortune.

The Black Vassalls' future security lay not in wobbly paper currency, but in land. They did not legally own any of the land on the Vassall estate, but they claimed a small patch for their homestead. Together, Anthony, Cuba, and their children "improved a little spot of land" adjacent to their "tenement."⁵²⁰ In this context, "improved" means that they used the land for agriculture. Before 1780, they only had three-quarters of an acre, which was too small a plot to grow large quantities of wheat or corn. Instead, they grew vegetables and perhaps raised chickens or hogs, like the one Anthony Vassall sold to Henry in 1758. The Black Vassalls may also have kept the "three bee hives" mentioned in Penelope Vassall's 1778 probate inventory.⁵²¹ Perhaps they used some of the farming implements listed in John Vassall's

⁵¹⁸ Robert J. Shiller, "The Invention of Inflation-Indexed Bonds in Early America," Working Paper No. 10183 (National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, December 2003), https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w10183/w10183.pdf.

⁵¹⁹ Middlesex Probate #23340.

⁵²⁰ Middlesex Probate #23335, 1811.

⁵²¹ Penelope Vassall Middlesex Probate Inventory #23342, 1778.

inventory: an “old plow” and plow chain, “two old hoes,” a pitchfork, a pickax, an iron shovel, a “weed puller,” a “small Iron tooth harrow,” a “Dung fork.”⁵²²

Indeed, the 1778 inventory of John Vassall’s property reads much more like the contents of a small farmhouse, not a mansion. It does not include any elaborate furnishings, carpets, dishware, household linens, or other luxury items, except the wheel-less, picked-over carcass of a carriage and an “incompleet” sleigh.⁵²³ Instead, the inventory lists a single set of farm tools and a 12-year-old mare, along with the furnishings of a modest kitchen: one “large brass kettle,” a quart-size copper pot, a pair of andirons, a set of “cream col[ored] plates.” The inventory lists two featherbeds—one of them “old”—but no bedsteads or other furniture worth mentioning. It is possible that these were items left behind by the white Vassalls, but the specific assortment of goods suggests that the inventory may actually show the contents of the Black Vassalls’ house. Like Cuba and her children, these objects technically belonged to John Vassall, but were in the process of becoming the property of the people of Massachusetts.⁵²⁴

It may seem strange for enslaved people to argue affirmatively that their enslavement was legally valid. Yet Cuba and Anthony Vassall were seasoned veterans of a hostile legal system that they navigated with ingenuity and resolve. They secured Flora’s freedom in 1772. They appealed to legal arbitration to force Simon Tufts to pay his debt to Anthony in 1777. In the unsettled legal environment of 1778–1780, they were prepared to argue whatever they needed to argue in order to safeguard their family and extract reparations from John Vassall’s estate.

Pursuing Legal and Financial Stability (1780–1790)

By 1780, Anthony and Cuba Vassall had been working for years to secure liberty for themselves and their children. They had negotiated with Penelope Vassall, put physical distance

⁵²² John Vassall Middlesex Probate Inventory #23340, 1778.

⁵²³ John Vassall Middlesex Probate Inventory #23340, 1778.

⁵²⁴ By contrast, Penelope Vassall’s 1778 inventory reads much more like the stored contents of a lumber room belonging to a wealthy household. It includes dozens of “pictures,” some in gilt frames, a marble table, and an assortment of buckets, canisters, baskets, harnesses, and carriages. Thomas Oliver’s 1778 inventory contains no bedding, dishware, or furniture, only the tools, carriages, and other equipment found in a barn or shed. John Vassall Probate, 1778, Middlesex, 23340; Penelope Vassall Probate, 1778, Middlesex, 23342; Thomas Oliver Probate, 1778, Middlesex, 16231.

between themselves and the white Vassalls, and used the Massachusetts legal system in strategic ways to serve their own ends. In doing so, they participated in a “bottom-up revolution” among Black residents of Massachusetts who seized or negotiated their own freedom.⁵²⁵ They did not wait for a law to pass or for the Commonwealth to adopt its new Constitution; indeed, people like the Black Vassalls had been taking concrete actions to free themselves and their families for years before 1774. Some enslaved people left their enslavers and dared them to re-enslave them. Others negotiated with their enslavers for full manumission or greater control over their circumstances. Still others used the courts. Acting alone and together, in concert with rising uneasiness about slavery among their white neighbors, Black people like Cuba and Anthony Vassall dismantled slavery in Massachusetts with a thousand blows.

One of the tools they used was the petition.⁵²⁶ In the wake of the 1772 Somerset decision in England, free and enslaved people in Massachusetts drafted several petitions for the abolition of slavery. They frequently invoked the same rhetoric of natural rights used by patriots during the American Revolution. In one 1773 petition, Black residents of Massachusetts who were “held in a state of slavery within the bowels of a free Country” argued that they “have in comon with other men a naturel right to be free and without molestation to enjoy such property as they may acquire by their industry.”⁵²⁷

While these early abolition petitions did not lead to laws abolishing slavery, they did build a culture of petitioning among Black Massachusetts residents. In the late 1770s and 1780s, a growing number of Black Bay Staters used petitions to advocate for voting rights, tax relief, and financial support, as well as abolition.

⁵²⁵ Gloria Whiting, *Belonging* (2024).

⁵²⁶ Emily Blanck, “Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts,” *The New England Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2002): 24–51; Roy E. Finkenbine, “Belinda’s Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2007): 95–104; Loren Schwenger, “Freedom Suits, African American Women, and the Genealogy of Slavery,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2014): 35–62; LaGarrett J. King and Jason Williamson, “The African Americans’ Revolution: Black Patriots, Black Founders, and the Concept of Interest Convergence,” *Black History Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (2019): 10–14; Gloria Whiting, *Belonging* (2024).

⁵²⁷ “Petition for freedom to Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson, His Majesty’s Council, and the House of Representatives,” June 1773, Papers of Jeremy Belknap, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

The most famous petitioner was Belinda Sutton, who was enslaved by Penelope Vassall's brother, Isaac Royall. On February 14, 1783, Sutton submitted a petition for financial support to the Massachusetts General Court. In it, she told her life story in broad strokes, from her childhood in West Africa, to her kidnapping and suffering the Middle Passage, to her life in Massachusetts. She demanded funds from Isaac Royall's estate, which had been confiscated by the Commonwealth, just as John Vassall's estate had been. Sutton also delivered a searing indictment of slavery and a compelling case for reparations. All the fruits of her labor, she protested, went to her enslaver, and her body, as property, further increased Royall's wealth. As a 70-year-old mother caring for a sick daughter, she was in need of—and indeed owed—money from Isaac Royall. The Assembly granted her a pension of 15 pounds 12 shillings per year, but despite petitioning repeatedly for the funds, she received them only twice.⁵²⁸

Anthony and Cuba Vassall submitted several petitions of their own. In 1780, three years before Belinda Sutton filed her petition, they petitioned the Commonwealth for the right to stay in their small house on John Vassall's estate. At the time, Massachusetts was preparing to sell John Vassall's property, which meant potentially displacing the Black Vassalls from the dwelling they had inhabited for at least five years. Cuba and Anthony protested. They portrayed themselves as vulnerable and conscientious: a "little family" who occupied a "small tenement, with three quarters of an acre of land," for which they paid "a reasonable rent and all the taxes that were assessed."⁵²⁹ This was a small piece of land, "not sufficient to supply them with such vegetables as are necessary for their family use." Still, it would be a terrible blow to lose both the house and garden when the Commonwealth sold it out from under them.

Throughout this first petition, Anthony and Cuba Vassall positioned themselves as dependents abandoned by their enslavers. They argued that the "earlier part & vigour of their lives was spent in the service of their several masters," but the Revolution had "deprived them of that care and protection which they might otherwise have expected from them." This was a

⁵²⁸ "Petition of 'Belinda [Sutton], an Affrican,'" 14 February 1783, Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Massachusetts Archives Collection, v.239-Revolution Resolves, 1783. SC1/series 45X, Petition of Belinda, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OGMCO>, Harvard Dataverse, V4; Roy E. Finkenbine, "Belinda's Petition.

⁵²⁹ Petition of Anthony Vassall, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, MSA, v.186-Revolution Petitions, 1779–1780, SC1/series 45X, Mass.v.186:p.313–314, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:13906058?n=6>.

familiar line of argument. Since the seventeenth century, the New England colonies had repeatedly held enslavers responsible for the support of enslaved people who were too old or disabled to work. The Black Vassalls drew on this long-established practice. Cuba was in her mid-forties and Anthony was probably in his late fifties, old enough that they chose to argue that they were “considerably advanced in life” and “feel an anxious concern for the future support of themselves and their children.”⁵³⁰

In order to secure their livelihood, Anthony and Cuba Vassall asked the Massachusetts General Court to grant them a “freehold,” a legal title to their house, their three-quarter-acre garden, and an additional quarter acre. They argued that “the detachment of so small a parcel” could not possibly alter the value of the remaining estate. Neither Anthony nor Cuba Vassall could write, but both of their names are affixed to the bottom of the petition in an unknown hand.⁵³¹

The petition was not successful. In 1781, Anthony Vassall filed a second petition, this time without Cuba’s name attached. Historian Gloria Whiting has argued that this was a strategic choice by Anthony Vassall to portray himself as a head of household struggling to provide for his family through no fault of his own.⁵³² He had worked hard all his life, but slavery had deprived him of the fruits of his industry. “Though dwelling in a land of freedom, both himself and his wife have spent almost sixty years of their lives in slavery,” which meant that they had little to show for decades of “honesty” and faithful service. Their garden had expanded since the previous petition—it was now “a little spot of land about one an half acre”—but it was still not enough to provide an “old man,” his “sick” wife, and their “little flock with a sufficiency of bread.” Since the Commonwealth had taken over the white Vassalls’ estates, it had also assumed their responsibility to provide support for the estate’s dependents. If it did not fulfill these obligations, Anthony Vassall argued, his family would soon be reduced

⁵³⁰ Petition of Anthony Vassall, MSA, v.186: p.313–314.

⁵³¹ The handwriting on this petition has not been definitively identified. Some previous historians have speculated that Prince Hall may have written it, but neither the handwriting nor the spelling matches other petitions signed by Prince Hall. Petition of Prince Hall, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions; Passed Acts; St. 1787, c.48, SC1/series 229. MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:12176678>

⁵³² Whiting, *Belonging*.

to “the painful necessity of begging for bread.” He signed the petition with his mark, a large capital T.⁵³³

The Massachusetts General Court knew that the Black Vassalls’ dilemma was part of a larger problem. Individual towns—including Cambridge—were already paying for the support of dependents left behind by the banished Loyalists. The Confiscation Acts gave the probate courts authority to use portions of the Loyalist estates to provide “comfortable support” for these dependents. The alternative was supporting them with public funds. In the case of Anthony Vassall, the language of his petition—“charity,” “begging for bread,” “old man,” “sick”—invoked the Commonwealth’s responsibility to care for the elderly, infirm, and destitute. Vassall argued that without support, “himself his wife and little ones must throw themselves upon the charity of others and be reduced to wander abroad and adopt the hard necessity of begging for a little bread.”⁵³⁴ The spectre of the wandering poor presented a stark contrast to the settled order of the Black Vassalls’ house and garden. This was a deliberate choice. Massachusetts officials abhorred the “disorderly” poor, and could fit Anthony Vassall’s request into their preexisting framework for preferring orderly, settled families to itinerant beggars.

In the end, the Massachusetts legislature did not grant Anthony Vassall a title to his house and land, but it did grant him a payment of £12 “out of the proceeds of the estate of John Vassall,” along with an equivalent annual pension “out of the public Treasury.”⁵³⁵ Vassall collected the initial payment in 1781, along with another payment of £24 from John Vassall’s estate in 1783, and the annual pension every February 6th beginning in 1782.⁵³⁶ He signed the receipts with his capital T.⁵³⁷

By the time of the first payment, Cuba and Anthony’s household consisted of themselves and four children: 14-year-old Flora, 12-year-old Darby, 10-year-old Cyrus, and 3-year-old Nancy. Their oldest son, James, was in his twenties, and may have already moved to

⁵³³ Petition of Anthony Vassall, v.231:p.114–117, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:13906075?n=4>.

⁵³⁴ Petition of Anthony Vassall, v.231:p.114–117, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:13906075?n=4>.

⁵³⁵ Petition of Anthony Vassall, v.231:p.114–117.

⁵³⁶ MSA, Miscellaneous Records, volume 139, 1775–1789, 391, 395; Whiting, *Belonging*.

⁵³⁷ Tony Vassall, c.1713–1811, Receipt and warrant for Massachusetts state pension payment to Anthony Vassall, 1792, HUY 218, HUA, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.arch:41272405>.

Boston, where he eventually became a barber/hairdresser and married Abigail Hall, the granddaughter of the famous community organizer and Masonic leader, Prince Hall.⁵³⁸ The whole family was provisionally, precariously free.

The Commonwealth sold John Vassall's estate to Nathaniel Tracy, a merchant and shipbuilder from Newburyport. Tracy may have allowed the Black Vassalls to remain on the property as renters for a time, but it is also possible that Tracy evicted them. In 1786, "Toney Vassall" appeared on a Boston tax roll as a servant in the house of Thomas Russell, a white merchant whose brother, Charles, was married to Penelope and Henry Vassall's daughter, Elizabeth.⁵³⁹ The tax record shows that Russell owned three carriages—a chariot, a chaise, and a phaeton—which required the care of a skilled coachman like Anthony Vassall. While the tax roll does not say whether Cuba and the younger children were also living in the Russell household, it does show the presence of another free Black servant, 45-year-old Fortune Symmes, who later became a friend and colleague of Darby and Cyrus Vassall in their work with the African Society.⁵⁴⁰

Between 1781 and 1787, Cuba and Anthony Vassall were able to save enough money to buy their own property in Cambridge. In 1787, they paid \$87 for a house on a quarter-acre lot adjacent to modern-day Massachusetts Avenue, north of the current Harvard Law School campus.⁵⁴¹ They added other parcels in the 1790s, expanding until they owned five acres of

⁵³⁸ Abigail Hall Vassall's name has sometimes been recorded as Abigail Hill rather than Hall. However, when she died on 2 May 1816, the Boston death index recorded her next of kin as her father, Primus Hall, the son of Prince Hall. Primus Hall was the executor of James Vassall's estate after he died in 1812. Zebulon Clap v. James Vassall and Cyrus Vassall, 24 January 1811, Suffolk County Court of Common Pleas, 1811, 577–8; Boston Tax Records, 1811; Boston Marriages, 8 January 1810; Boston Marriage Publications, 1807–1817, 1 February 1809; Abigail Vassall, Boston Death Index, 1810–1848.

⁵³⁹ Boston Tax Records, MSA.

⁵⁴⁰ Banns for the marriage of Fortune Symmes and Jenny Fuller were published on 22 February 1785, though other records suggest they did not marry until January 1787. Jenny Fuller Symmes may also have lived in the Russell household at this time. Boston Marriages, 1761–1809, volume 12.

⁵⁴¹ Deed transfer from Aaron Hill to Anthony Vassall, 25 July 1787, Middlesex Registry of Deeds, Book 96, page 84. The deal was \$66 in cash and a \$21 mortgage that Anthony Vassall paid off (with interest) on 3 August 1791.

“mowing and village” land worth \$500.⁵⁴² They planted a new garden, kept pigs, and churned butter.⁵⁴³

Cuba Vassall may have been ill, as Anthony argued in his 1781 petition, but she probably still did heavy work like laundry, cooking, cleaning, and childcare. The difference was that this work was now for the benefit of her own family, not the white Vassalls. Meanwhile, Anthony Vassall established his own business grooming, shoeing, and possibly renting horses.⁵⁴⁴ Public records refer to him as “Anthony Vassall of Cambridge Farrier” and “Anthony Vassall of Cambridge . . . Yeoman.”⁵⁴⁵ Both terms implied economic independence and property ownership.

As Anthony and Cuba Vassall worked to build their property and set their children on a path to prosperity, their fellow Black citizens of Massachusetts continued to fight for legal freedom and subsistence. Some, like Belinda Sutton, petitioned for relief payments on grounds similar to those of the Black Vassalls. Others, like Quock Walker and Elizabeth Freeman, won court cases that found legal grounds for emancipation in the language of the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution, which stated that “all men are born free and equal.”⁵⁴⁶

Despite the language of the Constitution, slavery in Massachusetts did not come to an abrupt end in the 1780s. Successful freedom suits were limited to the people involved, not broadly applied to all enslaved people. Indentured servitude also remained legal, often blurring the lines between slavery and freedom for Black children, who were frequently indentured until age 21. Black adults were also bought and sold in Massachusetts for years after the supposed

⁵⁴² Anthony Vassall Inventory, 1811, Middlesex Probate #23335; Deed, Aaron Hill to Anthony Vassall, 3 August 1791, Middlesex Deeds, vol. 105, 274–5; Deed, John Foxcroft to Anthony Vassall, 8 January 1793, Middlesex Deeds, vol. 110, 199–200; Deed, Anthony Vassall to Tuthill Hubbard, 23 April 1796, Middlesex Deeds, vol. 122, 136.

⁵⁴³ Anthony Vassall Inventory, 1811, Middlesex Probate #23335; Deed, Anthony Vassall to Tuthill Hubbard, 23 April 1796, Middlesex Deeds, vol. 122, 136.

⁵⁴⁴ See dispute with Stephen Hartwell discussed later in this chapter.

⁵⁴⁵ Deed, John Foxcroft to Anthony Vassall, 8 January 1793, Middlesex Deeds, vol. 110, 199–200; Deed, Anthony Vassall to Tuthill Hubbard, 23 April 1796, Middlesex Deeds, vol. 122, 136.

⁵⁴⁶ Both Elizabeth Freeman and Quock Walker have been remembered for their part in the legal fight against slavery in Massachusetts. Elizabeth Freeman, an enslaved woman from Sheffield, Massachusetts, sued for her freedom in 1781 (*Brom and Bett v. Ashley*, 1781); Quock Walker, an enslaved man from Worcester County, Massachusetts, sued for his freedom in a series of cases in 1781 and 1783 (*Walker v. Jennison*; *Jennison v. Caldwell*; *Commonwealth v. Jennison*). Their suits were part of the larger movement by enslaved people to use the courts to free themselves that was already underway in the 1760s, when Margaret and James Tulip secured their freedom (see chapter 2), embedded within the widespread efforts toward self-emancipation that spanned the 1760s-1780s. Gloria Whiting, “Emancipation without Courts or Constitution” *Slavery & Abolition*, 2020.

end of legal slavery. In 1793, an elderly Cambridge woman named Venus was put up for public auction as a pauper after the death of her enslaver, Samuel Whittemore. This was probably not an ordinary sale, but an auction intended to find a low bidder to provide food and housing for an impoverished person.⁵⁴⁷ Since the obligation to support enslaved people could extend to enslavers' heirs as well, Whittemore's heirs may have hoped to rid themselves of this responsibility. Venus seems to have had some agency over her own living conditions, as she reportedly "refused to go into the family of one of the bidders."⁵⁴⁸ Eventually, one of Whittemore's grandchildren, William Watson, agreed to take responsibility for Venus as part of a £200 deal that included a valuable parcel of land in Cambridgeport.⁵⁴⁹

Black citizens of Massachusetts also remained vulnerable to being kidnapped and trafficked outside the state. In 1788, just as Massachusetts was voting to ratify the United States Constitution, a brazen kidnapping shook the Black community around Boston. The victims were Cato Newell, Wenham Cary, and Luck Russell, the coachman who had refused to corroborate Harry Vassall's testimony about a threatening gunshot in 1774.⁵⁵⁰ Anthony Vassall certainly knew Luck Russell, a fellow coachman previously enslaved by Henry and Penelope Vassall's daughter, Elizabeth Russell. In 1788, Luck Russell and the two other men were tricked into boarding a ship in Boston, then locked in the hold for the "purpose of selling them as slaves

⁵⁴⁷ With thanks to Edward L. Bell and Kathryn Mudgett. Kathryn Mudgett, "Venus Whittemore and the Judicial Construction of Freedom in Antebellum New England," paper presented at the Nineteenth Annual Association for the Study of Law, Culture and Humanities Conference, Hartford, Connecticut, April 1–2, 2016.

⁵⁴⁸ Watson vs. Cambridge, 1818, *Massachusetts Reports: Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1864), 286–289, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Massachusetts_Reports/lxAQAAAAYAAJ?q=%E2%80%9CVenus+Whittemore%E2%80%9D&gbpv=1&bsq=venus#f=false.

⁵⁴⁹ Venus Whittemore died in Cambridge on 4 May 1825, "upwards of 100 years." Her enslaver, Samuel Whittemore, appears in Henry Vassall's expense book and later leased the estate of Henry's sister, Anna Vassall Borland. Samuel Whittemore (1693–1793), father of Elizabeth Whittemore Watson (1716–1759), mother of William Watson (1755–1811), List of Leased Loyalist Properties, 1776, MSA, vol. 153, Board of War Letters, 1776–1780, 480. *Vital Records of Cambridge*, 791.

⁵⁵⁰ For more on the kidnapping of Luck Russell, Cato Newell, and Wenham Cary, see Suenna Smith, "Reimagining Prince Hall: Race, Freemasonry, and Material Culture In Boston, 1775–1870," (PhD diss., University of South Carolina 2021); Benjamin D. Remillard, "'What then are our Lives and Lebeties worth': The 18th Century Kidnapping Case that Shook Boston," *The Beehive* (blog), *Massachusetts Historical Society*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.masshist.org/beehiveblog/2022/01/what-then-are-our-lives-and-lebeties-worth-the-18th-century-kidnapping-case-that-shook-boston/>.

in the West Indies.”⁵⁵¹ The “three unhappy Africans” were trafficked to St. Barthélemy, a Swedish colony near Antigua.

Immediately, the families, friends, and Masonic brothers of the kidnapped men mobilized to rescue them. Prince Hall and other Black Bostonians signed a petition protesting “the inhuman and cruel treatment” of “three of our Brethren free cetysons of the Town of Boston.” According to the petition, this kidnapping was not the first, and the threat of enslavement prevented many able Black seamen from seeking work. The petitioners—including James Vassall’s future father-in-law, Primus Hall—asked Massachusetts to protect Black citizens from kidnapers who “sport[ed] with the Lives and Lebeties of There fellow men.”⁵⁵² Two other petitions by white Quakers and clergymen joined the Black Bostonians’ plea. Within weeks, Massachusetts passed a law banning the slave trade and providing relief to “the families of such unhappy persons as may be kidnapped or decoyed away from this Commonwealth.”⁵⁵³

Even the people who had once enslaved Luck Russell and the other kidnapped victims wrote to the Governor of St. Barthélemy to advocate for their release. Elizabeth Vassall Russell, the daughter of Henry and Penelope Vassall, joined with Richard Cary and Eliphalet Newell in signing a written declaration that the men they had once enslaved were now being “deprived of that Liberty which is the right of freemen . . . in direct violation of Justice and humanity.” The statement used paternalistic language, basing its support for Russell, Cary, and Newell on their blameless conduct as “faithful servants.” Still, Eliza Russell signed a document that said Luck Russell and the others were entitled “to the Protection of the Laws & Government they lived under.”⁵⁵⁴ Luck Russell and the other men returned to Boston as free men in July 1788.

Anthony and Cuba Vassall were able to hold onto both their freedom and their property through the early years of the American Republic, but they had to fight for dignity and respect

⁵⁵¹ John Atherton to Pehr Herman von Rosenstein, 21 April 1788, Massachusetts Correspondence 1786-1792, volume 289, 90, MSA.

⁵⁵² This petition was written on 27 February 1788, three weeks after Massachusetts ratified the US Constitution. Petition of Prince Hall, 27 February 1788, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Passed Acts, St. 1787, c.48, SC1/series 229, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:12176678>.

⁵⁵³ “An Act To Prevent The Slave Trade, And For Granting Relief To The Families Of Such Unhappy Persons As May Be Kidnapped Or Decoyed Away From This Common Wealth,” 26 March 1788, <https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/server/api/core/bitstreams/b7c5f604-f1a2-4736-b743-68be2a13e507/content>.

⁵⁵⁴ Letter from Elizabeth Russell, Richard Cary, and Eliphalet Newell, 20 April 1788, Massachusetts Correspondence 1786–1792, vol. 289, 89, MSA.

all their lives. In 1807, when Anthony Vassall was in his eighties or nineties, he filed a lawsuit against a wealthy white neighbor who tried to cheat him. The suit described Stephen Hartwell as a “yeoman alias Gentleman alias Trader,” and demanded that he pay an overdue bill of \$21.95 for farrier services Anthony Vassall had performed. After hearing the evidence, the court awarded Vassall a partial payment plus court costs totalling \$30.57.⁵⁵⁵

The Hartwells continued to plague Anthony Vassall until the last year of his long life. In the summer of 1810, Hartwell’s 25-year-old son, Stephen Hartwell, Jr., stole a saddle, a bridle, and an 8-year-old grey mare that belonged to Vassall. The younger Hartwell owned a livery stable on School Street in Boston, so it is likely that the horse and tack came to him through a client who had rented the horse from Vassall and returned it to Hartwell. Still, Hartwell refused to return the horse and tack to Anthony Vassall, “well knowing” that they belonged to him. Instead, he “converted the [horse and tack] to his own use.”⁵⁵⁶

Anthony Vassall sued again. The younger Hartwell did not show up for court, which seemed to annoy the judge. Vassall had requested only \$9.00 in damages, but the judge awarded him \$12.50, along with \$31.09 in court costs.⁵⁵⁷

Despite this victory, the dispute with the Hartwells must have been exhausting for Anthony Vassall. Official records say that he was 97 years old in 1810. Even if this is a slight exaggeration, Vassall was certainly in his mid-eighties at the very least. Not only was he still working, but he was also forced to chase down thieves and appear in court multiple times to defend his hard-won property. Through relentless work and strategic planning, Anthony Vassall had achieved independence, but he was never able to rest.

Anthony Vassall died on September 2, 1811. By that time, he and Cuba had built a small estate furnished with modest comforts. Their house was no longer the bare-bones “tenement” it had been in 1778. Instead, they had built and furnished a home with nine pictures and a looking glass on the walls, two small mahogany tables, pewter and Delft dishware, and a teapot with three sets of cups and saucers. They ate at a square pine table, kept eleven chairs for visits

⁵⁵⁵ The court awarded Anthony Vassall \$13.00 plus court costs of \$17.57. The case began in December 1807, but continued into June 1808. Vassall v. Hartwell (1808), Middlesex County Court Records via FamilySearch.

⁵⁵⁶ Vassall v. Hartwell (1811), Middlesex County Court Records via FamilySearch.

⁵⁵⁷ Vassall v. Hartwell (1811), Middlesex County Court Records via FamilySearch.

from family and friends, and slept in a large feather bed under a calico quilt. Their barn held an array of gardening tools, farrier's equipment, and a horse and cart. Anthony Vassall's probate inventory was taken in October, so it included provisions for the coming winter: thirty bushels of potatoes, twenty bushels of "Indian corn," and two tons of hay for the horse. All together, the house, barn, five acres, and personal possessions were worth \$1,218.91.⁵⁵⁸ Anthony Vassall did not leave a will, but many of his tools were purchased from the estate by his sons James, Darby, and Cyrus.⁵⁵⁹

Shortly after Anthony's death, Cuba Vassall filed a petition for the continuance of his annual pension.⁵⁶⁰ The Commonwealth agreed to continue payments of \$40 each year. In the end, Cuba Vassall collected this payment only once. She had probably been ill with consumption (tuberculosis) for a long time; as early as 1781, Anthony had argued that she was "sick." As her health worsened, she called the Rev. Abiel Holmes from the Congregational First Church of Cambridge to her bedside. She was baptized "by her own desire" on September 13, 1812, and died three days later, age 78.⁵⁶¹

Neither Cuba Vassall nor Anthony Vassall has a surviving gravestone. The exact location of their graves is unknown, though they were probably buried in the Old Burying Ground near Harvard Square, just a few hundred yards from the home they had built for themselves and their children.⁵⁶²

⁵⁵⁸ Anthony Vassall Inventory, 1811, Middlesex Probate #23335.

⁵⁵⁹ At a sale of Anthony Vassall's property on 16 November 1811, James Vassall bought two saddles; Darby Vassall bought several hoes, a shovel, a grindstone, a gridiron, "ropes and strops," and some "old iron"; Cyrus Vassall bought a horse cart, horse tack, two axes, a crowbar, a saw, a brass kettle, carpenter's tools, and some "old iron." Anthony Vassall Probate, 1811, Middlesex Probate #23335.

⁵⁶⁰ Petition of Cuby Vassall, 1811, Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Passed Resolves, Resolves 1811, c.154, SC1/series 228, MSA, Boston, Massachusetts. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:12208688>.

⁵⁶¹ Records of the Church of Christ at Cambridge in New England, 483. Rev. Holmes was the father of poet and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes, and grandfather of Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

⁵⁶² Other family members who were sent to Cambridge for burial during this period include James Vassall (May 1812), Lucy Vassall (d.15 July 1811, age 27), George Vassall (d.13 Feb 1816, age 17 months), Lucy Vassall (d. 11 Dec 1828, age 54). See ongoing work by Aja Lans, Jason Ur, and Andrew Blair, "Mapping Postmortem Segregation: A Proposal to Survey the Old Burying Ground in Cambridge," <https://jasonur.scholars.harvard.edu/cambridge>.

CHAPTER FIVE

BUILDING FREE BLACK MASSACHUSETTS, 1790–1865

"for the mutual benefit of each other . . . behaving ourselves at the same time as true and faithful Citizens of the Commonwealth in which we live."

— "Laws of the African Society" of Boston, 1796

At the time of the first Federal census in 1790, Cuba and Anthony Vassall's family was part of a small community of free Black people living in Cambridge. Of the sixty free people of color in the town, about half lived in eight households headed by free Black people, while the others lived in ones and twos as servants in households headed by white people.⁵⁶³ Although the census did not list every person by name, it is likely that the five people living on the Black Vassalls' new farm north of Harvard College were Anthony (in his seventies), 56-year-old Cuba, 21-year-old Darby, 19-year-old Cyrus, and 12-year-old Nancy.⁵⁶⁴ The oldest surviving son, James, was in his thirties. He may have already moved to Boston, where the oldest Vassall daughter, 23-year-old Flora, was living with her husband, Bristol Maranday, and their young daughter, Susannah.⁵⁶⁵

Darby, Cyrus, and Nancy would soon move to Boston as well, though they maintained close ties with their family in Cambridge throughout their lives. All the Vassall children and grandchildren carried on their parents' tradition of pursuing self-determination. In cooperation with their kin and neighbors, they helped build and strengthen free Black communities committed to mutual protection, civic engagement, and prosperity.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶³ There were 60 free people of color in Cambridge in 1790. Thirty-one lived in Black households, while twenty-nine lived in households headed by white people. *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Massachusetts*, Bureau of the Census, Government Printing Office (1908) 136–7.

⁵⁶⁴ *Heads of Families at the First Census (MA)*, 136.

⁵⁶⁵ Bristol Maranday's name was spelled many ways, including Bristow, Miranday, Miranda, and Morande. This report uses the spelling "Maranday," which Flora Maranday used for her signature. See Anthony Vassall Probate, 1811, Middlesex Probate #23335.

⁵⁶⁶ Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York University Press, 2016).

For the children and grandchildren of Anthony and Cuba Vassall, this work combined the most intimate relationships of family life with service to the wider community. They married into families known for their public advocacy, becoming kin to celebrated figures like Prince Hall and Quock Walker.⁵⁶⁷ They also maintained older ties, giving succor to relatives who had fallen on hard times. Together, the Black Vassalls and their extended families imagined new futures for themselves and their descendants. Many of these dreams involved improving life for Black people in Massachusetts, but the Black Vassalls were also part of movements that envisioned other possibilities beyond New England's shores. This chapter traces the lives of the surviving Vassall siblings—James, Flora, Darby, Cyrus, and Nancy—and their children as they established their own families, helped build free Black Massachusetts, fought the evil of slavery, and engaged with the global Black Atlantic diaspora.

Moving to Boston

Free Black people called Boston home before the American Revolution, but the community grew in the 1780s as Black residents chipped away at slavery in Massachusetts. Though many degrees of unfreedom persisted in the Commonwealth past 1790, Black Bay Staters asserted their right to the status of free and equal citizens.

In 1790, the largest community of free people of color was in Boston, where 766 Black people lived, worked, and pursued the momentous task of transforming freedom into prosperity.⁵⁶⁸ Black barbers, clothing sellers, and soap boilers opened shops in the North End, on Beacon Hill, and near modern-day City Hall Plaza. Dockworkers and waiters established independent households, some of them for the first time, while many domestic servants continued to live in the homes of their white employers. Black families frequently convened in

⁵⁶⁷ Quock Walker's name was spelled many ways, including Kwaku and Quork. Kwaku is a name traditionally granted to boys born on Wednesday by the Akan, a large ethnic group primarily located in Ghana and parts of Ivory Coast. For more information, see "Library Guides: Researching Genealogy Virtual Library Resources: The Akan Day Names and Their Embedded Ancient Symbolism," n.d. <https://pvamu.libguides.com/c.php?g=1434869&p=10652498>. This report uses the spelling, "Quock," which is found commonly in the writing of his contemporaries.

⁵⁶⁸ In 1790, there were 18,320 people in Boston and the Harbor Islands. Of these, 761 free people of color lived in the city and 5 lived on the islands. 1790 Federal Census, Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts, Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Massachusetts* (Government Printing Office, 1908), 10.

the same streets and buildings for mutual aid, comfort, and camaraderie. In the early decades of the new republic, Black Bostonians founded new civic organizations—schools, churches, fraternal societies—to uplift one another, share educational resources, and support widows, orphans, and the poor of a community navigating intergenerational impoverishment. Many free Black Bay Staters owned property, paid taxes, and voted.⁵⁶⁹ While this freedom was fragile, their efforts show a community rooted in dignity, activism, and insistence on their right to carve out lives of their own choosing.

Some of the Black Vassall children may have lived in Boston in the late 1780s, when their father was working for Thomas Russell, but the family moved back to Cambridge when Anthony and Cuba Vassall purchased their small farm in 1787. Their eldest daughter, Flora, stayed in Boston permanently. On October 4, 1787, she married Bristol Maranday, a “Labourer” from Hartford, Connecticut who purchased his own freedom by paying Abigail Griswold and her daughter Abigail Jr. “100 silver dollars” in April 1781.⁵⁷⁰ They were married by Rev. John Clarke of the First Church of Boston. Their daughter Susannah was born soon after.⁵⁷¹

In 1790, Flora’s family lived in a house they shared with Robert Jackson, a free Black man, and one other person, possibly Robert’s future wife, Jane Downes.⁵⁷² The practice of sharing living quarters was common for those managing households on limited incomes. Their community was diverse, made up of many Black and white neighbors, and their house was located only a few doors away from the home of Leonard Vassall Borland, the grandson of

⁵⁶⁹ Van Gosse, *The First Reconstruction: Black Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

⁵⁷⁰ When Flora and Bristol Maranday’s daughter, Margaret Burns, died on Nantucket on 25 November 1890, her father’s birthplace was listed as Hartford, Connecticut. Deaths Registered in the Town of Nantucket, Massachusetts, 1890 via Ancestry.com. Wethersfield Historical Society, “Free and Enslaved People of Color in Wethersfield 1634 – 1848 - Wethersfield Historical Society,” February 16, 2025, <https://www.wethersfieldhistory.org/free-and-enslaved-people-of-color-in-wethersfield-1634-1848/entry/1454/>. For a description of Bristol as a “Labourer,” see Boston, Massachusetts Taking Records, 1800, ward 7, p. 18, from page 300 of G. Whiting’s dissertation: <https://dash.harvard.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/ccb809f3-cb11-4399-a170-4482584cd51c/content>.

⁵⁷¹ When she was baptized at King’s Chapel in 1804, Susannah Maranday’s baptism was recorded as an “adult” baptism while Margaret and John were “infant” baptisms. This suggests that Susannah was likely an adolescent, born between 1788 and 1792. Susannah Maranday married William Harris in Boston on May 16, 1815. Boston, Massachusetts, U.S., Marriages, 1700–1809, Ancestry.com.

⁵⁷² Robert Jackson and Jane Downes were married 19 May 1791. First Census of the United States, 1790, Boston, Suffolk, Massachusetts, Series M637, Roll 4, Page 56, The National Archives in Washington, DC, Family History Library Film: 0568144.

Leonard Vassall and nephew of Henry Vassall. Members of the two households would have been aware of one another's shared history and close proximity. Flora and Bristol had at least three children—Susannah, Margaret, and John—all of whom were baptized at King's Chapel in Boston on the same day, September 23, 1804.⁵⁷³

Most records describe Bristol Maranday as a laborer, but he was also an entrepreneur who aspired to run his own tavern. In the mid-1790s, he set himself up as a "tavernman" and kept a "public tavern" that sold rum, brandy, and other strong spirits. Unfortunately, Maranday did not have a license to sell alcohol. In 1797, he was prosecuted for running an unlicensed tavern and forced to pay a fine of £20 or \$66.99.⁵⁷⁴

Bristol Maranday's "tavern" may have been a business he ran out of his house, but it is possible that it was a more occasional enterprise. In 1798, Cyrus Vassall and nine other Black Bostonians wrote a petition to the town Selectmen regarding their safety when they sold refreshments on Boston Common during public holidays. Cyrus and his colleagues wrote that they had, "for a number of years past," set up temporary carts or stalls on the Common and "other places of public resort" to sell "a variety of Articles in the way of refreshment . . . for the convenience of people in general, as for their own emolument." The Black vendors writing the petition recounted being "treated by the white People with great cruelty & barbarity." This included both having their stock ruined and direct violence that put them in "imminent hazard of losing their lives." The petition asks for protection from these attackers. Cyrus Vassall and the others emphasized that they were "disposed to live peaceably with all men," and that they "are, & always have been, ready to show every mark of respect to the white people."⁵⁷⁵

Bristol Maranday was not one of the ten men who signed this petition, but he may have been one of the vendors they hoped to protect. His indictment says that he sold alcohol on October 28, 1796, and "at divers[e] other days and times as well before as afterwards," rather than specifying an address where he operated his tavern. If Maranday sold rum and brandy to white customers on public holidays, he may have been vulnerable to violence as well as the

⁵⁷³ King's Chapel, "Uncovering the Past - Online Exhibit," n.d. <https://www.kings-chapel.org/uncover11.html>.

⁵⁷⁴ Indictment of Bristol Miranda, 3 January 1797, Suffolk Court Records, Miscellaneous Papers, Volume 3, 1792–1799, #392, Suffolk County Court Files, Boston.

⁵⁷⁵ Petition of Cyrus Vassall, Scipio Walton, et al., 24 May 1798, Boston Town Records (Ms.Bos.7), vol. 8, p. 176, Boston Public Library.

enforcement of the town's licensing laws. The same Massachusetts authorities who surveilled, prosecuted, and fined Bristol Maranday for selling alcohol did not protect Black vendors from the violence of their white customers.⁵⁷⁶

Buying Property on May Street

The Black Vassall siblings and their spouses worked many different jobs to support their families, but they also followed their parents' example by purchasing land. In 1796, the same year Bristol Maranday was indicted for selling alcohol, Darby and Cyrus Vassall bought a piece of land in Boston. Twenty-seven-year-old Darby was already living in Boston, working as a servant in an elegant Summer Street mansion owned by merchant Joseph Barrell.⁵⁷⁷ Cyrus, who was two years younger than Darby, was just moving to the city from Cambridge.⁵⁷⁸ Together, the brothers took out a mortgage of \$433.33 to purchase an irregular parcel of about 4,000 square feet on May Street, amid an already established community of Black Bostonians on Beacon Hill. Darby later stated that the lot "hung like the eve of an old fashioned house," either in reference to its shape or the ground's notable slope.⁵⁷⁹ This small plot of urban land was a considerable investment for the Vassall brothers. It cost five times as much as their parents' house lot in Cambridge, and was similar to the value of real estate owned by a typical blacksmith, sailmaker, or small shopkeeper.⁵⁸⁰

After paying off the mortgage in 1798, the brothers divided the land between them, with Darby taking the west side and Cyrus taking the east. Soon after, Darby sold the southwestern half of his portion to Bristol Maranday. Both Cyrus and Maranday built houses on

⁵⁷⁶ Indictment of Bristol Miranda, 3 January 1797, Suffolk County Court Files.

⁵⁷⁷ Barrell's mansion was known for its extensive gardens. City of Boston Tax Records, reel 8, 1796, <https://archive.org/details/cityofbostontaxr8179bost/page/n441/mode/2up>; "Memoir of Peter Chardon Brooks," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, vol. 3, New England Historic Genealogical Society (October 1854) 304.

⁵⁷⁸ The deed describes Cyrus as "of Cambridge." (Suffolk Deeds 183: 79, 183: 92).

⁵⁷⁹ The location of this house is described in the 1835 deposition as "May Street near the corner of Southack Street." May Street later became Revere Street, while Southack Street became Phillips Street. *A Record of the Streets, Alleys, Places, Etc. in the City of Boston*, Municipal Print Office (1902), 237, 337; (Suffolk Deeds 183: 79, 183: 92); 1835 deposition

⁵⁸⁰ In comparison, the real estate of Joseph Barrell, who employed Darby Vassall as a servant, was worth \$2,500. Many artisans and tradesmen on the Boston Tax rolls for 1796 owned real estate valued between \$200 and \$500. City of Boston Tax Records, reel 8, 1796.

their portions before 1800, and Flora's family may have lived there before they moved to Charlestown.⁵⁸¹ Darby added a well to his quarter of the parcel and built a "New Brick Mansion house" in 1806.⁵⁸²

Although both Cyrus and Darby Vassall built houses on the May Street property, they may not have lived on the property continuously. Both brothers worked as live-in servants to wealthy white Bostonians: John Sullivan and Peter Chardon Brooks, respectively.

The May Street property was an important financial anchor for the Vassall family. Even when they did not live there, it was an asset they could use, rent out, or borrow against. Both Cyrus and Darby took out mortgages on their portions in order to meet more immediate expenses. In 1801, Cyrus mortgaged his portion of the property to his father for \$250, which he paid back in 1809.⁵⁸³ Darby took out a much larger mortgage of \$2,000 from Samuel Brown in 1807.⁵⁸⁴ While the exact relationship between Samuel Brown and Darby Vassall is unclear, Brown may have been either an employer or a friend. Darby lived with Samuel Brown in 1824, and when Brown died in 1825, his will fully forgave the mortgage. He also bequeathed many personal items to Darby, including clothing and a featherbed, suggesting a close relationship.⁵⁸⁵ Three years after Brown's death, Darby mortgaged the property again, this time for \$927.⁵⁸⁶

Owning the May Street parcel gave the Vassall brothers a financial backstop that protected them during lean times. Eventually, the land passed to their daughters. Cyrus's portion went to his daughter, Eliza Flagg Vassall [Sprague], after his death, and Darby sold his portion to his son-in-law, Jonas Clark, the husband of his daughter Frances in 1829.⁵⁸⁷ Later, Jonas and Frances bought Eliza's part of the land, reuniting three quarters of the original parcel in 1838.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸¹ Darby Vassall gave a deposition in a property investigation in 1835. In it, he says that Cyrus Vassall built his house "around the time of the division" in 1798. He also says that the Maranday house was "taken down" in 1807 or 1808. Vassal for Boot et al., Suffolk County Deeds, Vol. 387, pp. 123 to 127.

⁵⁸² The well existed in 1820. Suffolk Deeds, 220: 277; Suffolk Deeds, vol. 268, page 29.

⁵⁸³ Suffolk Deeds, vol. 196, page 244.

⁵⁸⁴ Suffolk Deeds, vol. 220, page 277.

⁵⁸⁵ Will of Samuel Brown, Suffolk Probate #27627.

⁵⁸⁶ Suffolk Deeds, vol. 327, page 259.

⁵⁸⁷ Suffolk Deeds, vol. 343, page 53.

⁵⁸⁸ Suffolk Deeds, vol. 430, page 117.

Family Networks

As the Vassall siblings worked to establish themselves financially, they also established their own families.

In 1802, Darby Vassall married a free Black woman named Lucy Holland.⁵⁸⁹ Lucy's father, Jupiter Holland, hailed from the North Shore, and had been free since at least 1758.⁵⁹⁰ He married Phillis Ridgeway in Woburn in 1772, and Lucy was born there around 1776.⁵⁹¹ Lucy was a teenager when she inherited a small estate from a white neighbor.⁵⁹² Darby and Lucy were married at the Brattle Street Church on April 4, 1802. Between 1803 and 1814, Darby and Lucy Vassall had seven children, of whom only one survived to adulthood.⁵⁹³

⁵⁸⁹ While all of this went on, the fate of the white Vassall estate remained in limbo. Penelope Royall Vassall, widow of Henry, died in 1800. The estate experienced changes in occupancy and ownership, serving as home to Andrew Craigie for a time, then was eventually returned to Isaac Royall's heirs, who sold it. Published sources give two different dates for Darby Vassall's marriage to Lucy Holland. The civil record published in *Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (1903) gives the date as July 14, 1801. The published records of the Brattle Street Church give the date as April 4, 1802. This confusion may arise from a conflation of the publication of marriage banns with the date of the wedding. Indeed, Ancestry.com's database of Massachusetts Vital Records, 1620–1988, shows the 1801 date as part of a document titled "Boston Marriage Publications, 1798–1807, volume 7," with "Publication" indicating banns being published, rather than the actual wedding date. *A volume of records relating to the early history of Boston: containing Boston marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 477; *Church in Brattle Square, The Manifesto Church: Records of the Church in Brattle Square Boston, 1699–1872* (Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), 269.

⁵⁹⁰ See Mellen Chamberlain, *A Documentary History of Chelsea Including the Boston Precincts of Winnimmet[,] Rumney Marsh, and Pullen Point, 1624–1824, vol. 2* (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1908), 593.

⁵⁹¹ Lucy Holland Vassall died on December 11, 1828, in Boston. In the Boston death records, her age is recorded as 54. Her body was transported to Cambridge, where she was buried on December 13, 1828. In the Cambridge death records, her age is given as 54. Therefore, her estimated birthdate is 1774–6. See Baldwin, *Vital Records of Cambridge, Massachusetts*, 772.

⁵⁹² A white widow, Anna Johnson, who had no heirs, left her small estate to young Lucy in her 1781 will (she died on March 17, 1785): 'I Give & Bequeath all my Estate that I shall Die Siezd of both Real and Personal To Lucy Holland Daughter of Jupiter and Phillis Holland,' she pledged." Middlesex County Probate, #12622; Gloria McCahon Whiting, "'Endearing Ties': Black Family Life in Early New England" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2016), 302–303; *Woburn Records of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, from 1640–1873, Part II: Deaths*, ed. Edward F. Johnson, (Woburn, 1890), 100.

⁵⁹³ Children of Darby and Lucy Vassall baptized at the Brattle Street Church: William (born April 21, 1805; baptized May 5, 1805); Frances Holland Vassall (born November 9, 1806; baptized December 7, 1806; note that her name appears as "Francis" in the transcribed records); Sally Kimball (or Campbell) Vassall (born March 18, 1810; baptized May 6, 1810). An unnamed child, age five weeks, died of "internal fits" on August 26, 1805 (this may have been William with an incorrect age). Another child (probably Sally), age 17 months, died October 20, 1811. Two other children—Charles Ward and Rhoda Crosby (or Goosby)—were baptized at King's Chapel on July 8, 1804. Another son, Richard Chardon Vassall, was born on September 13, 1814, and died in February 1816. *The Manifesto Church. Records of the church in Brattle square, Boston, with lists of communicants, baptisms, marriages and funerals, 1699-1872* (1902), 209, 210, 213, 278, 283;

<https://archive.org/details/manifestochurch00massgoog/page/114/mode/2up>; Source Information

Cyrus Vassall also married a woman named Lucy. Little is yet known about Lucy Jenkins (1784–1811), but that they married at Boston’s Trinity Church in 1805 and had two surviving children: Eliza Flagg (b.1806) and Cyrus Gunther (b.1809).⁵⁹⁴ The oldest Vassall brother, James, also lived in Boston, where he worked as a Barber. In 1810, he married Abigail Hall, the daughter of Primus Hall.⁵⁹⁵ This marriage formally united the Hall and Vassall families. Although the African Meeting House existed at this time, James and Abigail were married by Rev. Caleb Blood of the Third Baptist Church on Charles Street.⁵⁹⁶

Catherine, Anthony and Cuba’s oldest granddaughter, remained at home in Cambridge with her grandparents until their deaths in 1811 and 1812.⁵⁹⁷ She married Adam Lewis in 1815. Although Catherine inherited her grandparents’ house and lived there for a few years, by 1819

Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. Original data: Town and City Clerks of Massachusetts. Massachusetts Vital and Town Records. Provo, UT: Holbrook Research Institute (Jay and Delene Holbrook); *Columbian Centinel*, February 14, 1816.

⁵⁹⁴ Eliza Flagg Vassall Sprague was 35 when she died in 1841. Boston Death Records, Ancestry.com, *Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620–1988* via Ancestry.com, *Boston, Massachusetts, U.S., Marriages, 1700–1809* [database on-line]. Original data: Boston, Massachusetts Registry Department, *Boston Marriages from 1700 to 1751*, vol. 1 (Boston, 1898); Boston, Massachusetts Registry Department, *Boston Marriages from 1752–1809*, vol. 2 (Boston, 1903).

⁵⁹⁵ There has been some confusion as to Abigail Hall’s identity. In some genealogies, she has been called Abigail Hill, which is the spelling that appears in transcriptions and indices of the Boston Marriage records from 1810 (the original handwritten record is not perfectly legible, and could read either Hill or Hall). When Abigail Vassall died in 1816, she was a widow, and her next of kin in the Boston burial records is given as Primus Hall. Primus Hall also served as executor of James Vassall’s estate in 1814. *Boston Death Index, 1810–1848*, Ancestry; *Boston Death Records, volume 20, 1810–1821, North District*, Ancestry; James Hall Probate, Suffolk Probate #24393.

⁵⁹⁶ In 1810, the Third Baptist Church still required Black congregants to sit in a segregated gallery. When Black and white activists tried to integrate the pews in the 1830s, they were expelled from the congregation and went on to found the explicitly anti-slavery Tremont Temple. Boston Marriage Records, Ancestry.com. *Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620–1988* [database on-line], <https://www.nps.gov/boaf/learn/historyculture/charles-street-meeting-house.htm>.

⁵⁹⁷ This report refers to Catherine Vassall [Lewis] as Cuba and Anthony Vassall’s granddaughter, though it is not certain who her parents were. She was almost certainly not the daughter of Flora Vassall Maranday, whose three children were all born around the same time as Catherine Vassall (1790s) and shared the surname Maranday. It is possible that Catherine may have been the daughter of one of the Vassall sons (James, Cyrus, or Darby), though she is not mentioned in their probate records, as she likely would have been if she were their child. If Catherine was the biological daughter of one of the Vassall siblings, it is most likely that she was the child of Nancy Vassall, who was a young woman in the 1790s and died unmarried in 1802. It is also possible that Catherine Vassall was related to Anthony and Cuba Vassall by some other tie of kinship or community but was raised by them. Whatever their exact relationship, Anthony and Cuba Vassall treated Catherine Vassall as an equal with their children and grandchildren. After Anthony Vassall died, his estate was divided equally among his two surviving children (Darby and Flora), James’s widow (Abigail), Cyrus’s daughter (Eliza), and Catherine Vassall. This further suggests that Catherine may have been Nancy’s child, since she inherited a share of the estate that was not part of the portions allotted to James, Flora, Darby, or Cyrus.

she and Adam had purchased a triangular lot at Garden Street and Concord Avenue to build their home.⁵⁹⁸ Over time, many members of Adam Lewis's extended family made their home in the same neighborhood, creating a distinct Black neighborhood known as Lewisville.⁵⁹⁹ Among these relatives were Peter and Minor Walker Lewis (Adam Lewis's great-uncle and great-aunt), who lived there from approximately 1830 to 1877.⁶⁰⁰ Peter was a free Black yeoman from Middlesex County, while Minor had previously been enslaved in Worcester; they moved their large family from Barre in western Massachusetts to Cambridge in 1821, where they would become important players in building the Black community.

Marriage created and strengthened the Black Vassall siblings' ties to Black communities in Boston, Cambridge, and beyond. These new connections coexisted alongside older kinship ties, including their association with the Tulip family of Lexington. In 1820, years after both Cuba Vassall and James Vassall had died, the Tulip family found themselves in dire straits and turned to Darby Vassall for help. He housed them for several months, likely at his "tenement" on May Street.⁶⁰¹ Whether or not James Tulip was James Vassall's father, Darby treated the Tulips as kin.

Early Civic Work (1796–1810)

The Vassall children's marriages added bonds of affection to the ties of solidarity and mutual support that united them to their fellow Black Bostonians. Together, the Black Vassalls

⁵⁹⁸ According to the Boston Vital Records, Catherine Vassall and Adam Lewis were either married or had their marriage banns published on March 20, 1815. Some records record a marriage date of April [?] 1815. They were married by Rev. Charles Russell Lowell of the West Congregational Church in Boston. In 1818, Rev. Lowell bought Elmwood, Thomas and Elizabeth Vassall Oliver's house in Cambridge. His son, the poet James Russell Lowell, was born there in 1819 and lived there many years, close to his friend and colleague, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011; "Massachusetts, State Vital Records, 1638-1927", FamilySearch <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:FH8J-92X: Thu May 23 00:11:03 UTC 2024>), Entry for Adam Lewis and Catherine Lewis, Apr 1815. Susan E. Maycock and Charles M. Sullivan, *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development* (2016), 281.

⁵⁹⁹ A short five-minute walk away from Lewisville stood the John Vassall house where Catherine's parents had been enslaved. The fate of that building was in limbo. Andrew Craigie, who had taken over property at 105 Brattle Street in 1792, died in 1819, leaving his wife bankrupt. After selling many of their belongings, she brought in lodgers. Probate Records 1648–1924, Middlesex County, Massachusetts.

⁶⁰⁰ Maycock and Sullivan, 282.

⁶⁰¹With thanks to Robert Bellinger and Leslie Masson. Receipt to Darby Vassall from Lexington Overseers of the Poor, 1 April 1820, Overseers of the Poor Records, c0168, Box 1, Lexington Historical Society.

and their neighbors shaped their lives around optimism for the future and shared responsibility within their community.

In 1796, the same year that they bought their May Street property, Cyrus and Darby Vassall were among forty-four founding members of the African Society, a benevolent fraternity that worked to support and advocate for Black people in Boston. Society members proclaimed themselves “true and faithful Citizens of the Commonwealth in which we live,” and promised both to uphold the laws and provide for “the mutual benefit of each other.”⁶⁰² Their monthly dues of 25 cents, combined with profits from quarterly lectures, provided health benefits to members and death benefits to their widows and orphans. The African Society also sponsored lectures for its members, and published several of them, “almost all on the history of enslavement in the Americas.”⁶⁰³

The African Society existed alongside another important Black fraternal organization, the African Lodge of Freemasons, founded by Prince Hall. Blocked from membership by white colonial Freemasons, Hall gained entry into a lodge of British soldiers from Ireland in 1775, then began organizing his own lodge, African Lodge No. 1, which acquired full rights from the Grand Lodge of England in 1784. Under Hall’s leadership, the African Lodge became an institutional center for black activism, especially for Black men working to secure abolition and civil rights.⁶⁰⁴ While neither Darby nor Cyrus Vassall appears to have been a member of the African Lodge, Flora Vassall’s husband, Bristol Maranday, was. His name appears in the Lodge’s records several times between 1785 and 1787, including notations that he paid dues and fines.⁶⁰⁵

One of the principal concerns for all Black Bostonians was education. In 1798, the African Society raised funds for a new “African School” to teach both Black children and adults who had never had the opportunity to learn. At the time, Cyrus Vassall was the Society’s secretary. He was one of the primary advocates for the school, alongside Primus Hall, who was both the son of community leader Prince Hall and the future father-in-law of James Vassall.

⁶⁰² *Laws of the African Society, Instituted at Boston, Anno Domini 1796*, Massachusetts Historical Society: https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=573.

⁶⁰³ Massachusetts Historical Society, *Laws of the African Society, Instituted at Boston, Anno Domini 1796*, https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=573&pid=42.

⁶⁰⁴ Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds*, 159-161. Kendrick, Stephen and Kendrick, Paul. *Sarah’s Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changes America* (Beacon Hill Press, 2004).

⁶⁰⁵ Records of the African Lodge (Boston, MA), Samuel Crocker Lawrence Library, Grand Lodge of Massachusetts.

At first, the school met at Primus Hall's house. In 1808, it moved to the basement of the new African Meeting House, a fine brick building constructed in 1806 to house the First African Baptist Church.⁶⁰⁶ During its first year at this location, Cyrus Vassall served as the school's teacher. He was succeeded by Prince Saunders, a Black teacher who attended Dartmouth and later became "a diplomatic and civil officer of [Henri] Christophe, emperor of Hayti."⁶⁰⁷

The African School was of tremendous significance to Boston's Black families. Literacy was a crucial skill for establishing businesses, communicating by letter, reading newspapers and books, writing poems, essays, and orations, and advocating for legal protections through petitions and the courts. Adults and children alike studied at the African School, and several of the Vassalls were probably among its students. Parents typically paid 12.5 cents per week for their children to attend, though donations from the community also kept the school afloat.⁶⁰⁸

The Black Vassall family had already made generational strides in literacy. Both Cuba and Anthony Vassall signed official papers with a mark, but their children and grandchildren could all sign their names. Catherine's signature was elegant, with decorative loops and flourishes that suggested she was a fluent writer, while Flora's had heavier lines. James signed his name clearly and consistently, while Darby's signature and spelling of his name varied.⁶⁰⁹ Like many adults in the Black Boston community, Darby may have attended some of the lessons that Cyrus taught at the African School, where he shared his achievements in literacy with his neighbors.

The Vassalls' commitment to education remained a priority over the decades. In 1812, Darby Vassall joined several community leaders in a petition asking that the African School should be formally incorporated and funded. The petitioners argued that the "blessings of education" that had benefitted Black children, adults, and indeed the whole town, could not be sustained by donations from the Black community and "a few benevolent gentlemen." They

⁶⁰⁶ Beth Ann Bower, *The African Meeting House, Massachusetts: Summary Report of Archaeological Excavation, 1975–1986* (Museum of African American History, Boston).

⁶⁰⁷ Petition from Colored Citizens of Boston to the Primary School Committee of the City of Boston (1846), p. 16. ShaVonte' Mills, "An African School for African Americans: Black Demands for Education in Antebellum Boston," *History of Education Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2021): 478–502, <https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2021.38>.

⁶⁰⁸ Petition to the School Committee (1846), p. 16.

⁶⁰⁹ James Vassall, Flora Maranday, Darby Vassall, and Cyrus Vassall all signed Anthony Vassall's probate record, as did Catherine Vassall. Anthony Vassall Middlesex Probate #23335.

asked for “an act of incorporation” to facilitate “permanent support.”⁶¹⁰ Among the men who signed their names alongside Darby Vassall’s were Primus Hall and Fortune Symmes, who had worked alongside Anthony Vassall at Thomas Russell’s. The Boston School Committee agreed to recognize the African School and allot \$200 per year, but it remained chronically underfunded and segregated.⁶¹¹

The African School and African Meeting House were also important places for the community to gather.⁶¹² In 1808, Cyrus Vassall was a member of the committee that planned a celebration to commemorate the official end of the transatlantic trafficking of kidnapped Africans to the United States. The event began with a procession of two hundred people to the African Meeting House, where they heard an oration by Rev. Jedidiah Morse. The music for the occasion was “performed principally by the people of colour,” and was “appropriate and excellent.”⁶¹³ Although the ceremony was of great importance to Black Bostonians, it met with mixed reviews from the local press. The editors of the *Independent Chronicle* described the event as regular, decent, devout, and solemn. However, they added that the “events celebrated by these people are certainly of great interest to the cause of humanity and religion... we think, however, one celebration of this kind sufficient.”⁶¹⁴ The African Society continued to observe the celebration on July 14th annually.

Churches and Religious Life

The years after the Revolution were a time of great change in American churches. The departure of the Loyalists gutted Anglican congregations like King’s Chapel in Boston and Christ Church in Cambridge. At the same time, a major rift developed within the congregations

⁶¹⁰ Petition of Primus Hall, 1812, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Senate Unpassed Legislation 1812, Docket 4522, SC1/series 231, MSA, Boston, <https://smithcourtstories.org/assets/petition-to-the-massachusetts-legislature/>. “The Struggle for Equal Education,” U.S. National Park Service, n.d. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-struggle-for-equal-education.htm>.

⁶¹¹ Kathryn Grover and Janine V. Da Silva, “Historic Resource Study: Boston African American National Historic Site,” Boston African American National Historic Site, 2002, 79–81.

⁶¹² Bower, Beth Ann. “The African Meeting House, Massachusetts: Summary Report of Archaeological Excavation, 1975– 1986,” Museum of African American History, Boston, MA.

⁶¹³ Jedidiah Morse, “A Discourse, Delivered at the African Meeting-house, in Boston, July 14, 1808: In Grateful Celebration of the Abolition of the African Slave-trade, by the Governments of the United States, Great Britain and Denmark,” (Boston, 1809).

⁶¹⁴ *Independent Chronicle*, July 18, 1808

descended from the Puritan churches, pitting traditional Congregationalists against the newer, more liberal theology of Unitarianism. Many New England churches split over the ensuing controversies. Meanwhile, the growth of Baptist congregations and the establishment of Boston's first permanent Methodist (1792) and Catholic (1803) churches highlighted growing diversity among Boston's Christian communities.⁶¹⁵

For Black Bostonians, one of the most pressing issues was the ongoing discrimination practiced by Boston's churches. In nearly all congregations, Black worshippers were forced to sit in segregated galleries or pews. While many Boston churches did allow Black people to become members, they often restricted their right to vote on church matters or hold positions of influence. In the 1780s and 1790s, various Black preachers held weekday services in homes and public places, including Faneuil Hall, but they did not have a permanent church.⁶¹⁶

This discrimination was one of the driving forces that led to the creation of the First African Baptist Church in 1805 and the building of the African Meeting House in 1806. In addition to a vital gathering space for education and civic activism, the African Meeting House was a vibrant church community under the leadership of a Black pastor, Rev. Thomas Paul.⁶¹⁷

Yet Black Bostonians were no more uniform in their religious affiliations than their white neighbors. While the African Meeting House was an important center of community life, many families—including the Black Vassalls—attended and worshipped at other churches. The Vassall family's property on May Street was less than a quarter mile from the African Meeting House, but the Vassall siblings did not celebrate their marriages or baptisms there. Instead, their baptismal and marriage records show that they attended many different congregations, some of which had widely divergent theological views. While some of these affiliations may have

⁶¹⁵ Of course, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and people of other faiths had lived in Boston or visited its port for centuries. Many worshipped in private or in small groups before they established permanent congregations in the city: the first Methodist church in Boston was established in 1792, the first Catholic church in 1803. The first synagogue in Boston was not established until 1842. "Methodist Churches in Boston Since 1792 | School of Theology Library," n.d. Accessed 18 August 2025. <https://www.bu.edu/sthlibrary/archives/neccah/records-files-state/boston-records/>.

⁶¹⁶ Dianne Wheaton Capiello, "Where the Spirit of the Lord Is, There Is Freedom": Black Spirituality and the Rise of the Antislavery Movement, 1740–1841" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2011), 149, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/e6a85ef7-156a-4528-b8bc-d88a788e8aa7/content>.

⁶¹⁷ Beth Ann Bower and Byron Rushing, "The African Meeting House: The Center for the 19th Century Afro-American Community in Boston," in *Archeological Perspectives on Ethnicity in America, Baywood Monographs in Archaeology*, 1, ed. Robert L. Schuyler (Baywood Publishing Co., Inc., 1980).

been brief, they suggest the breadth of religious belief among the Vassall siblings, the importance of personal connections to particular ministers or church communities, and the fluidity of their churchgoing practices.

Each of the five Vassall siblings was married in a different church. Moreover, only Cyrus Vassall baptized his children in the same church where he was married.

In October 1787, Flora Vassall and Bristol Maranday were married by Rev. John Clarke, minister of the First Church of Boston. As the name indicates, First Church was the original Congregationalist church planted by the Puritans of the Winthrop Fleet in the 1630s. In the 1780s, it still had a reputation as a conservative congregation that stood in staunch opposition to the spiritual enthusiasm of the Great Awakening.⁶¹⁸

However, when it came time to baptize their three children in 1804, Flora and Bristol chose King's Chapel, a church with an extremely different theology.⁶¹⁹ King's Chapel was Boston's first Anglican church, founded in 1686 to oppose the Puritan practices of congregations like First Church. Before the Revolution, King's Chapel was attended by many Loyalist families, including the white Vassalls. Afterward, it became the first Unitarian congregation in the United States. King's Chapel had many Black congregants, including Hannibal Allen and Cato Morey, both founding members of the African Society, but its seating remained segregated until the 1920s.⁶²⁰

Darby Vassall and Lucy Holland also baptized two of their children—Charles and Rhoda—at King's Chapel in 1804, despite the fact that they were longtime congregants of the Brattle Street Church in Boston. Darby was baptized at Brattle Street in 1796, and he and Lucy

⁶¹⁸ Until February 1787, First Church was led by Rev. Charles Chauncy, who served the congregation for sixty years and held a hard line against the Great Awakening, an evangelical revival movement of the mid-18th century that emphasized personal spiritual experiences and conversion, rather than institutional authority. A biography of Chauncy is titled *Old Brick* in reference to both the church building and Chauncy's worldview. Edward M. Griffin, *Old Brick* (University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

⁶¹⁹ When their daughter Susannah Maranday married William Harris in 1815, the couple was married by Rev. Daniel Fillmore, a Methodist minister. Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

⁶²⁰ Faye Charpentier, *Slavery and King's Chapel*, King's Chapel History Program (Boston, 2019), https://www.kings-chapel.org/uploads/1/2/3/9/12399624/kings_chapel_slavery_report.pdf.

were married there in 1802.⁶²¹ The terse church records provide no clear reason why Darby and Lucy Vassall chose to baptize their children at King's Chapel, though changes in leadership at Brattle Street between 1802 and 1805 may have played a role.⁶²² In any case, the Vassall family's attendance at King's Chapel was not a long-term commitment. Lucy Vassall became an official member of the Brattle Street Church on March 3, 1805.⁶²³ Two months later, their son William was baptized at Brattle Street, but not by its usual minister. Instead, William Vassall was baptized by Rev. William Emerson, minister of First Church and father of Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁶²⁴ Darby Vassall remained a congregant for decades, as did his daughter Frances, who was married at Brattle Street and baptized her own son there.⁶²⁵ Nancy Vassall was also a congregant of the Brattle Street Church, having been "baptized at the table" there in 1801.⁶²⁶

Unlike the other Vassall siblings, James Vassall and Abigail Hall were Baptists. In 1810, they were married by Rev. Caleb Blood of the Third Baptist Church on Charles Street. This was four years after the completion of the African Meeting House, which housed a Black Baptist congregation, but James and Abigail chose to be married at the segregated Third Baptist instead of by Rev. Paul.⁶²⁷

⁶²¹ *The Manifesto Church. Records of the church in Brattle square, Boston, with lists of communicants, baptisms, marriages and funerals, 1699–1872* (Benevolent Fraternity of Churches, 1902), 115, <https://archive.org/details/manifestochurch00massgoog/page/114/mode/2up>.

⁶²² The minister of the Brattle Street Church, Rev. Peter Thacher, died on December 16, 1802. Until his death, the church was still Congregationalist, but it underwent changes over the next three years. The next permanent minister, Rev. Joseph S. Buckminster (installed in 1805) was a Unitarian. The Vassalls may have been avoiding unsettled church politics in 1804, a time when many Boston congregations were in flux.

⁶²³ *The Manifesto Church*, 117, <https://archive.org/details/manifestochurch00massgoog/page/114/mode/2up>.

⁶²⁴ Other children of Darby and Lucy Vassall baptized at Brattle Street: Frances Holland Vassall (baptized 7 December 1806; note that her name appears as "Francis" in the transcribed records), Sally Kimball Vassall (6 May 1810); *The Manifesto Church*, 209, 210, 213, <https://archive.org/details/manifestochurch00massgoog/page/114/mode/2up>.

⁶²⁵ A penciled note in the Brattle Street Church records lists him among active congregants in 1828. Frances H. Vassall married Jonas W. Clark at Brattle Street Church on 27 January 1828. Their son, Jonas Whitney Vassall Clark, was born 28 July 1828 and baptized on 17 September 1828. Frances was already baptized, but she "owned the covenant" on the day her son was baptized, meaning that she chose to become a full adult member of the congregation. *The Manifesto Church*, 116, 224, 275; Jonas W.V. Clark's birthdate is noted on a paper accompanying the Will of Darby Vassall, 1852, Wendell Phillips papers, MS Am 1953, box 45 (1852), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁶²⁶ Nancy Vassall was baptized on September 16, 1801. *The Manifesto Church. Records of the church in Brattle square, Boston, with lists of communicants, baptisms, marriages and funerals, 1699-1872* (1902), 116. <https://archive.org/details/manifestochurch00massgoog/page/114/mode/2up>.

⁶²⁷ Roy E. Finkenbine, "Boston's Black Churches: Institutional Centers of the Antislavery Movement," in *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston*, ed. Donald Jacobs (Indiana University Press, 1993), 173; Grover and da Silva, 118–119.

This sort of congregation-hopping was not unique to the Vassalls. Their kinsman, Primus Hall, was married three times between 1786 and 1817, always in a different church and never at the African Meeting House.⁶²⁸ When he died in 1842, Hall was buried in a vault under St. Matthew's, an Episcopal Church in South Boston, far from the neighborhood where he lived and worked for most of his life.⁶²⁹

Of the Vassall siblings who lived in Boston, only Cyrus and his wife, Lucy Jenkins Vassall, were regular congregants of a single church. They were married at Trinity Church, an Episcopal congregation, in 1805.⁶³⁰ Both Cyrus and Lucy were baptized at Trinity in 1807. Both of their children were also baptized there: Eliza Flagg Vassall in 1806 and Cyrus Anthony Gunther Vassall in 1809.⁶³¹

While churches were spiritual centers, they also played a central role in the political and cultural lives of Black Bostonians. In the case of Black churches, these spaces served as places for education and training, entertainment and conviviality, and conversation away from the restrictions of white society.⁶³² For the Vassalls and their community members, churches were key sites of congregation, commemoration, and civic participation, marking births, marriages, and meetings as free Bostonians.

A Great Cataclysm (1802–1816)

The first decade of the 1800s was a time of great promise for the Vassall siblings. They acquired property, married, raised their children, and contributed to the foundations of a thriving Black community. Yet, their gains were fragile. The multiple mortgages they took out

⁶²⁸ In 1786, Primus Hall married Phebe Robson at Christ Church (Old North). In 1810, he married Martha Gardner at Brattle Street. In 1817, he married Anna Clark at Old South.

⁶²⁹ Two of Primus Hall's children, Isannah (1827–1846) and Ezra (1825–1843), were also buried in Vault 59 at St. Matthew's Church Cemetery. When St. Matthew's was demolished in 1866, some of the burials were moved to other cemeteries. See Boston Burial Records, Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620–1988, Ancestry.com, https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/embed/s/spring_2017.pdf.

⁶³⁰ Andrew Oliver and James Bishop Peabody, eds., *The Records of Trinity Church, Boston, 1728–1830, Publications of The Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 56 (Boston, 1982), <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/1103#pt01>.

⁶³¹ *The Records of Trinity Church, Boston, 1728–1830*, <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/1103#pt01>.

⁶³² James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (Holmes and Meier, 1999, originally 1979), 41.

on the May Street property point to continued financial difficulties, while the threat of violence from white neighbors was never far away.

Of all the threats to the Black Vassalls' fragile prosperity, none was more destabilizing than untimely death. Anthony and Cuba Vassall lived long enough to become revered elders to their growing family, but the next generation was not so fortunate. Between 1802 and 1816, four of the five Vassall siblings died relatively young ages, as did three of their spouses and several of their young children. The losses reshaped the family forever.

Nancy Vassall was twenty-seven years old when she died of consumption on June 15, 1802.⁶³³ Less than a year earlier, she was baptized at the Brattle Street Church in Boston, but she died in Cambridge, suggesting that she may have returned to her parents' house as her illness progressed. As a young woman with no property, Nancy Vassall left few official records beyond the notation that she was "baptized at the table," testifying to her Christian faith.⁶³⁴

The first of the Vassall spouses to die was Flora's husband, Bristol Maranday, who passed away in 1807. At the time, the family lived in Charlestown, along Milk Row, which is now Somerville Avenue.⁶³⁵ They had a dwelling house, a barn, and land worth \$1,000, as well as a horse. Unfortunately, Bristol was in debt when he died. Flora was forced to sell the land and auction off their personal possessions. Primus Hall bought many of their belongings and the larger part of the land. Although he died in Charlestown, Bristol's body was transported back to Boston for burial. As a mark of honor, grief, and the family's respectability, Flora and the children all purchased black clothing in order to observe a period of public mourning.⁶³⁶ Donning mourning—black for adults, white for young children—was a common custom for everyone who could afford to do so. Even the poorest mourners might wear a black armband, but the Maranday estate spent \$15.00 on new sets of mourning clothes for Flora and the

⁶³³ *Vital Records of Cambridge, vol. 2 Marriages and Deaths* (1915), 772.

⁶³⁴ *The Manifesto Church* (1902), 116.

<https://archive.org/details/manifestochurch00massgoog/page/114/mode/2up>.

⁶³⁵ Milk Row was a long road, but it was also a name for the neighborhood on the western outskirts of Charlestown near Charlestown Neck. Charlestown Land Records, 1638–1802,

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Charlestown_Land_Records_1638_1802/dJbsEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0

⁶³⁶ Bristow Maranday Probate, 1807, Middlesex Probate #14634.

children, a significant expense when the auction of their household goods raised only \$28.57.⁶³⁷ The Marandays were poor, but they observed death rites that underscored the dignity of both the dead and the living.⁶³⁸

Flora was left to support three adolescent children. Susannah was in her mid-teens; Margaret and John were both younger than 14. In order to protect them, Flora asked Primus Hall to stand as their legal guardian until they came of age. She probably conferred with her parents for advice, as the guardianship papers were signed by both Flora Maranday and Anthony Vassall.⁶³⁹

Although the children were under Primus Hall's legal protection, the family may have lived at the May Street property with their uncles, Darby and Cyrus. The 1810 census shows that Darby's household numbered nine people and Cyrus's eleven. Since Darby and Lucy had no more than three living children in 1810 and Cyrus and Lucy had two, they may have been housing Flora and her children. Even so, there were at least seven other Black Bostonians living in the Vassall houses on May Street, either as kin, renters, or guests.⁶⁴⁰

Bristol Maranday's death was a tragedy for his wife and children, but it was just one of many the Vassall family would endure. In 1811 and 1812, several members of the family died in quick succession. First, Cyrus's wife, Lucy Jenkins Vassall, died of consumption on July 15, 1811. She was just 27 years old. Her infant son, Cyrus Gunther Vassall also died around this time.⁶⁴¹ Anthony Vassall died a few months later, on September 2, 1811.⁶⁴² Of his purported 98 years, he lived more than 30 as a free man. In November, two months after Anthony's death, all three of his living sons—James, Darby, and Cyrus—gathered in Cambridge to help their mother

⁶³⁷ A generation later, in the 1840s, Lucy Sprague spent \$2 on muslin dresses and \$5 on silk dresses, and her younger brother, Joseph, typically spent \$1-2.00 on pants, \$2.50-3.50 on jackets, and \$4.00 on a frock coat and vest. In 1807, \$15 likely represented complete outfits for the Maranday family. Bristow Maranday, Middlesex Probate #14634; Lucy F. Sprague and Joseph A. Sprague, Suffolk Probate #33251-2.

⁶³⁸ D. Tulla Lightfoot, *The Culture and Art of Death in 19th Century America* (McFarland, 2019); Lou Taylor, *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History* (Taylor & Francis, 2009).

⁶³⁹ Middlesex Probate #14635

⁶⁴⁰ 1810 Federal Census, Boston Genealogical Society. 1810 Boston City Directory (Boston, 1810).

⁶⁴¹ Cyrus Anthony Gunther Vassall was baptized at Trinity Church in 1809, but he does not appear in the guardianship documents drawn up for his sister, Eliza, after their parents' deaths, and did not inherit any part of Anthony Vassall's estate, as Eliza did. This suggests that he died before 1812. *The Records of Trinity Church, Boston, 1728-1830*, <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/1103#pt01>.

⁶⁴² Anthony Vassall Probate, 1811, Middlesex Probate #23335

process the estate. Their signatures appear beneath Cuba's mark on a document that appointed an executor.⁶⁴³

Within half a year, two of the three Vassall brothers were dead as well. Cyrus Vassall died on April 27, 1812, at age 41. The inventory taken after his death reflects some of the priorities in his life: two desks and nine books, along with another "lot of books," a dining table with enough chairs to host a gathering, and a silver watch that signified his place as a man of dignity and position. His personal property was valued at \$144.35, of which nearly 12 percent was Lucy's clothes, which remained in a trunk, untouched since her death.⁶⁴⁴

The deaths of Cyrus and Lucy Vassall within a year left their six-year-old daughter, Eliza Flagg Vassall, an orphan.⁶⁴⁵ The little girl was sent to Cambridge to live with her grandmother and cousin Catherine and may have remained there for several years.⁶⁴⁶ Unlike her impoverished Maranday cousins, Eliza Flagg inherited her father's real estate. Her Uncle Darby managed the property on her behalf, making regular payments for insurance, taxes, repairs, and routine maintenance like emptying the privy vault. Eliza lived on the income generated by renting out rooms to many community members, including her cousin, Margaret Maranday.⁶⁴⁷

Just a month after Cyrus Vassall's passing, his older brother James died as well.⁶⁴⁸ James died in Boston, but his body was returned to Cambridge and buried in a funeral "from his mother's house."⁶⁴⁹ His exact burial place is unknown, but he was probably buried in the Old

⁶⁴³ James Frost, a blacksmith, was the administrator. Antony Vassall, Middlesex Probate #23335.

⁶⁴⁴ Cyrus Vassall Probate, 1812, Suffolk #23965.

⁶⁴⁵ *US, Newspaper Extractions from the Northeast, 1704–1930*, Ancestry.com, 2014.

⁶⁴⁶ Cyrus Vassall's estate paid Catherine Vassall \$11.38 for "E.F. Vassall's board" in 1812. A subsequent payment for board from 1817 does not specify where Eliza was living at the time. Cyrus Vassall, Suffolk County Probate #23965.

⁶⁴⁷ Cyrus Vassall's estate paid Catherine Vassall \$11.38 for "E.F. Vassall's board" in 1812. A subsequent payment for board from 1817 does not specify where Eliza was living at the time. Eliza Flagg Vassall's probate record shows that she was placed under the guardianship of Richard Sullivan (1812) and Jacob Kuhn (1825), but it is possible that she stayed with her aunt and uncle for some time. Both the 1820 and 1830 censuses show an adolescent girl living in Catherine and Adam Lewis's household. While the girl living there in 1820 could have been Eliza, the girl living there in 1830 was probably not. Eliza married Joseph Sprague in 1827 and was living with him and their two young children in Boston Ward 6 in 1830. Cyrus Vassall, Suffolk County Probate #23965; Eliza F. Vassall, Suffolk Probate #24066; Federal Censuses of 1820 and 1830.

⁶⁴⁸ 28 May 1812, *Columbian Centinel*.

⁶⁴⁹ The mortuary notice lists James's age as "26," which is almost certainly a mistake. He may have been 56, and the typesetter made a mistake. "Mortuary Notice," *Columbian Centinel*, no. 2937, 30 May 1812, 2. Other family members who were sent to Cambridge for burial during this period include Lucy Jenkins Vassall (d. 15 July 1811, age 27), George Vassall (d. 13 Feb 1816, age 17 months), and Lucy Holland Vassall (d. 11 Dec 1828, age 52 or 54).

Burial Ground in Harvard Square. His mother, Cuba, died a few months later, in September 1812, and was probably buried nearby.

These deaths came one after the other, with little time for rest or grieving for those who remained. Anthony Vassall's probate file demonstrates just how many losses the family suffered in rapid succession. Of the four heirs who signed the initial document appointing an executor in November 1811—Cuba, James, Cyrus, and Darby—only Darby was alive to sign the final distribution of his father's property in December 1813. This final document shows the stark reorganization of the family. Instead of an elderly mother bolstered by her three adult sons, the probate record shows Darby Vassall as both the head of the family and the only surviving adult man. All the other family members who signed were women or their representatives: Flora Vassall Maranday, Catherine Vassall [Lewis], James's widow Abigail Hall Vassall, and Richard Sullivan, the guardian who signed on behalf of seven-year-old Eliza Flagg Vassall.⁶⁵⁰

This was not the end of the Vassall family's tragedies. Flora Vassall Maranday died on March 22, 1815, age 48, just three years after Cyrus and James. By then, her children—Susannah, Margaret, and John—were young adults. All three had been formally under the care of Primus Hall since their father's death, and Hall stepped in to administer Flora's will.⁶⁵¹ While still in the process of performing this sad duty, Primus Hall lost his own daughter, Abigail Hall Vassall, James Vassall's widow. She died of an "apoplexy" on May 2, 1816, at age 24.⁶⁵²

Darby Vassall and his wife, Lucy Holland Vassall, had also suffered many losses during these terrible years. Both of Lucy's parents died, as did several of Darby and Lucy's young children, including two toddlers: Sally Campbell Vassall, who died in October 1811, and Richard Chardon Vassall, who died in 1816.

⁶⁵⁰ Anthony Vassall Probate, 1811, Middlesex Probate #23335. James Vassall's share of the estate—\$155—went to his widow, Abigail, while Cyrus Vassall's share went to his daughter, Eliza Flagg Vassall.

⁶⁵¹ "Flora Miranday & Family, Uncovering the Past: Exploring Black History through Primary Sources, King's Chapel," accessed 18 August 2025, <http://www.kings-chapel.org/uncover11.html>. Hall also was also appointed guardian of the Maranday children in 1807: Probate Records 1648—1924, Middlesex County Probate Court, Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, US, Wills and Probate Records, 1635—1991, Ancestry.com.

⁶⁵² Massachusetts, US, Town and Vital Records, 1620—1988, Ancestry.com; Original data: Town and City Clerks of Massachusetts, Massachusetts Vital and Town Records; Gloria McCahon Whiting, "'Endearing Ties': Black Family Life in Early New England" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2016), 308.

When the whirlwind of death lifted, Darby Vassall and his wife Lucy were the only members of their generation left alive. All the other Vassall siblings and their spouses passed away by the end of 1816. Of more than a dozen grandchildren of Cuba and Anthony Vassall, only six survived early childhood: Catherine Vassall; Flora's children: Susannah Maranday [Harris], Margaret Maranday [Burns], and John Maranday; Darby's daughter Frances Holland Vassall [Clark], and Cyrus's daughter, Eliza Flagg Vassall [Sprague]. Since the only surviving grandson was John Maranday, the Vassall surname did not continue, but the family very much did.

Community-Building and Activism (after 1816)

The Black Vassall family was much smaller after 1816, but their commitment to their community remained strong. Both Darby Vassall and Catherine Vassall Lewis played crucial roles in caring for their extended kin and neighbors by pooling resources and leveraging them for collective care. Coupled with the support of some of the most prominent white abolitionists in the country, they worked to hold Massachusetts accountable to all its citizens. They also passed these values to their children, nieces, and nephews, who joined the fights for education and equality as they reached adulthood.

Education continued to be a priority for the Vassall family and their community. In 1835, the African School moved into a freestanding building next to the African Meeting House, and became the Abiel Smith School in honor of a white philanthropist who donated \$4,000.⁶⁵³ The new school was a significant achievement, but it remained underfunded, segregated, and inaccessible to Black students who did not live on Beacon Hill.

One of the leading advocates for better education for Black children was Jonas W. Clark, the husband of Darby and Lucy Vassall's daughter, Frances Holland Vassall. Clark was from Hubbardston, Massachusetts, but moved to Boston in the 1820s. He was a tailor and clothing seller who opened his own shop around 1826.⁶⁵⁴ Clark also became an officer in the Prince Hall

⁶⁵³ Kathryn Grover and Janine V. Da Silva, "Historic Resource Study: Boston African American National Historic Site," Boston African American National Historic Site, 2002, 79–81.

⁶⁵⁴ Clark operated his clothing shop at a few different addresses in Boston, including the corner of North Russell Street and Cambridge Street, and 18 Brattle Street. Boston's Brattle Street was home to several other clothing shops owned by Black shopkeepers, including David Walker, author of the radical antislavery pamphlet, "Walker's

Lodge of Masons and became a close friend of Primus Hall.⁶⁵⁵ He was 28 when he married 23-year-old Frances at the Brattle Street Church in 1828.⁶⁵⁶ They purchased Darby's portion of the May Street property in 1829 and lived there with their growing family.⁶⁵⁷ When the Abiel Smith School opened just a few steps from their door in 1835, their son Jonas was six years old and their daughter Frances was five.⁶⁵⁸

After the Abiel Smith School opened, Jonas Clark was one of thirty men who established an "Infant School" in the old schoolroom in the African Meeting House.⁶⁵⁹ At the time, Infant Schools were a modern, progressive innovation in early childhood education, similar to modern preschools.⁶⁶⁰ In 1835, Clark and his fellow Infant School backers—including Primus Hall and Cato Freeman—petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for a charter. They promised that their school would serve "coloured children of all denominations," not just Baptists. After some

Appeal" (1829). Jonas W. Clark's clothing shop is mentioned several times in Boston newspapers, including an advertisement for the 18 Brattle Street address in 1836 and an article about a fire at the North Russell Street address in 1857. *Boston Evening Transcript*, 2 February 1857, page 2; *Boston Post*, 18 July 1836, page 2."Grammar School Committee," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 2 August 1849; *Weekly American Workman*, 16 December 1871 (via <https://www.nps.gov/people/jonas-w-clark.htm>).

⁶⁵⁵ According to the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Clark was the Lodge's treasurer. "Prince Hall Lodge of Masons," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 26 June 1855.

⁶⁵⁶ Jonas Whitney Vassall Clark (1828–1884), Frances Jane Clark [Weedman] (b.1830–1894), Emma (b.1836). The 1830 census shows the Clark household as five people, probably Darby Vassall, Jonas W. Clark, Frances H.V. Clark, Jonas Clark (b.1828), and Frances Clark (b.1830). Lucy Holland Vassall, Darby's wife, died in 1828. On an 1851 petition, Jonas Clark is listed as the head of a family of six. The 1855 Massachusetts Census shows another member of the household, Emma Clark (born c.1836); it is not clear what her relationship to the other people in the family was, but her birthplace is listed as New Brunswick. She may have been the Emma Clark who died in Boston of typhoid fever at age 49 on 14 August 1884 (confusingly, Emma's birth and married names were both Clark). Frances Jane Clark [Weedman] was born around 1830. She was 23 when she married a boatman named James Weedman in 1853. Massachusetts, US, Marriage Records, 1840–1915, Ancestry.com; Petition of Benjamin F. Roberts, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, House Unpassed Legislation 1851, Docket 3139, SC1/series 230, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:11005529?n=12>.

⁶⁵⁷ Suffolk Deeds, vol. 343, page 53.

⁶⁵⁸ In 1842, Jonas Clark became the guardian of four more children: Primus Hall's teenage children Isannah and Ezra Hall, and Eliza Flagg Vassall Sprague's children, Lucy and Joseph Sprague.

⁶⁵⁹ Barbara A. Yocum, *The African Meeting House: Historic Structure Report*, Building Conservation Branch, US Department of the Interior (1994), <https://npshistory.com/publications/boaf/hsr-african-meeting-house.pdf>, p. 24; Petition 1, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions; Passed Acts; St. 1836, c.9, SC1/series 229, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:10935185?n=3>.

⁶⁶⁰ Mary W. Howland, *Infant School Manual; Or, Teacher's Assistant: Containing a View of the System of Infant Schools. Also a Variety of Useful Lessons; for the Use of Teachers* (Worcester, MA, 1834), 9, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Infant_School_Manual_Or_Teacher_s_Assist/u7dJAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22infant+school%22&pg=PA9&printsec=frontcover.

negotiations with the Church, the Infant School was granted the right to operate out of the basement schoolroom, free of charge.⁶⁶¹

Both the Abiel Smith School and the Infant School were substantial achievements, but they did not ensure educational equality for Black students. The schools were segregated, chronically underfunded, and inconvenient for families who did not live on Beacon Hill. When young Jonas and Frances Clark attended the Abiel Smith School, they were faced with peeling paint, cramped classrooms, and tiny play yards that were accessible only through “a dark, damp cellar.”⁶⁶² A city report concluded that “every part gives evidence of the most shameful negligence and abuse.”⁶⁶³

In response to these conditions, Jonas Clark and other advocates for equal education shifted their activism toward the desegregation of schools. They filed multiple petitions in the 1840s calling for the closure of the Abiel Smith School and the integration of Boston’s public schools.⁶⁶⁴ The city’s Primary School Committee reacted to their proposal with outrage and derision. During debates in 1846, white School Committee members dismissed the Black community’s concerns and scolded them in condescending tones. “Is this the kind return of the present generation of colored men, to the City of Boston, for granting the petition of their sires?” the School Committee asked. They declared the integration advocates, “unworthy successors of Primus Hall, of Cyrus Vassall, and of Prince Sanders.”⁶⁶⁵

This was an outrageous insult. The white School Committee members invoked the names of Cyrus Vassall and Primus Hall as weapons against the very friends, neighbors, and family who had known and loved them best. When Primus Hall died in 1842, he made Jonas W. Clark one of the executors of his will and guardian of his adolescent children, Isannah and

⁶⁶¹ Barbara A. Yocum, *The African Meeting House*, p. 24; Petition 2, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions; Passed Acts; St. 1836, c.9, SC1/series 229, MSA, Boston.

⁶⁶² City Document No. 28: Report of the Annual Visiting committees of the Public Schools of the City of Boston (Boston, 1846), p. 151, as printed in Leonard W. Levy and Harlan B. Phillips, “The Roberts Case: Source of the ‘Separate but Equal’ Doctrine,” *The American Historical Review* 56, no. 3 (1951): 511.

⁶⁶³ Report of the Annual Visiting committees of the Boston Public Schools; Kabria Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America* (NYU Press, 2019).

⁶⁶⁴ *Boston Courier*, 18 Sept 1842.

⁶⁶⁵ Report to the Primary School Committee, June 15, 1846, on the Petition of Sundry Colored Persons, for the Abolition of the Schools for Colored Children: With the City Solicitor’s Opinion (Boston, 1846), p. 20.

Ezra.⁶⁶⁶ Clark was also the guardian of Cyrus Vassall's orphaned grandchildren, 18-year-old Lucy Sprague and 11-year-old Joseph Sprague.⁶⁶⁷ By declaring Clark and his fellow petitioners "unworthy successors" to the legacy of Primus Hall and Cyrus Vassall, the School Committee used the memory of Black Boston's elders against the very person who was entrusted with the care and protection of Hall's children and Vassall's grandchildren.⁶⁶⁸

In 1849, a Black parent, Benjamin Roberts, sued the city after his five-year-old daughter Sarah was denied access to her local school. This landmark lawsuit was part of the long tradition of Black New Englanders using the legal system to advocate for their rights, but in this case a judge upheld segregation in Boston's public schools.⁶⁶⁹ In response, some Black families moved to Cambridge. Others withdrew their children from the Abiel Smith School in protest.

Jonas Clark and his fellow desegregation advocates did not give up. Instead, they launched a new petition campaign that anticipated so much participation that they had the

⁶⁶⁶ Ezra T. Hall (1825–1843) and Isannah Hall (c.1827–1846). Isannah Hall attended the Abiel Smith School, and was recognized as one of three high-achieving girls in 1838. The School Committee's decision was issued on 15 June 1846, just two months after Isannah Hall died. Jonas Clark was responsible for her funeral, which was held at the African Meeting House. Boston burial records have her name as "Hannah" Hall of Charlestown, age 19, but the death date matches the date in the Suffolk Probate documents (3 April 3 1846). Isannah and Ezra were both buried in Vault 59 at St. Matthew's Church, beside their father. Kabria Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge*, 147; Guardianship of Isannah and Ezra Hall, 1842, Suffolk Probate Vol. 411, 1839-1842, 257, #33334-5; Martin Walsh and Kelly Thomas, "The Many Burying Grounds of South Boston," *Historic Burying Grounds Initiative Newsletter*, 10th ed., season-01 2017, Boston Parks & Recreation Department, https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/embed/s/spring_2017.pdf.

⁶⁶⁷ Eliza Flagg Vassall Sprague died of consumption 2 Sept 1841, age 35. Her husband, Joseph Sprague, died of consumption on 3 May 1841, age 40. Both were buried in the South Burying Ground, tomb 110. According to the guardianship documents appointing Jonas Clark as the guardian of their children, Lucy F. Sprague was over the age of 14 in 1842 and Joseph A. Sprague was younger than 14. According to the 1860 Census, Joseph A. Sprague was born around 1835 and worked as a mariner. He lived with Jonas and Frances Clark and Darby Vassall. He died of consumption in Cambridge on 21 May 1873, with his age listed as 41 (born around 1832) (Suffolk Probate #33251-2). Lucy Sprague was born around 1828. She was 23 years old when she married Lewis F. Smith, a barber, in 1851. Various records show Lewis F. Smith's birthplace as Nova Scotia (1860 and 1870 census), Bermuda (Otis Smith death record, 1903) or Demerara, West Indies (1900 census). In the 1850s, Lewis Smith's barber shop was at 11 Devonshire St., near the Old State House. They had four sons: Lewis P. Smith (1852–1901), Charles Smith (1853–c.1855), Otis Franklin Smith (1857-1903), and Byron M. Smith (1867–1867). Their son Otis Franklin Smith (1857–1903) became a dentist in Cambridge, but never married or had children. The only one of the Smith children who had children was Lewis P. Smith. He married Kate Green of Washington, DC, in 1884. Their daughter, Maude Fanny Smith (b.12 April 1886) married Arthur E. Freeman, a map mounter from Atlanta, in Boston in 1911. 1860, 1870, and 1900 Federal Censuses, Suffolk Co., "Suffolk, Massachusetts, United States records," Ancestry Vital Records database; FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C9Y5-BVBY?view=fullText> : Aug 13, 2025), image 786 of 1165, Massachusetts. Probate Court (Suffolk County), Image Group Number: 007704198.

⁶⁶⁸ Joseph A. Sprague lived with Jonas and Frances Clark for many years. In the 1860 census, he was listed as a 25-year-old mariner living at 20 Grove Street with the Clarks and Darby Vassall.

⁶⁶⁹ Sarah C. Roberts vs. The City of Boston 59 Mass. 198, 5 Cush. 198 (1849).

petitions printed so that they could be circulated more widely than the previous, handwritten petitions.⁶⁷⁰ “We believe we have a legal right to the free and untrammelled admission of our children to the same schools in common with the children of our neighbors,” read a mass petition submitted in 1851. The petitioners argued that segregated schools taught racism to Black and white students alike: “Prejudice and hatred are the direct results of exclusive institutions.” Jonas Clark’s signature was the first on the page.⁶⁷¹ After years of advocacy from Black Bostonians, the city’s schools were desegregated in 1855.

Jonas W. Clark was committed to education for Black Bostonians of every age. In addition to his work with the Infant School and the desegregation of the Boston Public Schools, he was also an officer of the Adelpic Union Library Association. The Adelpic Union—led by William Cooper Nell—was a Black-led library and lyceum, an intellectual club that sponsored lectures, classes, and debates.⁶⁷² Lecture topics included a wide array of political, economic, and philosophical topics, as well as biographical lectures about Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture and blistering critiques of scientific racism. Jonas W. Clark served as the Adelpic Union’s Vice President, supporting the organization in encouraging intellectual debate and offering public lectures that were open to all, including women.⁶⁷³

Through the 1820s and 1830s, Black Bostonians were staunch leaders of the growing antislavery movement. In 1826, Adam Lewis’s brother, Quaku Walker Lewis, was one of the Black Freemasons who co-founded the Massachusetts General Colored Association to combat slavery and racism. Lewis was named for his famous uncle, Quock Walker, whose freedom suit had struck a powerful blow against slavery in the 1780s. Lewis and his fellow Masons built on

⁶⁷⁰ Benjamin Roberts, who was a printer by trade and produced broadsides for the community’s antislavery campaigns, may have printed these petitions himself. George R. Price and James Brewer Stewart, “The Roberts Case, the Easton Family, & the Dynamics of the Abolitionist Movement in Massachusetts, 1776–1870,” *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4 (2002): 89–115. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25081172>.

⁶⁷¹ Equal School Rights, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, House Unpassed Legislation 1851, Docket 3139, SC1/series 230, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:11005529?n=12>; Petition 1, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Passed Acts, St. 1836, c.9, SC1/series 229, MSA. Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:10935185>. In coverage of the petitions in *The Liberator*, one of the petitions for desegregation is described as being “signed by Jonas W. Clark and 227 others,” emphasizing his role as a leader. *The Liberator*, 4 April 1851, page 3.

⁶⁷² Peter Wirzbicki, “Black Transcendentalism: William Cooper Nell, the Adelpic Union, and the Black Abolitionist Intellectual Tradition,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 2 (2018): 269–90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26478059>.

⁶⁷³ *The Liberator*, 11 October 1844, page 3.

Walker's legacy by organizing petitions, publishing lectures, and hosting events at the African Meeting House. They worked to uplift Black Americans through education and religion, abolish discriminatory laws in Massachusetts (including segregated public accommodations and prohibition of interracial marriages), and abolish slavery nationwide.⁶⁷⁴

The community continued to collaborate with white abolitionists toward their shared goals. In 1832, the inaugural meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery Society was held at the African Meeting House. The Society was founded by white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, but the choice of venue showed how closely it worked with Black abolitionists. In 1833, the Massachusetts General Colored Association voted to combine with the New England Anti-Slavery Society, creating a racially integrated organization that eventually welcomed women as members as well.⁶⁷⁵

By the early 1840s, antislavery sentiment in Massachusetts had grown into a powerful political movement. When George Latimer, a self-emancipated man from Virginia, was captured in Boston in 1843, nearly sixty-five thousand Bay Staters—more than 11 percent of all adults in the Commonwealth—signed a petition to prevent the re-enslavement.⁶⁷⁶ Many of these signatures were collected at the African Meeting House. In response to this public outcry, the Massachusetts Legislature passed the “Personal Liberties Act,” also known as the “Latimer Law,” prohibiting Massachusetts state officials from detaining fugitive slaves or using state facilities for detention of the enslaved. Simultaneously, the congregation at the African Meeting House split, with a breakaway faction founding the Twelfth Baptist Church. Known as the “Fugitive Slaves’ Church,” Twelfth Baptist became a conduit for freedom for prominent emancipated activists like Ellen and William Craft and Thomas Sims. The Black community of

⁶⁷⁴ Nina Mjagkij, ed., *Organizing Black America: An Encyclopedia of African American Associations* (Taylor & Francis, 2001, ebook 2003), p. 282.

⁶⁷⁵ For more on women abolitionists' contributions, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (Yale University Press, 2016); Stephen Kantrowitz and Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Debra Gold Hansen, *Strained Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

⁶⁷⁶ In the 1840 census, the population of Massachusetts was 737,699. Of these, 162,649 were under the age of 20 and 575,050 were age 20 or older. The 64,526 signers of the petition thus represented 11.2 percent of the population over age 20. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1840/1840v3/1840c-02.pdf>.

the Boston area were carving a path to freedom for themselves and those they would welcome to the region.

Among the white intellectuals who helped spread antislavery ideas was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow was neither a political radical nor a fire-breather, but he was one of the most popular poets of his era, with both a national and international audience. In 1842, he published a small collection titled *Poems on Slavery*, his first public support of abolitionism. Longfellow remained more moderate than his friends Charles Sumner and Samuel Gridley Howe, but he donated regularly to abolitionist causes and presented antislavery ideas to far-flung white readers who would never pick up a copy of a polemically abolitionist newspaper like *The Liberator*.

Yet, like many white New Englanders, Longfellow's antislavery views coexisted alongside financial ties to slavery. In 1843, Longfellow married Fanny Appleton, a wealthy woman whose family fortune came from the mills where slave-grown cotton was spun and woven. Her father, Nathan Appleton, helped establish cotton manufacturing as a major industry in the United States in the 1810s, supercharging the market for cotton grown on American plantations.⁶⁷⁷ In 1843, Nathan Appleton used part of this fortune to purchase 105 Brattle Street as a wedding gift for Fanny and Henry, tying the house's history to yet another slavery-dependent industry.

By 1844, the New England Anti-Slavery Society was presenting more radical ideas. At its annual convention, Darby Vassall was one of the 250 delegates—including Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips—who voted in favor of a resolution to “agitate for a dissolution of the Union.” They reasoned that “no equal union can exist between a slaveholding and a free community,” and that the Constitution gave undue power to slaveholders. Therefore, “no abolitionist can consistently swear to support the Constitution.”⁶⁷⁸

In the following years, both Darby Vassall and Jonas W. Clark were frequent participants in antislavery activism alongside Boston's leading abolitionists. In 1847, Clark served as Vice President of a Committee chaired by his friend, William Cooper Nell, that invited Frederick

⁶⁷⁷ Charles C. Calhoun, *Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life* (Beacon Press, 2004); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015); Zaakir Tameez, *Charles Sumner: Conscience of a Nation* (Henry Holt and Company, 2025).

⁶⁷⁸ “No Union With Slaveholders,” *The Liberator*, 14 June 1844, page 3.

Douglass to the African Meeting House to speak about his recent travels in Great Britain. Douglass was “greeted by repeated demonstrations of applause,” from the crowd, who “united in three welcome shouts for Frederick Douglass, which did indeed make the welcome ring.”⁶⁷⁹ Jonas Clark served on many similar committees in the 1840s and 1850s, frequently working alongside other Black abolitionist leaders like Lewis Hayden, Joel Lewis, and Joshua Bowen Smith.⁶⁸⁰

While the Vassall–Clark branch of the family stood alongside the leading Black abolitionists in Boston, Flora Vassall Maranday’s descendants brought the family commitments to both activism and entrepreneurship to Nantucket.⁶⁸¹ Flora’s daughters—Susannah Maranday Harris and Margaret Maranday Burns—and their families lived in “New Guinea,” a neighborhood of Black and Wampanoag Nantucketers clustered around the African Meeting House on York Street.⁶⁸² Like many of their neighbors, their lives were closely tied to the island’s maritime and whaling industries. Susannah’s grandson, Charles F. Harris, was a sailor, and Margaret’s husband, Thomas Burns, was a ship’s cook.⁶⁸³ Susannah’s husband, William Harris, was an oyster-seller who specialized in “cooking Chowder” and “opening oysters mathematically.”⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁷⁹ *The Liberator*, 21 May 1847, page 1.

⁶⁸⁰ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*.

⁶⁸¹ John Maranday was likely the “John Maranda” who paid taxes in Cambridge from 1819 until 1823. No definite trace of him after that has yet been found. It should be noted that the Charlestown, Massachusetts death records for the years 1817-1840 were lost or destroyed, and are not included in compilations of Charlestown vital statistics made after 1889. Since the Maranday family lived in the part of Charlestown that later became Somerville, it is possible that death records for John Maranday were lost if he died in Charlestown between 1823 and 1840. It is also possible that he went to sea, moved away, or went by a different name. Leslie Brunetta, “Early Black Cambridge Taxpayers, 1795-1825,” Cambridge Black History Project, <https://cambridgeblackhistoryproject.org/early-black-cambridge-taxpayers/>; “Explanatory Note” in *Vital Records of Charlestown, Massachusetts to 1850*, ed. Roger D. Joslyn, New England Historic Genealogical Society (1995), ix.) Susannah and William Harris moved to Nantucket shortly after their marriage. Their son, William H. Harris, was born on Nantucket in 1818, and William Harris advertised his oyster business in the *Nantucket Inquirer* in 1821. *Nantucket Inquirer*, 19 July 1821, page 3.

⁶⁸² William Harris was a deacon at the church. *Nantucket Inquirer*, 20 February 1861, page 3;

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0491223fe1494f0086a48fe8025834a3>.

⁶⁸³ In 1850, Susannah (aka Susan Harris) was living with her husband, William Harris, their son William H. Harris (b.1818), and his four young children: William B. Harris (b.1841), Charles F. Harris (b.1842), Susan M. Harris (b.1846), and Sophia M. Harris (b.1848). Another daughter, Phoebe Harris (1850–1861) lived next door with her maternal grandparents, Charles and Sophia Godfrey. William H. Harris’s profession is listed as barber. 1850 Federal Census, Nantucket, Massachusetts, family #1585; 1860 Federal Census, Nantucket, Massachusetts, page 39, Ancestry.com; Massachusetts, US, Death Records, 1841–1915.

⁶⁸⁴ *Nantucket Inquirer*, 15 October 1831, page 3.

They were also antislavery and antidiscrimination activists. In 1841, Susannah's husband served on the committee that oversaw the neighborhood's antislavery library, alongside their 23-year-old son, William H. Harris.⁶⁸⁵ The library committee announced the opening of their "Reading Room" in a newspaper advertisement that referred to their brethren as "the (colored) legal voters in Nantucket."⁶⁸⁶ William H. Harris also chaired a committee that fought for school integration in the 1840s. He may have taken inspiration from his cousins in Boston, but his committee expressed their call for integration in terms meant to appeal to Nantucket's many white Quakers: "We contend not for, neither do we desire any rights or privileges that are not common to the rest of the members of this community . . . we are denied the right or privilege of education in common with our fellow citizens; we must pronounce it to be *unkind, unjust*."⁶⁸⁷

Alliances between Black and white abolitionists were a regular feature of the advocacy work of this time, and frequently resulted in fictive kinship ties that affected family planning. On May 16, 1844, the Lewis family patriarch, Peter, passed away without a will, leaving his wife Minor to appoint Richard Henry Dana Jr., the celebrated abolitionist and lawyer, as the estate's administrator.⁶⁸⁸ Dana, an alumnus of Harvard Law School, founded the anti-slavery Free Soil Party in 1848, represented Anthony Burns (a self-emancipated man who was entrapped back to enslavement) in 1854, and was a member of the Boston Vigilance Committee, an organization that assisted fugitive slaves.⁶⁸⁹ It is not surprising, then, that the Lewis family would have entrusted him with the administration of Peter's estate.

Ideological battles over the meaning of the United States, abolition and slavery, and the safety of free Black communities intensified through the 1850s. The controversial Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required that all escaped enslaved people, upon capture, be returned to the enslaver. It mandated cooperation by officials and citizens of free states.⁶⁹⁰ Boston became a

⁶⁸⁵ Frances Ruley Karttunen, *The Other Islanders: People who Pulled Nantucket's Oars* (Spinner Publications, 2005), 80.

⁶⁸⁶ *Nantucket Inquirer*, 16 January 1841, page 3.

⁶⁸⁷ *Nantucket Inquirer*, March 5, 1842, page 4. Frances Ruley Karttunen, *The Other Islanders*, 89.

⁶⁸⁸ Middlesex Probate #36415. Peter Lewis's death is not recorded in the vital records. Ann Clifford, "Notes on the Lewis Family in Cambridge," Cambridge Historical Commission, 1999, page 6.

⁶⁸⁹ Austin Bearer, *Reminiscences of Fugitive-Slave Law Days in Boston* (Boston, 1880), p. 3.

⁶⁹⁰ John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

site to which many self-emancipated people fled to attempt their escapes, leading to cases such as those of Thomas Sims, a self-emancipated man who escaped from slavery in Georgia to Boston and was forced to return to enslavement, and Shadrach Minkins, a fugitive slave who was covertly rescued from a courthouse by Black Bostonians, who then facilitated his freedom journey to Canada, both in 1851.⁶⁹¹ The Black Vassall family members were deeply aware of these cases and involved in activism around them. When Minkins was captured, Jonas W. Clark was one of two men who posted his bail of \$3,000.⁶⁹²

As these conflicts escalated, Black Bostonians recognized the need for armed protection from the malignant enforcement of enslavement. From 1851–1858, Jonas W. Clark was a leader in the movement to create an African American militia known as the Massasoit Guard, intended to protect the residents of Beacon Hill from “slave catchers” and serve as peacekeepers in the absence of police protection for Black residents. At the height of their activity, these armed men operated out of 29 Philips Street on Beacon Hill, where they drilled publicly and served as security officers in defiance of white law officers. Attorney Robert Morris represented their concerns, claiming legitimacy based on Black men’s participation in the wars against the British in 1776 and 1812.⁶⁹³ They filed an appeal to have the word “white” stricken from the state’s militia law.⁶⁹⁴ One of the would-be militiamen, William J. Watkins, wrote a scathing denunciation of the legislative committee that denied the Massasoit Guard their right to organize themselves as an armed force on equal terms to other citizens of the Commonwealth. “Now I, as an individual, believe that no one has a right, morally speaking, to shoot his brother through the heart or blow out his brains,” Watkins wrote in 1853, “but if the Committee have the right, then ‘Jonas W. Clark and sixty-five others’ have the right, also.”⁶⁹⁵ Despite their

⁶⁹¹ Jacqueline Jones, *No Right to An Honest Living: The Struggles of Boston’s Black Workers in the Civil War Era* (Basic Books, 2023); Stephen D. Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889*. (Penguin Press, 2012).

⁶⁹² *Boston Evening Transcript*, 20 February 1851.

⁶⁹³ Petition of Robert Morris, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Senate Unpassed Legislation 1856, Docket 18524, SC1/series 231, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:11666565?n=22>; Petition of Jonas W. Clark, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Senate Unpassed Legislation 1853, Docket 13837, SC1/series 231, MSA, Boston, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:11381179>.

⁶⁹⁴ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, “Black Militias,” in *Civil Disobedience: An Encyclopedic History of Dissidence in the United States* (Routledge 2015), 38–40.

⁶⁹⁵ W.J. Watkins, “Equal Rights of Citizens,” originally *Boston Herald*, reprinted in *The Liberator*, 13 May 1853.

efforts, the Massasoit Guard was never officially recognized, and the group eventually disbanded.⁶⁹⁶

While their participation in this activism might be less visible, Black women were also an important part of this movement, signing petitions, writing books, raising money, and voting at antislavery meetings that had been integrated by both race and gender.⁶⁹⁷ Activists had to be strategic in how they presented their community to the legislature and white society, as Anthony Vassall had been when he dropped Cuba's signature from the petition he wrote in the 1780s. Similarly, the Black men who petitioned the Boston School Committee had to respond to the committee's requests for men's signatures specifically.⁶⁹⁸

Yet when strategy allowed, Black women did sign petitions. In 1861, Frances Holland Vassall Clark added her name to a remonstrance against the repeal of the "Personal Liberties Law," which protected free Black people living in free states from fugitive slave laws. She signed just above her husband, Jonas W. Clark, and father, Darby Vassall, on the same page as the celebrated memoirist Harriet Jacobs.⁶⁹⁹ There was no question that this was a momentous act of resistance for New Englanders. The slave states that soon seceded from the Union went on to cite the personal liberty laws as evidence of the failure of northern states to uphold their end of the constitutional bargain.

⁶⁹⁶ Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 157–158.

⁶⁹⁷ S. J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860* (University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

⁶⁹⁸ *The Liberator*, April 4, 1851, page 3.

⁶⁹⁹ Personal Liberties Law petition, Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, Passed Acts; St. 1861, c.91, SC1/series 229, MSA, Boston. Petition 36 Page (seq. 200), Repository Collection Development Department, Widener Library, HCL Institution Harvard University, accessed 21 August 2025, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:10512596?n=200>. Harriet Jacobs escaped slavery in North Carolina in 1842 and settled in Cambridge for five years, where she "opened two boarding houses for Harvard faculty, including Christopher C. Langdell, the first dean of Harvard Law School," and William Cooper Nell. On the 1861 petition, Jacobs signed just under William Cooper Nell and just above Nell's sister Louisa and her husband, Ira Gray. The signatures of Frances and Jonas Clark are a few names lower down, with the Grays' 19-year-old son, Ira N. Gray. The Grays were definitely living at 20 Grove Street at the time (they are listed at that address in the 1860 Census, and their young daughter Gertrude died there in 1862). This raises the intriguing possibility that the Clarks, Darby Vassall, and the extended Gray–Nell family may have signed the petition all at once, perhaps because they were gathered at 20 Grove Street for a social occasion. If so, Darby Vassall may have met Harriet Jacobs. J. F. Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (Basic Civitas Books 2004).

At Home with the Vassall–Clark–Sprague Family

Although Black Bostonians worked together toward shared political goals, personal relationships between them were not always harmonious. Like any group of people united by struggle, solidarity, and affection, they argued, formed factions, and annoyed one another in everyday ways. This was particularly true for people who lived in close proximity, as Darby Vassall and his daughter's family did. In 1842, 73-year-old Darby was living with Frances and Jonas W. Clark in the house he had sold them on May Street. Darby seems to have had his own room on the second floor of the house. That summer, Jonas complained to a friend that Darby had "injured his house" by "breaking down the plastering & pouring water on the floor, which has leaked through the ceiling." In addition to this physical damage, Clark was annoyed that Darby did "other things to disturb his family." In particular, he was upset that Darby would "interfere with his children." The friend wrote to Darby, admonishing him to "behave yourself properly & quietly in the house."⁷⁰⁰

It is not surprising that tensions were running high in the Vassall–Clark household in 1842. The previous year had been another awful season of loss that added extra responsibilities to the family's already overflowing plates. Cyrus Vassall's daughter, Eliza Flagg Vassall Sprague, died of consumption in September 1841, just four months after her husband, Joseph, succumbed to the same illness. They left two orphaned children, 13-year-old Lucy and 6-year-old Joseph. Both children moved in with the Clarks, who had two children of their own: 12-year-old Jonas and 11-year-old Frances Jane.⁷⁰¹ The next spring, Primus Hall died, leaving his two youngest children, Isannah and Ezra Trask Hall, to Jonas W. Clark's guardianship. Isannah and Ezra were teenagers, and probably did not live in the Clark family's home, but they certainly added to the household's responsibilities.⁷⁰²

This puts the dispute between Darby Vassall and the Clark family in a different light. The spring of 1842 was a time of stress and grief, with Primus Hall's death in March and the recent

⁷⁰⁰ George Bigelow to Darby Vassall, 8 July 1842, Wendell Phillips papers, MS Am 1953, Box 44 (1490), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁷⁰¹ "Suffolk, Massachusetts, United States records," images, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C9Y5-BVRS?view=fullText> : Aug 13, 2025), image 799 of 1165; Massachusetts. Probate Court (Suffolk County). Image Group Number: 007704198.

⁷⁰² Ezra and Isannah probably continued living with their mother, Ann. Suffolk Probate #33334-5 notes that Jonas W. Clark paid Ann Hall \$103 for Isannah's board "at sundry times" before Isannah's death in 1846.

arrival of the Sprague children in the Clark household. Jonas Clark may have felt that water dripping through the ceiling was the last straw. His complaint that Darby Vassall “interfere[d] with his children” came at a time when there may have been disagreements—possibly heated—over how best to raise and protect the Sprague and Hall children. If Darby Vassall disagreed with decisions the Clarks made, Jonas may have felt that his father-in-law was undermining his delicate relationship with four grieving, disoriented children. Indeed, Primus Hall’s son, Ezra, seems to have suffered particularly in the aftermath of his father’s death. Less than a year after Primus Hall’s death, Ezra died at age 18 of “Intemperance.”⁷⁰³

The addition of the Sprague children to the Clark household brought all of Darby and Cyrus Vassall’s grandchildren under one roof on the land the brothers had bought together in 1796. Their house on May Street was busy, but the life that Frances and Jonas W. Clark provided for their niece and nephew was a comfortable one.⁷⁰⁴ The Clarks had to keep track of what they spent on Lucy and Joseph in order to fulfill their responsibilities as guardians, and the detailed lists paint a picture of security and aspiration. In the two years after Lucy turned 18 in 1846, she bought two silk dresses, a muslin dress, a Delaine (mixed wool and cotton) dress, a merino shawl, and various other clothing, including 2 ½ yards of velvet and 2 ½ yards of silk.⁷⁰⁵ In April 1851, the Clarks spent \$6.50 “for Cake” for 23-year-old Lucy’s wedding to barber Lewis F. Smith.⁷⁰⁶ Joseph Sprague’s clothing was less expensive, but appropriate for a growing

⁷⁰³ Isannah was supposed to marry a man named John Roberts on March 11, 1845, but she “forbid” the marriage at the last moment and died of unknown causes the next April. The probate record (Suffolk Probate #33334-5) shows that Jonas Clark bought various small items for Isannah over the years (a muff, a carpet bag), and brought her body to the African Meeting House for a funeral. Isannah was buried with her father and brother in crypt #59 at St. Matthew’s Church. Her death record erroneously calls her “Hannah” Hall, but the personal details and death date (3 April 1846) match Suffolk Probate #33334-5, Massachusetts, US, Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988, Ancestry.com.

⁷⁰⁴ Erica Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (University of Georgia Press, 2012).

⁷⁰⁵ Lucy F. and Joseph A. Sprague Guardianship, Suffolk Probate #33251-2.

⁷⁰⁶ In 1851, \$6.50 was a lot of money for cake, suggesting either that the wedding had many guests or the cake was luxurious. For comparison, Jonas W. Clark generally reckoned the Sprague children’s weekly “board” at \$0.92–\$1.00 per week. Lucy’s silk dresses cost \$5–7.00 each, while her muslin and Delaine dresses cost \$2.00 each. Free men who worked as farm laborers typically earned around \$1.00 per day in 1851, while artisans like carpenters and masons earned around \$1.50 per day. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, US Census Bureau, v.1, 164; *Statistical View of the United States*, ed. J.D.B. de Bow, Secretary of the Census (1854), 164, <https://libraryguides.missouri.edu/pricesandwages/1850-1859>, Massachusetts, US, Marriage Records, 1840–1915.

schoolboy. His long list of apparel—jackets, shirts, pants, warm coats—is interrupted by many entries for “repairing boots,” “school books,” and, when he was nine years old, “glass broken in house.”⁷⁰⁷

Diaspora: Jamaica, Haiti, Canada, and Liberia

The period between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars was a time of tremendous promise and significant backlash for the Black Atlantic diaspora. Revolutionaries in Haiti liberated their people from slavery, a success that terrified white slave owners around the world. The abolitionist movement in the United Kingdom gathered popular support, in part due to the activism of Africans like Olaudah Equiano, whose 1789 autobiography exposed the horrors of slavery and the slave trade.⁷⁰⁸ In 1807, Great Britain formally outlawed participation in the transatlantic slave trade, and the United States followed in 1808. Still, slavery itself remained legal in British colonies and most American states.

At every turn, Black revolutionaries, activists, and ordinary people continually pushed for expansive visions of Black liberation.⁷⁰⁹ Black Americans in Boston and beyond celebrated the success of the Haitian revolution while simultaneously imagining what shape freedom might take for their own families. For some, this meant fighting for equality under the laws of the United States. For others, it meant leaving the country for Canada, Great Britain, or Haiti, while still others dreamed of returning to the West African homelands of their forebears.⁷¹⁰

The Black Vassall family participated in many of these movements. Their activism in Boston was interwoven with far-ranging experiments in Black liberation around the globe. Yet even as Cuba and Anthony Vassall’s children and grandchildren fought for the prosperity and dignity of their community in Massachusetts, the white Vassalls continued their deadly work in Jamaica. Their sugar plantations did not disappear in 1774. Indeed, in the fifty years between

⁷⁰⁷ Lucy F. and Joseph A. Sprague Guardianship, Suffolk Probate #33251-2.

⁷⁰⁸ John R. Milsome, *Olaudah Equiano: The Slave Who Helped to End the Slave Trade* (Longman, 1969).

⁷⁰⁹ Leslie M. Alexander, Brandon R. Byrd, Russell John Rickford, eds., *Ideas in Unexpected Places : Reimagining Black Intellectual History* (Northwestern University Press, 2022); Marlene L. Daut, *Awakening the Ashes: An Intellectual History of the Haitian Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Twentieth anniversary edition (Beacon Press, 2022).

⁷¹⁰ James Campbell, *Middle Passage: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (Penguin Press, 2006); Henry Louis Gates and Donald Yacovone, *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* (SmileyBooks, 2013).

1774 and 1834, the white Vassalls continued to expand their sugar plantations in Jamaica, first through the importation of new captives from Africa and, after 1807, by purchasing enslaved people from their neighbors.⁷¹¹ When John Vassall died in 1797—the year after Darby and Cyrus Vassall helped found the African Society—he left about 200 enslaved people at his Newfound River plantation. His heirs continued to purchase more people after his death, increasing the population of enslaved people at Newfound River to 235 in the 1830s.⁷¹² John Vassall’s son, Robert Oliver Vassall, purchased an entirely new plantation near Half Moon Bay in 1815, along with 181 additional enslaved people.⁷¹³ Similarly, John Vassall’s uncle, William Vassall, and his heirs continued to expand their Green River plantation. In 1820—when Darby and Cyrus Vassall’s children were teenagers—William Vassall Jr. purchased an additional 64 enslaved people for Green River, bringing the population to 304.⁷¹⁴ When the Black Vassalls in Boston honored Haitian heroes like Toussaint L’Ouverture and marked the end of the transatlantic slave trade with songs and speeches, they were celebrating each blow struck against the West Indian plantation system that was such a fundamental part their own family history.

Haiti—the first country founded by self-emancipated people—held particular significance for Black Bostonians.⁷¹⁵ Important figures at the African Meeting House, the Baptist minister Thomas Paul and Vermont-raised teacher Prince Saunders, had spent significant time in Haiti. Paul was engaged in missionary work and Saunders in educational support, government, and writing. They both came to deeply appreciate the leadership of King Henri

⁷¹¹ Colleen A. Vasconcellos, *Slavery, Childhood, and Abolition in Jamaica, 1788–1838* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

⁷¹² According to the Legacies of British Slavery database, 201 people were enslaved at Newfound River in 1799, and 235 in 1831. Papers Presented to the House of Commons of the 7th May 1804, Respecting the Slave Trade (Houses of Parliament, 1804) section G p. 25, via Legacies of British Slavery database; Jamaica Almanac (1832) via the Legacies of British Slavery database; Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834.

⁷¹³ Abingdon Estate and Hanover Claim #510, Legacies of British Slavery database; Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834.

⁷¹⁴ Green River Estate and Hanover Claim #464, Legacies of British Slavery database. Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813-1834.

⁷¹⁵ Leslie M. Alexander, *Fear of a Black Republic: Haiti and the Birth of Black Internationalism in the United States* (University of Illinois Press, 2023).

Christophe and Haiti as a nation of liberated people of African descent, even going so far as to advocate it as an ideal site for Black American emigration.⁷¹⁶

In this context, the political advocacy of many of the Black Vassalls extended beyond the United States into solidarity with the African diaspora. In 1825, Darby Vassall served as vice president of a committee that planned a celebration for the anniversary of Haitian Independence. The event featured a repast held at the African School House, which had been decorated for the occasion, where twelve toasts were offered by committee members. Darby toasted: “May the freedom of Hayti be a glorious harbinger of the time when the color of man shall no longer be a pretext for depriving of his liberty.” He was followed by William Vassall, who toasted the colonization societies as “The efforts of patriotic and christian [sic] philanthropists to meliorate [sic] our condition, whether in the East or the West, the North or the South - shall receive our grateful cooperation.”⁷¹⁷ The evening refreshment was followed by a “splendid ball given to the Ladies.”⁷¹⁸

Shortly after this time, David Walker, a Black Bostonian clothing seller who had a shop on Brattle Street near Jonas W. Clark’s shop, called for Black Americans to pursue liberty within the United States, even if that meant armed combat.⁷¹⁹ A member of the Methodist May Street Church, the Prince Hall Masons, and the Massachusetts General Colored Association, his activism came to a head in 1829 when he published his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. He urged white readers, in his powerful and controversial document, to “Treat us like men, and there is no danger but we will all live in peace and happiness together. For we are not like you, hard hearted, unmerciful, and unforgiving. What a happy country this will be, if the whites will listen.”⁷²⁰

⁷¹⁶ Arthur White, “Prince Saunders: An Instance of Social Mobility Among Antebellum New England Blacks,” *The Journal of Negro History* 40, no. 4 (1975); Marlene L. Daut, *The First and Last King of Haiti: The Rise and Fall of Henry Christophe* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2025).

⁷¹⁷ William Vassall may have been descended from another family who had previously been enslaved by the white Vassalls. He was probably the William Vassall who died in the Boston House of Industry on January 30, 1840 at age 61. Massachusetts, US, Town and Vital Records, 1620–1988, Ancestry.com.

⁷¹⁸ *Columbian Centinel*, 31 August 1825, 1–2.

⁷¹⁹ Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

⁷²⁰ David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), page 79.

While Walker and many other Black Bostonians imagined a United States transformed by revolutionary abolition, others were drawn to the possibility of emigration.⁷²¹ Free Black communities had long balanced the tension between those who wished to stay and fight for liberty and those who wished to leave for safer or more congenial shores.⁷²² Sometimes, an individual was moved to follow both paths at different times in their life, as in the case of Occramar Mirycoo, alias Newport Gardner, who was born in Africa around 1746, enslaved in Rhode Island as a teenager, and led a group of free Black emigrants to Liberia in 1826. “I go to encourage the young,” he declared before setting sail. “They can never be elevated here. I have tried sixty years. It is in vain.”⁷²³

The oldest granddaughter of Anthony and Cuba, Catherine Vassall Lewis, was the only member of the Vassall family to emigrate. In 1847, she emigrated to Canada for a time with her husband, Adam Lewis. The couple joined the Dawn Settlement, a cooperative colony in Ontario led by Black Methodist preacher Josiah Henson. In 1830, Rev. Henson escaped from slavery in Maryland with his wife and children. Together, they founded the Dawn Settlement just over the border from Detroit, Michigan as a haven for self-emancipated people.

In the 1840s, Rev. Henson traveled to Boston to give speeches and raise money to sustain the Dawn Settlement and its residents.⁷²⁴ He worked tirelessly to share his vision for a refuge for freedom-seekers, and his 1849 autobiography became a major inspiration and

⁷²¹ Ronald Angelo Johnson and Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *In Search of Liberty: African American Internationalism in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (University of Georgia Press, 2021); Mia E. Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones and Barbara D. Savage, eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

⁷²² Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle against the Colonization Movement* (New York University Press, 2014).

⁷²³ Edward E. Andrews, “The Crossings of Occramar Marycoo, or Newport Gardner” in *Atlantic Biographies: Individuals and Peoples in the Atlantic World*, ed. Mark Meuwese and Jeffrey A. Fortin (Brill, 2013), 101–142.

⁷²⁴ During the American Civil War, Rev. Henson helped Black Canadians join the push for freedom. While many would come to know of his life through his association with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Queen Victoria, he was well known by the over one hundred people he helped usher to freedom. Following the war, the United States Freeman’s Inquiry Commission toured Black settlements in Ontario; in 1868, the Dawn Settlement closed and the school’s assets helped establish the Wilberforce Educational Institute in nearby Chatham. For additional information, see “HENSON, JOSIAH,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, n.d. https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/henson_josiah_11E.html, and “Celebrating Josiah – Introducing the Josiah Henson Museum of African-Canadian History,” in *Heritage Matters E-magazine*, n.d., <https://www.heritage-matters.ca/articles/celebrating-josiah>.

source for the white abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁷²⁵ In Boston, Rev. Henson courted funding from abolitionists, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who on at least two occasions donated \$10.00 to the school at the Dawn Settlement. Longfellow described his meeting with Henson in 1846: “In the evening Mr. Henson, a Negro, once a slave, now a preacher, called to get subscription for the school at Dawn, in Upper Canada, for education of blacks. I had a long talk with him, and he gave me an account of his escape from slavery with his family.”⁷²⁶

In 1846, Adam and Catherine Lewis sold their property in Cambridge to follow Rev. Henson to Canada.⁷²⁷ The next year, they settled on 50 acres of land in the Dawn Settlement in 1847 and began to farm.⁷²⁸ By 1851, they were cultivating 14 acres of crops—mostly wheat, corn, and potatoes—one acre of pasture, and 35 acres of woodland.⁷²⁹ They had two pigs, two oxen, and two cows that produced enough milk for Catherine to make 100 pounds of butter each year. It was a small farm by Dawn standards, but a large operation for an aging couple without children. Nearby, their neighbors raised peas, turnips, beans, and oats. They kept flocks

⁷²⁵ When Josiah Henson arrived in Canada in 1830, he could not read. His employer, Mr. Hibbard, sent Henson’s twelve-year-old son, Tom, to school, and Tom gradually taught his father to read. He dictated his autobiography. Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now a Resident of Canada* (1849); Jamie Ferguson Kuhns, *Sharp Flashes of Lightning Come from Black Clouds: The Life of Josiah Henson*, Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission, (2018); Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853).

⁷²⁶ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow diary, dated 26 June 1846, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁷²⁷ Middlesex County Register of Deeds, 1846, Middlesex, Massachusetts. FamilySearch <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-L9ZS-TLKV?view=fullText>, image 763 of 871.

⁷²⁸ For this land, they paid £56.5.0 to Francis St. Amour. Registrar of Deeds, Chatham, Kent, Ontario, Canada. FamilySearch <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSTT-Z9TP-9?view=fullText>, image 27 of 262.

⁷²⁹ The Canadian Census of 1851 shows that Adam Lewis’s farm was 35 acres of woodland, 1 acre of pasture, 1 acre of hay, 6 acres of wheat producing 40 bushels, 5 acres of “Indian Corn” producing 15 bushels, and 3 acres of potatoes producing 12 bushels. Most of the farms at Dawn were larger (100 or 200 acres) and produced much more food, but Adam and Catherine Lewis were in their late 50s and had no known children to help them work the farm. It should be noted that there was another Black man named Adam Lewis (1820-1900) living in the nearby town of Chatham, Ontario, but he was not related to Catherine and Adam Lewis, who have no recorded son and whose household did not include a boy in the 1820, 1830, or 1840 Federal Censuses. The younger Adam Lewis was from Missouri and was almost certainly self-emancipated. He married a woman named Mary Jane and had several children, but should not be confused with Adam Lewis, Catherine Vassall’s husband. 1851 Census of Canada, Dawn, Lambton County, Ontario, via digitized 1851 Census at Library and Archives Canada <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/>.

of sheep and turned their wool into thousands of yards of free-labor cloth, along with 5,546 pounds of maple sugar that was not from any plantation.⁷³⁰

When freedom-seekers arrived at Dawn, they found a community eager for agricultural labor, but also education. The community supported small industries—a sawmill, a ropewalk, a brickyard, a gristmill—and the British American Institute, a vocational school providing general education, practical training in agriculture and trades, and teacher training. The school is credited as having laid the foundation for later Black-led educational efforts in Canada and played a key role in shaping early Black Canadian social leadership.⁷³¹

Adam and Catherine Lewis did not stay in Canada permanently. In 1856, they sold a building lot in the burgeoning town of Dresden, Ontario to Thomas Ricks, a gardener and grocer from Philadelphia.⁷³² They kept the fifty acres for another decade, though they moved back to Boston sometime after 1861.⁷³³ When Adam Lewis died in 1868, he was a widower, so Catherine died sometime between 1861 and 1868, likely in Canada. At the time of his death, Adam Lewis was living at 20 Grove Street in Boston with Frances and Jonas Clark.⁷³⁴

Adam and Catherine Lewis were not the only Black New Englanders who believed that leaving the United States was the surest path to safety and liberation. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, colonization societies had been formed in New Jersey, Washington D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, with the goal of providing opportunities for free Black people to migrate to West Africa.⁷³⁵ In 1841, the Massachusetts branch of the American Colonization Society was founded, building on nearly twenty years of interest and advocacy among Black Americans to relocate to West Africa and build a colony called Liberia.

⁷³⁰ In 1851, the Dawn Settlement produced 496 yards of fulled cloth and 1,943 yards of flannel. 1851 Census Canada.

⁷³¹ Josiah Henson, *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life: An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson, from 1789–1876*, ed. John Lobb, preface by Harriet Beecher Stowe (London, 1876); digital version by Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina, 2011).

⁷³² Registrar of Deeds, Chatham, Kent, Ontario, Canada. FamilySearch <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSTT-Z9TP-9?view=fullText>, image 140 of 988.

⁷³³ In the 1861 Census of Canada, Adam Lewis's 50 acres in the Dawn Settlement were entirely "under wood or wild," not growing crops. Adam (age 63) and Catherine (age 55) are both still listed in the census, but they were no longer farming.

⁷³⁴ Adam Lewis died on May 16, 1868. His name is mistranscribed in the Massachusetts death indices as "Adana" Lewis. Massachusetts Death Records, volume 213, page 81.

⁷³⁵ Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (University Press of Florida, 2005).

Members of the Lewis family were introduced to these projects through the American and Massachusetts Colonization Societies' efforts. They learned of the 1855 settlement of Clay-Ashland, Liberia, and eventually joined ranks of the 150-member Cambridge Liberian Emigrant Association. The same year that Darby joined Cooper Nell's celebration of the American Revolution, more than twenty Black Cantabrigians planned to relocate to Liberia, under the direction of Enoch Lewis of Cambridge, Adam's brother, to establish civil and religious liberty, and to create "a nation among nations, like the Pilgrim Fathers"⁷³⁶ along the St. Paul's River. It has been suggested that Catherine and Adam Lewis may have joined this expedition,⁷³⁷ but they were still living in Canada in 1861. If they ever did go to Liberia, they quickly returned to Massachusetts. Property records show that Adam Lewis was definitely in Boston in 1867, when he signed papers for the sale of his land in Canada in front of witnesses.⁷³⁸

An 1858 article about the Cambridge Liberian Emigrant Association's effort documents a meeting held in Lyceum Hall in Cambridge, where "Mr. Enoch Lewis explained the intentions and wishes of the emigrating company." Lewis told his neighbors that they "propose to settle in Liberia, together, organize a new township to be called Cambridge, and to accomplish their object, they must have assistance."⁷³⁹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow supported the expedition. His account book from October 1858 records his donation of \$10.00 for "Negroes to Liberia."⁷⁴⁰

Of the more than twenty emigrants that departed from Cambridge on the resulting voyage, fourteen were descendants of Peter Lewis. After a brief stop in Baltimore, they made their way across the ocean that brought over their ancestors. The crossing was successful, but

⁷³⁶ Longfellow House Bulletin 16.1 (June 2012).

⁷³⁷ "Self-Guided Tour: Stories from the Early African American Community of Old Cambridge," n.d., *History Cambridge*, <https://historycambridge.org/self-guided-tours/self-guided-tour-stories-from-the-early-african-american-community-of-old-cambridge/>. Accessed 19 August 2025.

⁷³⁸ Registrar of Deeds, Camden, Kent, Ontario, Canada. FamilySearch <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSYS-39ZJ-R?view=fullText>, image 146 of 906.

⁷³⁹ "Emigration to Liberia," *The Cambridge Chronicle*, Vol. XIII, No. 41, 9 October 1858.

⁷⁴⁰ Account book entry listed under heading "1858," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Papers, p. 148, MS Am 1340 (152), Houghton Library, Harvard University, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.HOUGH:1476983>.

within a year, a third of the emigrants passed away due to sickness.⁷⁴¹ Many members of the Lewis family, including Enoch Lewis and his wife, were among them.⁷⁴²

Darby Vassall's Legacy

Back in the United States, Darby Vassall was thinking about his own mortality. In 1852, when he was 83 years old, he dictated a last will and testament to his friend, white abolitionist Wendell Phillips, whom he also asked to serve as his executor.⁷⁴³ After paying his debts, Darby asked for most of his personal possessions to be left to his “dear grandson,” Jonas Whitney Vassall Clark.⁷⁴⁴ These included his “silver spectacles,” a silver watch marked with young Jonas’s name, and several silver spoons that he exhorted Clark to keep “in memory of his grandmother & myself.” Young Jonas never knew his grandmother, Lucy Jenkins Vassall, who died when he was an infant.⁷⁴⁵ Darby’s exhortation to remember her suggests that he must have told his grandchildren stories about his beloved wife.⁷⁴⁶

The rest of Darby Vassall’s possessions were mostly clothing, furniture, bedding, and kitchen utensils that suggested he lived in a modest but comfortable room in his daughter’s house. He slept in a decorated wooden bed with a featherbed, bolsters, and pillows in a room that also held a writing desk, a bureau, and “one mahogany table, three feet & nine inches in

⁷⁴¹ “We arrived at Monrovia December 25th, after one of the most pleasant of sea passages. The company in the cabin were very agreeable, and time passed rapidly.... The site appears to be a healthy one, and the situation as pleasant as could well be found; water excellent, and at a convenient distance: the emigrants, so far, content. The road to town is good, at this season of the year; but will need bridging for the rainy season, otherwise it will be impassable. We are a poor people, with very little capital, but I think we shall gradually work ourselves up to a respectable standing, and supply some produce as an offset to the large amount imported into our country, and when this brings general relief to the community it will not be so forbidding a place to him of timid heart, after all.” Dr. Daniel Laing’s Correspondence Regarding Monrovia, Liberia, *The African Repository* by American Colonization Society, 1859.

⁷⁴² “Saddening,” *The Cambridge Chronicle*, 24 September 1859, <https://cambridge.dlconsulting.com/?a=d&d=Chronicle18590924-01.2.8&srpos=2&e=-----185-en-20--1-byDA.rev-txt-txIN-liberia----->.

⁷⁴³ This will was not probated through the Suffolk County probate court. It remained a private document, albeit one that was witnessed by three wealthy white abolitionists in addition to Wendell Phillips; the witnesses were Justice of the Peace Francis Jackson, Robert F. Wallcut (publisher of *The Liberator*), and editor Edmund Quincy. Will of Darby Vassall, 1852, Wendell Phillips papers, MS Am 1953, box 45 (1582), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁷⁴⁴ Jonas W.V. Clark (28 July 1828–1884) was the son of Jonas W. Clark and Frances Vassall Clark.

⁷⁴⁵ Jonas W.V. Clark was born 28 July 1828, according to documents in the Wendell Phillips papers accompanying Darby Vassall’s will. Lucy Jenkins Vassall died on 11 December 1828, age 52. *Vital Records of Cambridge*.

⁷⁴⁶ Will of Darby Vassall, 1852.

width.” Darby Vassall was not a rich man, but he had a fine collection of vests—three black silk, one striped, two cotton flannel, one white, one blue—that he paired with either his black or his blue dress coat.⁷⁴⁷ He left all of these to his grandson, Jonas W. V. Clark.⁷⁴⁸

In the last decade of his life, Darby Vassall was a respected elder who continued to participate in community events and political activism. Despite their conflicts in the 1840s, and aside from some time spent apart, he lived with his daughter Frances’s family in his final years. In 1849, Frances and Jonas Clark purchased 12 Belknap Street, a “brick dwelling house” just

⁷⁴⁷ In *Belonging*, Gloria Whiting argues that Darby Vassall “lost, along with his kin, all of his material possessions: the land he purchased with his earnings, the home he had built with his hands, the inheritance he had collected after his father’s passing” (Whiting, 227). In footnotes, Whiting argues that the 1860 Census shows Darby Vassall living with his daughter Frances and her husband, Jonas W. Clark, but that “none of the three had any property, either real or personal” (note 121). This is a misreading of the 1860 census, likely stemming from an anomaly in the data entry. The value of the real estate at 20 Grove Street is listed as \$4,500 (with personal estate of \$300), but it is listed on the next page, beside the final resident of 20 Grove Street, a clerk named James C. Cooper. Note that in 1860, two families were living in the Clarks’ house. The first consisted of Jonas and Frances Clark, Darby Vassall, and Joseph A. Sprague (Cyrus Vassall’s grandson). The second household was Ira and Louisa Nell Gray, their two children, and James C. Cooper. For unknown reasons, the census taker listed the value of the property on the final line associated with the house, which is easy to miss because the households are split over two pages. This amount is in line with what is known of the Clark family’s finances in 1860 from other sources. The Boston Tax Records for 1860 confirm that Darby Vassall paid no tax on real or personal estate, but show that Jonas W. Clark paid taxes on \$6,500 of real estate and \$1,200 of personal estate. This \$6,500 included both the Grove Street property and Jonas W. Clark’s other real estate holdings. A brief history of property transactions is necessary to illustrate the Clark family’s finances in 1860. In December 1829, Darby Vassall sold both his May Street property in Boston and 4.5 acres in Cambridge to his son-in-law, Jonas W. Clark (Clark paid \$500 for the Cambridge property in 1829 and sold it the next year for \$1,200; Suffolk Deed, Vassall to Clark, 16 December 1829; Middlesex Deed, Vassall to Clark, 21 December 1829; Middlesex Deed, Clark to Stone, 7 September 1830.) After he sold the May Street property, Darby Vassall lived with his daughter’s family off and on over the next three decades. Frances and Jonas W. Clark lived on the May Street property with their children, the Sprague children, and Darby Vassall for many years. They sold a piece of the May Street land to George W. Thompson in 1847 for \$500, but continued to own the bulk until 1855, when they sold it to Robert Andrews for \$5,000 (Suffolk Deeds, Clark to Thompson, 24 November 1847; Clark to Andrews, 29 May 1855). The previous day, 28 May 1855, the Clarks purchased a house at 20 Grove Street, which they still owned when Jonas W. Clark died in 1870 (Suffolk Probate #50262). The Clarks also owned another house (73 Joy Street, formerly 12 Belknap Street) and a small piece of land in Arlington, as well as the stock of Jonas’s Excelsior clothing shop, which operated out of a rented storefront at 18 Brattle Street. In 1870, this real estate was worth \$5,500 over and above the value of a \$2,700 mortgage on 20 Grove Street, which was the family’s primary residence. Jonas W. Clark’s probate file also shows an additional \$423.54 in personal property and stock. Darby Vassall also had some personal property in 1853, when Wendell Phillips recorded his will. This included silver cutlery, a silver watch, clothing, bedding, and furniture, all of which he left to his grandson, Jonas W. V. Clark. Since the will was informal, it was never probated, so it is not possible to confirm that this bequest was carried out upon Darby’s death in 1861; however, there is no reason to believe it was not. Darby Vassall’s financial situation may have diminished in his old age, but he was not destitute. He was an elder who lived in his daughter’s comfortable home on one of the several properties her husband owned, likely with his own room and personal possessions, as enumerated in his will. Will of Darby Vassall, 1852, Wendell Phillips papers, MS Am 1953, box 45 (1582), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁷⁴⁸ Will of Darby Vassall, 1852.

steps from the African Meeting House, for \$2,600.⁷⁴⁹ Jonas's younger brother, Arthur F. Clark, had operated a boarding house there for years, providing shelter for many community members, including Rev. John T. Raymond, minister of the Baptist congregation at the African Meeting House.⁷⁵⁰ The Clarks may have continued renting rooms. They lived on May Street, on the property that Darby and Cyrus Vassall had purchased in 1796, until May 29, 1855, when they sold it for \$5,000. The previous day, the Clarks had purchased another house nearby, 20 Grove Street, which became their primary residence.⁷⁵¹ Darby Vassall moved with them.⁷⁵²

The house at 20 Grove Street was not only a home for the Clarks and Darby Vassall. It was also part of the infrastructure of Boston's abolitionist movement. The Clarks' good friend, William Cooper Nell, boarded with them there in 1857, as did Nell's sister, Louisa, her husband, Ira Smith Gray, and their children, Ira and Gertrude.⁷⁵³ At the time, they were all deeply involved with the ongoing efforts to protect self-emancipated people, both by agitating for their rights and by providing direct support in the form of money, housing, and jobs. Their next-door neighbors, George and Nancy Ruffin, were free people from Richmond, Virginia, who moved North in search of safety and educational opportunities for their children, including their son, George Lewis Ruffin, the first Black graduate of Harvard Law School.⁷⁵⁴ Jonas Clark also

⁷⁴⁹ Jonas W. Clark purchased this property from his brother, Anthony F. Clark. Clark to Clark, deed, 25 September 1855, Suffolk County Deeds, vol. 604, 29–30.

⁷⁵⁰ Kathryn Grover and Janine V. Da Silva, "Historic Resource Study: Boston African American National Historic Site," Boston African American National Historic Site, 2002, 47; Jonas W. Clark was born 17 June 1799, the fifth of Peter and Mitty Clark's ten children. His brother Anthony, the youngest child, was born 16 July 1813. Vital Records of Hubbardston, Massachusetts.

⁷⁵¹ Jonas W. Clark to Robert Andrews, deed, 29 May 1855, Suffolk County Deeds, vol. 681, 104-5; Cyrus and Deborah Redlon to Jonas W. Clark, deed, 28 May 1855, Suffolk County Deeds, vol. 681, 113–4.

⁷⁵² Darby Vassall was living with the Clarks when the Massachusetts Census was taken on 23 June, 1855. The Federal Census of 1850 contains a curious entry for the Clark household. It lists the members as Jonas W. Clark, Frances Holland Vassall Clark, Frances J. Clark [Weedman], and Lucy Sprague [Smith]. A final member of the household is identified as "Law Bassett," a Black man aged 73 who was born in Massachusetts. Efforts to identify Law Bassett have been unsuccessful. It is possible that the census taker recorded a very garbled version of Darby Vassall's name, along with an inaccurate age (Darby was 81 in 1850). It is also possible that Bassett was a community member staying with the Clarks, perhaps one of the many Black people who were passing through Boston on their way to places of greater safety in the 1850s. In any case, Darby Vassall was certainly living with the Clarks in 1842, 1855, and 1860.

⁷⁵³ Kathryn Grover and Janine V. Da Silva, 65. 1860 Federal Census. Gertrude Gray died of scarlet fever on 3 April 1862, age five. Her address in the Boston death records is 20 Grove Street.

⁷⁵⁴ In 1869, George Lewis Ruffin became the first Black graduate of Harvard Law School. Soon after, he became the first Black man elected to the Boston City Council, and was later elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. He also served as a Boston Municipal Judge. William J. Simmons and Henry McNeal Turner, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland, OH, 1887).

provided meeting space for the Black Methodist congregation on the second floor of the building he rented for his clothing shop.⁷⁵⁵

During this time, the residents of 20 Grove Street may have housed freedom seekers under their roof.⁷⁵⁶ While the necessary secrecy makes this difficult to corroborate, the Boston Vigilance Committee's financial records show that Jonas W. Clark directly assisted at least two men in 1857, in addition to the many times he posted bail for self-emancipated people like Shadrach Minkins.⁷⁵⁷ One thing is certain: the Clark family and Darby Vassall lived at the very heart of Black abolitionist Boston in the 1850s.

The Vassall–Clark family's finances were complex, but they are crucial to understanding the legacy that Darby Vassall—along with his parents and siblings—bequeathed to their community and their descendants. When Darby and Cyrus Vassall purchased their land on May Street in 1796, they planted a seed of security that grew over the next fifty years into a real estate portfolio that was more than just a source of shelter for its residents.⁷⁵⁸ Frances and Jonas W. Clark's properties provided them with assets that they could sell, rent, and borrow against at a time when Black Bostonians were desperate for collateral to meet the urgent needs of self-emancipated people. When freedom-seekers like Shadrach Minkins needed \$3,000 bail, Jonas W. Clark was able to step forward as a bail bondsman because he could leverage the real estate portfolio he had built out of the Vassall family's property. When fugitives, activists, and impoverished community members needed shelter, the Clark–Vassall family had a home and a boarding house next to the African Meeting House where they could rest in the heart of a

⁷⁵⁵ On February 1, 1857, there was a fire at Jonas Clark's shop. The fire started at 10 pm, shortly after the Methodist meeting was dismissed. The fire was stopped before it burned the building down, but the contents of Clark's store were "thoroughly soaked with water." *Boston Evening Transcript*, 2 February 1857, page 2. This account of the fire says that Clark's store was on the corner of North Russell Street and Cambridge Street, which is indeed where the Methodist Church met. However, Clark also operated his store from space at 18 Brattle Street, both before and after this fire. See advertisement for a stolen cloak, *Boston Post*, 18 July 1836, page 2.

⁷⁵⁶ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *The Underground Railroad: An Encyclopedia of People, Places, and Operations* (Taylor & Francis, 2015).

⁷⁵⁷ Account Book of Francis Jackson, Treasurer. The Vigilance Committee of Boston, Dr. Irving H. Bartlett collection, 1830–1880, W. B. Nickerson Cape Cod History Archives, 50, 52, <https://archive.org/details/drirvinghbartlet19bart/page/50/mode/2up>; "Jonas W. Clark," Boston African American National Historic Site, US National Park Service, accessed 20 August, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/people/jonas-w-clark.htm>.

⁷⁵⁸ Jacqueline Jones, *No Right to an Honest Living: The Struggles of Boston's Black Workers in the Civil War Era* (Basic Books, 2023); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

community that was willing to defend them at any cost.⁷⁵⁹ In this way, the houses that Anthony, Cuba, Darby, and Cyrus Vassall built were the exact opposite of 105 Brattle Street. Instead of mining luxurious comfort out of the exploitation of enslaved people, they put their own hard-won assets—the roofs over their heads—on the line to assist freedom-seekers.

The move to 20 Grove Street was connected to 105 Brattle Street in Darby Vassall's mind as well. On the morning of March 22, 1855, just a week before the Clarks sold the May Street property that he and Cyrus had worked so hard to obtain, Darby returned to his birthplace for a visit. The grand house on Brattle Street—where his family had been enslaved—was, by then, the home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Darby Vassall traveled to Cambridge to meet the poet, accompanied by Lunsford Lane, a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and author of a memoir about his former enslavement in North Carolina. Longfellow recorded the meeting in his diary: “[Publisher James] Fields comes out to hear some part of ‘Hiawatha.’ Read to him the Introduction and ‘The Peace Pipe.’ Then we are interrupted. Lundy Lane and old Mr. Vassall (born a slave in this house in 1769) come to see me, and stay so long that Fields is driven away, and there is no end of the reading.”⁷⁶⁰ The meeting appears to have had an impact on Longfellow, as two days later he sent a \$10 donation to Darby.⁷⁶¹

In his final years, Darby Vassall was widely recognized as a community leader and holder of historical memory. William Cooper Nell wrote that “Mr. Vassall was favored with a wonderful memory, and it was deemed a privilege with many persons from different walks in life, to avail themselves of his conversational reminiscences of Boston and vicinity, in the olden time.”⁷⁶² In 1858, Nell invited Darby Vassall to an event commemorating Crispus Attucks's death in the Boston Massacre and Black Revolutionary history. Rev. Theodore Parker, a reformer and well-known abolitionist, referred to Darby as “a living relic of the coloured population of

⁷⁵⁹ Richard Archer, *Jim Crow North: The Struggle for Equal Rights in Antebellum New England* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Erica Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (University of Georgia Press, 2012).

⁷⁶⁰ Journal of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 22 March 1855, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁷⁶¹ “Money given 1855,” Volume in the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Papers, MS Am 1340 (152), 179, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁷⁶² William Cooper Nell, “Darby Vassall,” *The Liberator*, 22 November 1861.

revolutionary days.”⁷⁶³ At a wizened 88 years old, with a tradition of dressing in Revolutionary-style clothing, one can imagine that Darby made a striking impression on those in attendance.⁷⁶⁴

By this time, Darby Vassall was faltering physically. On October 20, 1861, six months into the Civil War that would end chattel slavery in the United States, he left this world. He had, as was his way, prepared carefully for this moment. Two decades earlier, in 1843, Darby had acquired from Catherine Russell, the granddaughter of Henry and Penelope Vassall, the former enslavers of his family, a pass that “promis[ed]... that he and his family shall be placed in [her] grandfather’s tomb.”⁷⁶⁵ The pass included permission for his remaining descendants to eventually join him in this final resting place. While he could no longer provide for them physically, he aimed to care for them metaphysically.

Many have contemplated this decision, which to a twenty-first century eye, might seem a fraught mingling of remains of enslavers and the formerly enslaved.⁷⁶⁶ Yet this move was in keeping with the values of Darby’s worldview, as his notion of kinship would have included not only his blood relatives, but also to some extent the family that had once enslaved his own. William Cooper Nell, who had lived with Darby at 20 Grove Street, explained his elder friend’s rationale: “The idea of this tomb being his last resting-place was often the subject of his meditation, and he was eloquent in grateful expressions towards her [Catherine] whom he had always regarded as a considerate, rare, and valued friend.”⁷⁶⁷ It was, in Darby’s mind, his family’s right of respect to be buried with the white Vassalls in their tomb under Christ Church.

⁷⁶³ William Lloyd Garrison and James Brown Yerrinton, “The Liberator.” Newspaper. Boston, Massachusetts: William Lloyd Garrison and Isaac Knapp, 5 March 1858. Digital Commonwealth, <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/5h742g10z>.

⁷⁶⁴ At least one person was inspired to make a doll in his likeness, though the rendering is complex and merits careful consideration. “Notes and receipt related to a handmade doll (LONG 17905) of a Black male with exaggerated racialized features in detailed, handsewn colonial gentleman’s attire: overcoat, silk waistcoat, velvet breeches, tricorne hat, leather shoes. The doll has human hair and is accompanied by a walking stick. It was originally housed in a paper/cardboard box. Receipt shows that the doll was purchased on 23 June 1943 by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Harry) Dana for \$15.” “Tony Vassall” Doll Notes and Receipt, 1894-1943, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana (1881–1950) Papers, 1744–1972 (bulk dates 1850–1950), LONG 17314 (1002/009.002)

⁷⁶⁵ William Cooper Nell, “Darby Vassall,” *The Liberator*, 22 November 1861.

⁷⁶⁶ Gloria McCahon Whiting, “Endearing Ties,” 315–317; Nicole Catherine Piepenbrink, “Here Lies Darby Vassall: Rendering the obscured and concealed history of slavery at Christ Church Cambridge” (Master’s thesis, Harvard Graduate School of Design, 2022).

⁷⁶⁷ *The Liberator*, 22 Nov 1861, p. 4.

In a twist of fate, Darby's internment took place on October 15, 1861, one hundred years to the day from when the white Vassalls had co-founded the Church. The funeral interrupted the afternoon anniversary exercises that the Church had planned. While most who attended the anniversary celebration were unaware of the connection, the significance of Darby's burial—the joining of his remains with his former enslavers—is considerable. Nell published a laudatory obituary in *The Liberator* of the great man who represented living history for so many. He wrote not only of Darby Vassall's storytelling, but also of his political activism, community leadership, and moral example: "He had an intelligent appreciation of the Anti-Slavery movement, and loved to speak with and of Wm. Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips." Nell also praised Vassall's "continued sympathy, friendship, and . . . Christian manhood."⁷⁶⁸ The storied leader of Black Boston, patriarch of a pathbreaking emancipated Black family and longtime activist for human rights, was laid to rest underneath the white Vassall family crest, claiming the space as rightfully his own.⁷⁶⁹

* * *

The years following Darby Vassall's death continued to bring forward motion in the rights of the emancipated: "Freed people in New England persisted. Activism and institution-building continued, as did appeals and protest. . . . By the time of the American Civil War, many of the racist and segregationist laws in the region, such as separate public schools, had been repealed."⁷⁷⁰ Black New Englanders continued their commitment to freedom during the War, even as white racist sentiments limited their mobility. Massachusetts was the first northern state to raise African American troops after the Emancipation Proclamation.⁷⁷¹ By 1862, nearly

⁷⁶⁸ William Cooper Nell [W.C.N.], "Darby Vassall," *The Liberator*, 31:47, 22 Nov 1861.

⁷⁶⁹ While the crest is no longer visible, it was present at the time of the burial. The grave was officially sealed in 1865, meaning that Darby's descendants were ultimately buried elsewhere. Nicole Catherine Piepenbrink, "Here Lies Darby Vassall."

⁷⁷⁰ Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds*, 176.

⁷⁷¹ Luis F. Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment: History of The Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry 1863-1865* (Da Capo Press, 1995).

1,000 African Canadian men joined the Union Army in different Black regiments.⁷⁷² By 1863, the African Meeting House in Boston also served as a recruitment post for the Massachusetts 54th Volunteer Regiment, one of the first African American regiments to fight in the Civil War. A memorial to this regiment stands today on Boston Common, directly across from the Massachusetts State House.⁷⁷³

In the pursuit of freedom, Black people from different nations crossed borders, built communities, and learned the languages and laws of their new homelands. By foot and by sail, they liberated themselves and served as conduits of justice for one another. The generation of newly freed and freeborn Black New Englanders played a foundational, primary role in engineering an architecture for people fleeing enslavement, a type of benevolence that stands as an example of solidarity to this day. The Vassall (and Walker and Lewis) families and their extended network in the Boston area and beyond continued a tradition of self-determination and community building. This American story, tethered to a patchwork of empires that spanned oceans, is a global story that relied heavily on many people whose forced labor, disenfranchisement, and survival undergirded it all. This cultural inheritance is not just about wills, bills of sale, and petitions, but about the fullness of a people's humanity, the arduous and precarious nature of their collective journey, and their dignity, connections, and robust living legacies.

Conclusion

Dusk is falling in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Sounds of car traffic and a coxswain shouting commands to a skiff of rowers fill the air around 105 Brattle Street. Colorful leaves sway on aged sycamore and oak trees. At exactly 6:30 PM, the sharp peal of a djembe drum rockets through the air. Bass, slap, tone, bass, slap, slap, tone, slap, slap, slap, it calls. A group of djembes responds, the players vocalizing their enthusiasm for the moment. The day is Monday, the month October, the year 2024.

⁷⁷² Ontario Heritage Trust, "Black Settlement in Ontario," n.d. <https://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/pages/our-stories/slavery-to-freedom/history/black-settlement-in-ontario>.

⁷⁷³ "Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Regiment," Boston African American National Historic Site, US National Park Service, n.d. <https://www.nps.gov/boaf/learn/historyculture/shaw.htm>.

The decibel level of the drums penetrates through brick walls and stretches across a grassy expanse. Vibrations ricochet off a large monument to the south, flanked by steps and a stone wall. The monument: a commanding bust of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and a bas-relief panel with six ethereal figures from his best-known works: Miles Standish, Sandalphon, the Village Blacksmith, the Spanish Student, Evangeline, and Hiawatha. This is Longfellow Park, now a public space managed by the city of Cambridge.

The drumming continues; the occasional gleeful cheer of a drummer sparks through the bluish light that settles over the Quaker Friends Meetinghouse. The Stone of Hope Drumming Circle, led by Toussaint Liberator, Minga Claggett-Borne, and Daniel Fitzmartin, meets weekly with the goal of teaching West African rhythms. The circle is named for a line from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream Speech": "With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." The weekly gathering is described online: "Come check out the magic that happens. All levels of drumming experience are welcome. We are an anti-racist group, supporting each other as we learn to transform our lives away from domination towards a new vision. Everyone welcome."⁷⁷⁴

Watching the moving river, one can imagine other meetings of land and water where Anthony and Cuba Vassall and their descendants made their way through the world. Departing by ship from Antigua or Jamaica and arriving dockside in Massachusetts. Crossing the river from Cambridge to Boston on foot or by carriage or bus or subway and back again. Viewing the islands of Antigua and Jamaica from the bird's-eye view of an airplane on the way to learn about one's ancestors. Taking in the coastline of Boston Harbor from the sky upon return.

Akin to a jackhammer at their loudest, the sounds produced by the striking of human hands on the tense skin of the djembes interrupt the view of colonial-style mansions on the outskirts of the Harvard campus, home to the world's wealthiest university. If a visitor were to approach the former Vassall Estate from the Charles River, removing in their mind the more modern buildings in the surroundings, it would look like the classic enslaver's home situated at the water's edge that it was built to be. Today, however, it is a different site altogether.

⁷⁷⁴ "Events for August 2025," Friends Meeting at Cambridge, 16 January 2025. <https://fmcquaker.org/event/stone-of-hope-drumming-circle-2/2025-08-11/>.

Different from what its original residents could have foreseen, yet something that the liberated among them dreamed of and worked carefully to build.

The rhythm of the drums continues.

Appendix A

THE WHITE VASSALL FAMILY¹

John Vassall (c.1625–c.1688) m. Anna Vassall (c.1651–February 23, 1720)

- 1. John Vassall (c.1670–c.1701) m. Mary Wilmott**
 - a. John Vassall (1696–1728) m. Elizabeth Lewis (1703–1737)²
 - i. William Vassall (1720–1745) m. Valeria Senior
 1. John Vassall (1743–1779) m. Elizabeth Brooks
 - ii. John Vassall (–1770) m. Mary White (d.1758)³
 - iii. Elizabeth Vassall (1725–1743) m. William Foster (1722–1768)
 - b. William Vassall (c.1698–c.1717)⁴
 - c. Anna Vassall (1701–after 1734) m. William Lewis (1697–1717), Samuel Smith (–after 1734)
- 2. William Vassall (c.1672–August 6, 1720) m. Sarah Monicat Paine (born c.1675)**
- 3. Lewis Vassall (c.1673–c.1694)⁵**
- 4. Samuel Vassall (c.1675–c.1714) m. Elizabeth Yarmouth Mosely Young⁶**
- 5. Leonard Vassall (June 1678–June 20, 1737) m. Ruth Gale (September 30, 1685–March 14, 1734), Phoebe Penhallow (January 14, 1695–April 3, 1775)**
 - a. Lewis Vassall (August 10, 1709–September 15, 1743) m. Dorothy Macqueen (c.1718–August 10, 1746)

¹ This is not an exhaustive genealogy, as it excludes many young children who died in infancy. The goal of this listing of descendants is to track the descendants of John Vassall (adults) who may have enslaved people at New England and Caribbean properties.

² Daughter of “Orduardo” (perhaps Eduardo) Lewis, Calder, 10. After the death of John Vassall, Elizabeth Lewis Vassall married James Barclay (1694–1765) and had several more children. James Barclay enslaved 476 people when he died in 1765.

³ John Vassall (d.1770) appears to have had three children by a free woman of color named Rose. The three children were Elizabeth, Leonard, and Mary. Elizabeth inherited land called “Purgatory” (near Luana) from her father (Calder, 11). This property does not appear in the Legacies of British Slave Ownership database, so it is likely it filed no crop returns and no claim for compensation after emancipation.

⁴ William may have died between his grandmother Anna’s will of 1717, in which he is given an elaborate bequest, and her will of 1719, in which he is not mentioned, and which refers to Leonard’s son William as if he is her only grandson named William.

⁵ Lewis is named as one of the older sons in John Vassall’s will, along with John and William, while the other four are called “my four youngest sonnes.” Lewis Vassall may have died soon after, or he may have been the Lt. Vassall killed at Carlisle Bay in 1694.

⁶ Elizabeth Young was a widow and brought property to her marriage, including a Pen near Passage Fort, which she left to Richard Mill (who married the widow of Florentius Vassall).

- i. Anna Vassall (b.July 23, 1740)
- ii. Lewis Vassall (September 16, 1741–August 8, 1777) m. Eleanor Dove (c.1740–after 1773)
 - 1. Florentius Vassall (c.1768–September 30,1794) m. Elizabeth Farquharson (June 12, 1778–c.1852)
 - 2. Lewis Vassall (November 7, 1769–c.1796)
 - 3. George Gale Vassall (September 1, 1771–July 18, 1797) overseer at Lacovia
 - 4. Leonard Vassall (April 19, 1773–May 21, 1793)
- iii. Elizabeth Vassall (b.November 11, 1742)
- b. Ruth Vassall (August 17, 1712–November 10, 1770) m. Benjamin Stedman (July 17, 1706–c.1751)
 - i. John Stedman (July 21, 1736–c.1758)
 - ii. Ruth Stedman (March 21, 1737–c.1768) m. Jonathan Mills (c.1728–c.1757), Benjamin Cleverly (February 13, 1732–January 20, 1804)
 - 1. Benjamin Cleverly (1739–1753)
 - iii. Leonard Stedman (March 27, 1735–c.1761)
- c. John Vassall (September 7, 1713–November 27, 1747) m. Elizabeth Phipps (1716–1739), Lucy Barran (–1752)
 - i. Ruth Vassall (1737–1774) m. Edward Davis
 - 1. Elizabeth Davis (1758–1818) [went to England with John Vassall]
 - 2. Hannah Davis (1759–1841)
 - 3. Lucy Davis (1765–1830) m. William Hayden
 - 4. Charlotte Davis (1766–1799) m. Joseph Fossick
 - 5. Frances Davis (1766–1799) m. Samuel Prince
 - a. John Prince (1768) m. Ann Paige
 - 6. Edward Davis (1769–1798)
 - ii. John Vassall (1738–1797) m. Elizabeth Oliver (1744–1807)
 - 1. John Vassall (1762–1800) m. Elizabeth Athill of Antigua (daughter of James Athill)
 - 2. Spencer Thomas Vassall (1764–1807) m. Catherine Brandith Backhouse
 - 3. Thomas Oliver Vassall (1766–1807)
 - 4. Robert Oliver Vassall (1769–1827) m. Christian Barrett Tomlinson (daughter of John Tomlinson)

- a. Elizabeth Oliver Vassall (1796–) m. George Robert Johnson
 - i. Elizabeth Campbell Johnson (1819–1872) m. Francis Severn Maxwell
 - ii. George Vassall Johnson
 - iii. William Clarke Johnson
 - iv. Georgianna Elmina Johnson
 - v. John Vassall Campbell Johnson
 - 5. Elizabeth Vassall (1771–1856) m. John Gustavus Lemaistre
 - 6. Mary Vassall (1777–1806) m. John Gittins Archer of Barbados
 - a. John Vassall Archer (d.1806)
 - iii. Elizabeth Vassall (1739–1779) m. Thomas Oliver (1734–1815), who later married Harriet Freeman (daughter of Byam Freeman on Antigua)
 - 1. Anne Oliver (1764–1811) m. John Procter Anderdon
 - a. John Lavicount Anderdon (1792–1874)
 - 2. Elizabeth Oliver (1766–1826) m. Joseph Rogers
 - 3. Penelope Oliver (1768–1815) m. John Cave
 - 4. Lucy (1772–1857) m. Henry Tobin
 - 5. Frances Oliver (1773–1848)
 - 6. Mary Oliver (1777–1837) m. Charles Partridge
 - 7. Harriet Watkins Oliver (1786–1826) m. Henry Haynes
 - a. Note: Harriet was the daughter of Harriet Freeman, 2nd wife of Thomas Oliver
 - iv. Lucy Vassall (1747–1797) m. John Lavicount of Antigua
 - 1. John Lavicount (1769–) m. Anne Gravenor (1768–)
 - a. John Lavicount (1796–)
 - b. Anne Lavicount (1799–) m. Charles Dyer (–1825)
 - i. Mary Lee m. Henry Graves
 - 1. Emma, Lady Cavaganari (–1934)m. Sir Louis Napoleon Cavagnari
 - c. Joseph Lavicount (1800–1881) m. Amelia Dent in 1825, m. Margaret Spenser [Harman] (married 1830 – she was widow of Wm Harman (1792–1824))
 - i. Stephen Wilkins Lavicount (1827–1893)
 - ii. Ada Matilda Lavicount (1831–)

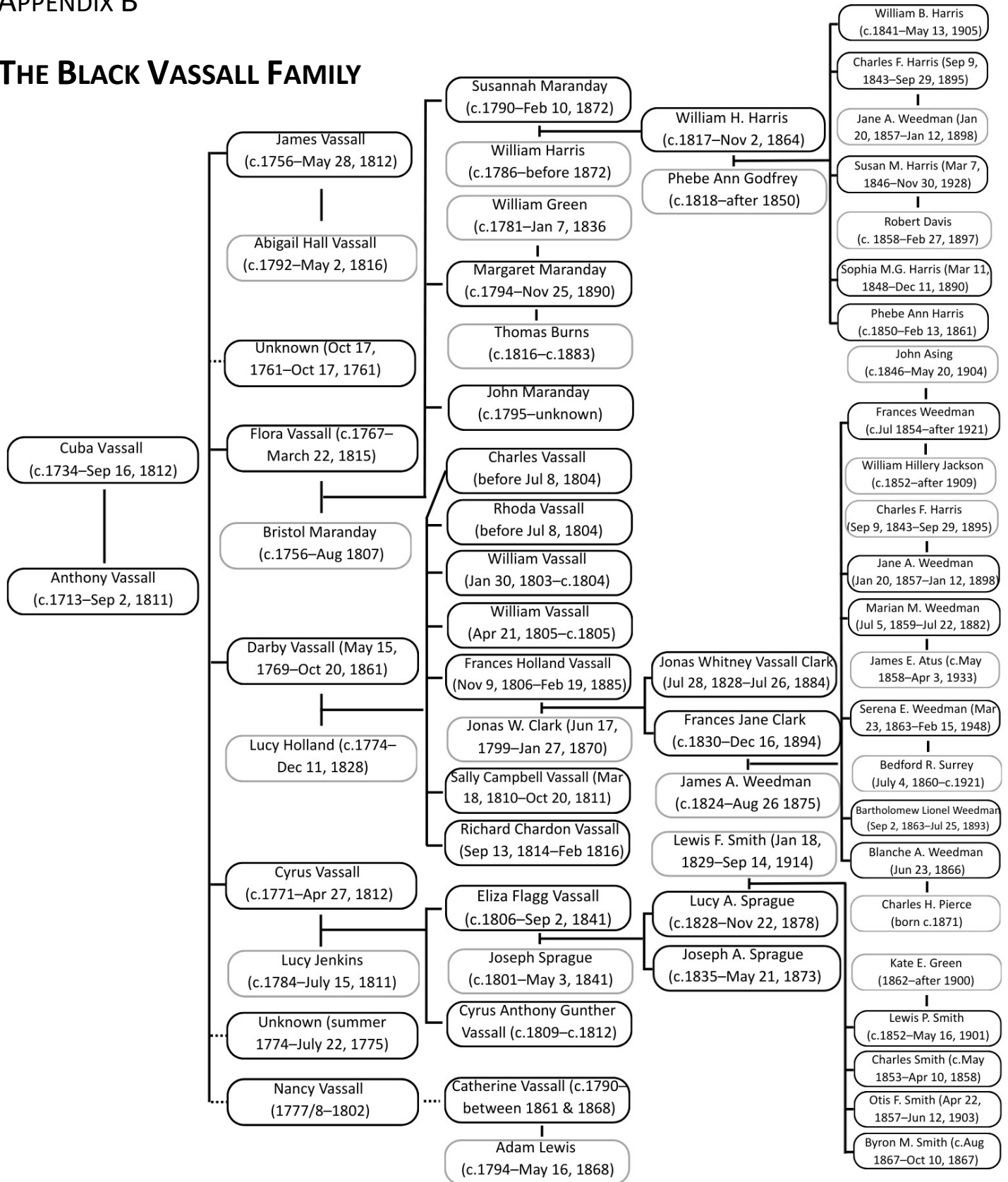
- iii. Endora Margaretta (1835–1915) m. Adlam
- d. William Vassall (1715–1800) m. Ann Davis (–1760), Margaret Hubbard (–1794)
 - i. Sarah Vassall (1739–1727) m. Joseph Syme
 - ii. Lucretia Frances Vassall (1751–) m. Richard Smith
 - 1. Anna Eyre Smith (1773)
 - iii. William Vassall (1753–1843) m. Anne Bent
 - iv. Henry Vassall (1755–) m. Margaret Harvey Graeme of Barbados
 - 1. William Vassall (1780–1845) m. Anne Oliver
 - v. Catherine Vassall (1757–)
 - vi. Margaret Vassall (1761–1819)
 - vii. Anne Vassall (1762–1849)
 - viii. Charlotte Vassall (1762–)
 - ix. Leonard Vassall (1764–1860) m. Sarah Fitch
 - x. Nathaniel Vassall (1768–1832)
- e. Elizabeth Vassall (1717–1772) m. John Miller (–1765)
 - i. Lewis Miller (1739)
 - ii. Rebecca Miller (1741) m. Giles Church
 - iii. John Miller (1742)
 - iv. Leonard Miller (b. 1743) m. Celia Wadsworth
 - v. Henry Miller (1745)
 - vi. Susanna Miller (1748)
 - vii. Elizabeth Miller (1750)
 - viii. Mary Miller (1750)
 - ix. Penelope Miller (1752)
- f. Sarah Vassall (1720–)
- g. Henry Vassall (1721–1769) m. Penelope Royall
 - i. Elizabeth Vassall (1742–1802) m. Charles Russell (1738–1780)
 - 1. Penelope Russell (1769–1827) m. Theodore Sedgwick
 - 2. Elizabeth Vassall Russell (1771–1824) m. Charles Furlong Degen
 - a. Royall Degen
 - b. Elizabeth Holwell/Hallowell Degen (1799–1815)
 - c. Charles Russell Degen m. Maria Kittredge
 - 3. Catherine Graves Russell (1772–1847)
 - 4. Rebecca Russell (1773–1825) m. David Pearce, Joseph Ruggles
- h. Mary Vassall (1723–) m. Jonathan Prescott

- i. Jonathan Prescott (1748)
- i. Susanna Vassall (1726–) m. George Ruggles
 - i. Susanna Ruggles (1747–) m. Ezekiel Lewis
- j. Anna Vassall (April 29, 1735–June 20, 1823) m. John Borland (September 5, 1728–June 5, 1775), William Knight (c.1725–December 21, 1793)
 - i. Phoebe Borland (October 27, 1751–February 18, 1833) m. George Spooner (c.1745–July 11, 1826)
 - ii. John Lindall Borland (August 18, 1754–November 16, 1825)
 - iii. Francis Borland (April 11, 1756–c.1826) m. Hannah Bowers (May 14, 1765–September 1825)
 - iv. Jane Borland (October 26, 1757–July 23, 1834) m. Jonathan Simpson
 - v. Leonard Vassall Borland (July 1, 1759–June 1801) m. Sarah Lloyd (c.1763–March 27, 1836)
 - vi. James Borland (May 26, 1761–c.1783)
 - vii. Samuel Borland (December 22, 1765–c.1840)
- 6. Florentius Vassall (before 1688–1711) m. Anne Herring⁷**
 - a. Florentius Vassall (1709–1778) m. Mary Foster (1713–)
 - i. Richard Vassall (1732–1795) m. Mary Clarke (1748–1835)
 - 1. Elizabeth Vassall (1770–1845) m. Godfrey Webster (baronet), divorced and married Lord Holland
 - a. Godfrey Vassall Webster (1789)
 - b. Henry Vassall Webster (1783)
 - c. Harriet Frances Webster (1794)
 - d. Charles Richard Fox–Vassall, MP (1796–1873)
 - e. Henry Edmund Fox–Vassall (1802)
 - f. Mary Elizabeth Fox–Vassall (1806)
 - ii. Elizabeth Vassall (1720–1776) m. Major General John Shute Barrington [son of Viscount Barrington] (1722–1764)
 - 1. William Barrington (3rd Viscount) (–1801) m. Anne Murrell
 - 2. Richard Barrington (4th Viscount) (–1813) m. Susan Budden
 - 3. George Barrington (5th Viscount) (1761–1829) m. Elizabeth Adair, Lady Caroline Keppel [daughter of Earl of Albemarle]

⁷ After Florentius' death in 1711, Anne married Hon. Richard Mill (1679–1739), Chief Justice of Jamaica, who raised her children and left them property. The property he left to Florentius Vassall (1709–1778) may have been the foundation of Vassall's plantations: Friendship, Greenwich, Sweet River Pen, Vineyard Pen.

- a. 15 children including William Keppel Barrington (6th Viscount Barrington), MP
- 4. Louisa Barrington m. Rev. Tristram, Thomas Cooke
- iii. Anna Maria Vassall (1755) m. William Henry Russell
- b. Bathshua Vassall (c.1710–1748) m. Rev. William May, Vicar of Kingston (1689–1753), many children, including:
 - i. Rose Herring May (1737–1791) m. Mary Trelawney Wigan (daughter of John Wigan and Mary Douce), many children including:
 - 1. Mary Trelawney May
 - 2. Catharine Douce May (1763–1829)
 - 3. William Vassall May (1763–1811)
 - 4. Elizabeth Bathshua May (1765–1829)
 - 5. Rose Herring May m. Mary Wilkes
 - 6. Ithamar Hodges May (1766–1845)
 - 7. Anna Maria May (1770–1829)
 - 8. Letitia Ann Trelawney May (1773–1850)
 - 9. Susanna Wigan May (1774–1855)
- c. Anna Maria Vassall (c.1710)

THE BLACK VASSALL FAMILY



APPENDIX C

PLANTATIONS OWNED BY DESCENDANTS OF JOHN VASSALL AND ANNA LEWIS VASSALL

A note on sources

This information is largely taken from the database maintained by the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery (LBS), a joint project of University College London and the Hutchins Center at Harvard University. The database is free and accessible to the public at www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/. It incorporates many different sources, including crop returns and inventories from the Jamaica Archives and Records Department, almanacs, tax records, slaveholder compensation claims from the 1830s, and original research by many scholars. Sources that are not included in the LBS Database are footnoted.

Jamaica:

Hanover Parish:

- **Newfound River Estate**

- This property was owned by Anna Vassall before her death in 1720. In his will, her son Leonard Vassall (1678-1737) explains that he had “a certain agreement” with his mother that she should give his portion of her estate directly to his son John (1713-1747). The will makes further reference to this property as being adjacent to the plantation at Green River that Leonard gave to his son William Vassall (1715-1800).¹
- owned by John Vassall (1713-1747), inherited by his son John Vassall (1738-1797) and later by his heirs
- 950 acres
- **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1720 to 1834**
- First crop return in 1741
- 201 people enslaved in 1799
- 214 people enslaved in 1810
- 235 people enslaved in 1831

¹ Temple, Nelson, Lloyd, Vassall, and Borland family papers, 1611-1862 (inclusive), 1700-1831 (bulk). Last will and testament of Leonard Vassall. Boston, 25 Sep 1756. MS Am 1250 (18). Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

- While the 1817 Slave Register of Newfound River counts 198 enslaved people, this may be a partial count due to a split in ownership. The property seems to have been partially mortgaged to Colvile & Co, and records include a purchase of 80 enslaved people from Spittal Plantation between 1829 and 1832. Thus, the Slave Register of 1830 counts 157 people at Newfound River, but the addition of 80 people in a separate list brought the total number of enslaved people at Newfound River in 1831 to 235.
- Claim: Hanover 461
 - 72 enslaved in 1834 (205 total at Newfound River)
 - Paid to Andrew Colvile and Alexander Seton, mortgage holders
- Claim: Hanover 462
 - 133 enslaved in 1834 (205 total at Newfound River)
 - Paid to John Vassall's heirs: daughter Elizabeth Vassall Athill Munro, grandson Spencer Lambert Hunter Vassall, daughter-in-law Catherine Strode
- **Green River Estate**
 - Leonard Vassall's will of 1737, left to his son William a "certaine Sugar Plantation, Works, and Buildings . . . on Green Island River near Orange Bay in the Parish of Hanover at the West End of Jamaica." This property was "joining the plantation I have Given to my son John."²
 - In 1737, this property already had "Stock, Negroes, Utensils, and other Implements." Although the first surviving crop return for Green River dates to 1740, it was clearly operating for several years before 1740.
 - Owned by William Vassall (1715-1800) and his heirs
 - 963 acres
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1737 to 1834**
 - First crop return 1740
 - 279 people enslaved in 1810
 - In 1820, 64 enslaved people previously registered at Rockingham Estate were purchased by William Vassall Jr. and transferred to Green River.
 - 304 enslaved people in 1821

² Temple et al., family papers, Houghton Library.

- Claim: Hanover 464
 - 198 people enslaved in 1834
 - The Jamaica Almanac of 1832 says that 269 people were enslaved at Green River, so the Vassalls may have sold or mortgaged some people before 1834
- **Abingdon Estate**
 - Owned by Robert Oliver Vassall, son of John Vassall (1738-1797)
 - 600 acres
 - Abingdon, an estate on the coast near Half Moon Bay) was purchased by Robert Oliver Vassall around 1815. It was established around 1766 and previously owned by John Perry, who died in 1811.
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: 1815 to 1827**
 - 181 enslaved people in 1815
 - The estate was sold around 1828, following the death of Robert Oliver Vassall in 1827
 - Claim: Hanover 510
 - 102 enslaved in 1834

Westmoreland Parish:

- **Friendship & Greenwich Estate**
 - owned by Florentius Vassall
 - Originally two separate estates, but merged by 1800
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1750 to 1834**
 - 1784: 535 acres of cane producing 214 hogsheads and 3 tierces sugar, plus rum
 - 2,200 acres, of which 500 planted³
 - 360 enslaved in 1802
 - 485 enslaved in 1811; this probably includes Friendship & Greenwich and Sweet River Pen together
 - Note: in 1754, the quit rent books show Florentius Vassall owning 2,700 acres in St. James, 3,714 acres in Westmoreland, 1,943 acres in St. Elizabeth
- **Sweet River Pen**
 - Owned by Florentius Vassall to Richard Vassall to Lady Holland
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1750 to 1834**

³ B.W. Higman, "To Begin the World Again: Responses to Emancipation at Friendship and Greenwich Estate" in *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage and Culture*, eds. Glen Richards, Kathleen E. A. Monteith (University of the West Indies Press, 2002).

- From 1810-1832, usually 70-80 enslaved people
- Claim: Westmoreland 27
 - includes both Sweet River Pen and Friendship
 - 401 enslaved in 1834

St. Elizabeth Parish:

- **“Pond Penn” Estate**

- Owned by John Vassall (d. 1779), son of William Vassall (1720-1745)
- **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1745 to post-1780**
- When John Vassall died in 1779, he left his wife, Elizabeth Brooks, a property described as “all that part of Luana called Pond Penn.” The estate, probated in 1780, included 240 enslaved people.
- 240 people enslaved in 1780
- Quit rent book for 1754 shows John Vassall owned 2,181 acres in St. Elizabeth
- see entry for “Possible: Luana Estate”—“Luana” was a somewhat imprecise name in the Vassall records. It was initially part of John Vassall’s 5,000 acres purchased in 1669-1672, and was later split up, but the records sometimes use “Luana” to refer to a specific plantation and sometimes to refer to the area that was eventually divided into several plantations. The part of Luana known as “Pond Penn” was sold or broken up in the 1780s

- **Savannah and New Savannah Pen**

- In his will, Leonard Vassall (1678-1737) notes that his “Plantation and Sugar Works in Luana” is entailed to his son Lewis Vassall (1709-1743), and also refers to 60 additional acres in Luana and “the Provisioning Plantation in the Mountains at New Savannah.” The will also mentions “my plantation and sugar works at Savana in the Parish of St. Elizabeth,” but it is unclear whether this is a separate estate or the same plantation.⁴
- Owned by the heirs of Lewis Vassall until at least 1791, possibly as late as 1810
- This is a large stock-raising operation (702 stock in 1821)
- **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1737 to 1791**
- Claim: St. Elizabeth 617
 - 122 enslaved in 1834

⁴ Temple et al., family papers, Houghton Library.

- **Tophill Pen or Top Hill Pen**
 - Owned by Lewis Vassall (1709-1743) and his son Lewis Vassall (1741-1777)
 - First Crop return in 1740: sugar, molasses, rum, adding cattle in 1743
 - In 1741, Top Hill was a full-scale sugar estate, producing 71 hogsheads of sugar. In 1744, it produced 112 hogsheads. This made it comparable to Newfound River in size, with an enslaved population of at least 120-150.
 - In the 1750s, crop returns refer to it as “Top Hill Estate and the Pen,” indicating two separate properties being merged.
 - In 1763, Thomas Craskell’s map codes Tophill as an estate, not a pen.⁵
 - After 1781, the crop returns switch from sugar and molasses to livestock
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1737 to 1792**
 - Any consideration of this property should divide it into two periods, before and after 1781. In the earlier period, it was an estate; in the later period, a pen.
 - After 1792, the LBS records Tophill Pen in St. Elizabeth in the possession of Anne Rochester and Thomas Ball. It is unclear whether this is the same property or whether these owners are connected to the Vassalls. It is also unclear whether the Vassalls divested of the Tophill estate or only the Pen.
- **Middlesex Pen**
 - Owned by William Vassall (1720-1745) and his son John Vassall (-1779)
 - After John Vassall’s death in 1779, his widow, Elizabeth Brooks, married John Vanheelen — Middlesex Pen is “under his care and direction” until 1788
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1750 to 1788**
 - (Is this the property called “Middle Quarters” in Leonard Vassall’s will (seq 8/20)?
 - Claim: St. Elizabeth 545
 - 44 enslaved in 1834
- **Lower Works Pen**

⁵ Craskell, Thomas, Henry Moore, James Simpson, and Daniel Fournier. *This map of the county of Cornwall, in the island of Jamaica*. Londini: D. Fournier, 1763. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/73691849/>.

- owned by John Vassall (1738-1797)
- In 1777, sold to Joseph Royall (1721-1814), a nephew or possibly first cousin of Isaac Royal Sr.
- **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1737 to 1777**
- pre-1777 crop returns show sugar, rum, molasses, cattle
- post-1777 crop returns show raising livestock (cows, steers, boars, mules, hens, sheep)
- On 1763 Thomas Craskell map⁶
- Claim: St. Elizabeth 818
 - 48 enslaved in 1834
- **Content Estate**
 - Owned by Elizabeth Vassall
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: 1834**
 - Claim: St. Elizabeth 447
 - 32 enslaved in 1834
- **Vineyard Pen**
 - Owned by Florentius Vassall (1689-1778)
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1750 to perhaps 1764**
 - The infamous overseer and diarist Thomas Thistlewood was overseer at Vineyard Pen in 1750. His diary records hundreds of acts of torture and sexual violence perpetrated against the enslaved people at Vineyard Pen, including a punishment of 300 lashes personally ordered by Florentius Vassall.
 - Thistlewood's diary counts 42 enslaved in 1750⁷
 - Claim: St. Elizabeth 740
 - 19 enslaved in 1836
- **Enslaved by Christian Barrett Vassall**
 - Owned by Christian Barrett Vassall
 - In the 1829 Slave Registers for St. Elizabeth, Christiana B. Vassall purchased 33 people from George Clark. Christian Barrett Vassall was the widow of Robert Oliver Vassall. She seems to have sold several people prior to making a claim in 1834 for 12 people.
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: 1829-1834**
 - Claim: St. Elizabeth 261
 - 12 enslaved in 1834

⁶ Craskell et al, Map, <https://www.loc.gov/item/73691849/>.

⁷ Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

- **SPECIAL CASE: Bogue/Dawkins Estate**
 - Bogue/Dawkins was owned by William Foster (1722-1768), who owned 300 acres in Westmoreland and 2,185 acres in St. Elizabeth on his death in 1768.
 - Foster was married to Elizabeth Vassall (1725-1743), daughter of John Vassall (1696-1728), but Elizabeth died the year after the marriage with no known children.
 - At the time of the marriage, William Foster did own Bogue/Dawkins. He also owned a property called Casement, but probably not during his marriage to Elizabeth Vassall.
 - Thus, Bogue/Dawkins does count as a Vassall-owned estate, but only for a brief period of time.
 - Bogue/Dawkins was a large estate. William Foster enslaved 367 at his death. In 1817, 371 people were enslaved at Bogue/Dawkins.
- **SPECIAL CASE: Cabbage Valley Estate**
 - Cabbage Valley was owned by James Barclay (1694-1765).
 - On Barclay's death in 1765, he enslaved 476 people
 - Barclay's wife, Elizabeth Lewis Vassall (1703-1737), was married to John Vassall (1696-1728) and had three children by him (William, John, Elizabeth). After John Vassall's death in 1728, Elizabeth married James Barclay and raised her young children with him (all the children were 8 or younger when their father died). She also had several more children with Barclay before her own death in 1737.
 - Although Cabbage Valley was not owned by the Vassalls, three of the Vassall children grew up there and benefited from their stepfather's wealth and the work of the people he enslaved.
- **POSSIBLE: Another Luana Estate⁸**
 - "Plantation and Sugar Works in Luana" entailed on Lewis Vassall (1709-1743), source: Leonard Vassall's will (Suffolk Co., MA, 1737)
 - Also another 60 acres "at Luana" separate from the sugar works
 - There was a cluster of Vassall-owned properties near the mouth of the Black River. On Craskell's 1763 map, they are labeled separately as Luana, Tophill, Lower Works, and Vassalls. These properties were split in various ways over the decades, so names

⁸ Note: "Estate" denotes a plantation primarily dedicated to the production of sugar, molasses, and rum. "Pen" denotes a plantation primarily dedicated to the production of cattle, food, and other provisions, though many pens also produced some sugar.

sometimes shift.⁹ It is unclear whether Leonard Vassall's plantation "in Luana" was *called* Luana or whether "Luana" was a more general term for a plantation near Luana Point and the Luana Mountains, all of which are in the area patented by John Vassall near the mouth of the Black River.

- Isaac Gale as the owner of Luana Sugar Estate before 1752. It is possible that this was always a Gale family estate, or that the sons of John and Anna Vassall sold the estate to their nephew/cousin, Isaac Gale between 1720 and 1752.
 - After 1765, Luana Estate was owned by John Fisher, husband of Isaac Gale's daughter Isabella. When Fisher died in 1770, the enslaved population of Luana estate was 306.
- There is also a "Luana Pen" owned by the Gale family, whose relative, Ruth Gale, was the wife of Leonard Vassall (1678-1737) and the grandmother of John Vassall (1738-1797). The Isaac Gale who owned Luana Pen before 1750 was likely Ruth Gale's brother Isaac, who passed the property to his son John Gale.
 - Luana Pen Claim 1: St. Elizabeth 730
 - 145 enslaved in 1834
 - Luana Pen Claim 2: St. Elizabeth 718
 - 38 enslaved in 1834
- **POSSIBLE: Biscany Estate**
 - Elizabeth Vassall is listed among the patentees in an 1818 map of Biscany Estate in the National Library of Jamaica¹⁰
 - 550 acres
 - crop returns begin in 1741, but if any Vassalls were part-owners of Biscany, it may have been in the 19th century
 - Claim: St. Elizabeth 399 A & B
 - 210 enslaved in 1834
- **POSSIBLE: Ruggles Pen**
 - On the 1763 Craskell map, there is a property labeled "Ruggles Pen" in St. Elizabeth just west of Tophill and other Vassall estates.¹¹ The LBS database does not have any entries for anyone named Ruggles in St. Elizabeth Parish, nor any property called

⁹ Craskell et al, Map, <https://www.loc.gov/item/73691849/>.

¹⁰ Biscany Estate Map (1818), 1000000054674, National Library of Jamaica.

¹¹ Craskell et al, Map, <https://www.loc.gov/item/73691849/>.

Ruggles Pen. However, multiple sources refer to George Ruggles, husband of Leonard Vassall's daughter Susanna as a "merchant of Jamaica."¹² It is possible that George Ruggles or his family did own property in Jamaica in the 1760s that was sold, absorbed into another plantation, or otherwise defunct by the time the LBS database 19th-century sources registered it.

St. Dorothy Parish

- **Cherry Garden Estate**
 - Owned by Rose Herring May (1737-1797), son of Bathshua Vassall, who was the daughter of Florentius Vassall (1709-1778) and Anne Herring
 - 1,246 acres
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1775 to around 1790**
 - Mortgaged in 1775 for £6,000, along with a property called "Gymballs" which may have been thereafter absorbed into records for Cherry Garden
 - Claim: St. Dorothy 19
 - 242 enslaved in 1834

Clarendon Parish

- **Douce's Ballard's River**
 - Owned by Rose Herring May (1737-1797) and by his son William Vassall May (1763-1811)
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: pre-1775 to 1801 (possibly later)**
 - Crop returns for 1775-1807 show sugar, rum, molasses
 - No claim filed

St. Andrew Parish:

- **Property of Rev. William May (1689-1753)**
 - The inventory of Rev. William May, husband of Bathshua Vassall and father of Rose Herring May shows that at his death, he enslaved 21 people and owned 84 acres of land in St. Andrew Parish.
 - The Jamaica Quit Rent Books for 1754 show William May owned a further 97 acres in Vere for a total of 181 acres.
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls pre-1753**

St. James Parish:

- **POSSIBLE: Seven Rivers Estate**

¹² Batchelder, *Notes on Henry Vassall*.

- Seven Rivers was bequeathed by Richard Vassall to his wife Mary Clarke Vassall (1748-1835) in 1795, however other records show that Seven Rivers was a Barrett family property, so it is unclear what part of Seven Rivers Richard Vassall may have owned before 1795.
- Crop returns from 1774
- Claim: St. James 3
 - 215 enslaved in 1834

St. Catherine Parish:

- **Unnamed Pen near Passage Fort**
 - Owned by Elizabeth Yearmouth Mosley Young Vassall, wife of Samuel Vassall (1673-1712)
 - In a will dated 1726, she gave her “Pen near Passage Fort” to Richard Mill.
 - Elizabeth was married several times — it is likely she brought this property to her marriage with Samuel Vassall

Uncertain

- It should also be noted that someone named “John Archer” filed several claims for small numbers of enslaved people in Hanover (5 people, Claim #524), St. Elizabeth (11 people, Claim #s 180 and 181), St. Ann (1 person, Claim #746) and St. Catherine (5 people, Claim #494). It is possible that some of these claims were filed by John Gittens Archer, husband of Mary Vassall (1777-1806) or their heirs, possibly for partial inheritances left to Mary Vassall Archer by relatives. Further research necessary to confirm whether these claims are connected to the heirs of Mary Vassall Archer.
- Similarly, several people with the surname “May” filed claims for small numbers of enslaved people in Kingston. It is difficult to tell whether these are the descendants of Rev. William May, Vicar of Kingston, and his wife, Bathshua Vassall, the daughter of Florentius Vassall (1688-1778)

Antigua:

- Friar’s Hill
 - Owned by Thomas Oliver and inherited by his daughters
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: c.1757 to 1834**
 - 206 people enslaved in 1817
 - 230 acres

- Henry Haynes, husband of Thomas Oliver’s daughter Harriet, listed as a part owner
- Claim: Antigua 37
 - 137 people enslaved in 1834
 - Claim filed by Thomas Oliver’s daughters (Penelope, Lucy, Frances, Mary) and their husbands
- The sugar estate dated back to the early 18th century, but Thomas Oliver may have purchased it in the 1750s. It may previously have been the property of Thomas Walkin.
- Royall Estate (possibly “Harts and Royals” Estate)
 - half of this estate was inherited by Penelope Royall Vassall from her father, Isaac Royall, Sr.
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: 1739 to 1834**
 - Henry Vassall mortgaged Penelope’s half to William Vassall before Henry’s death in 1769
 - In 1776, Penelope’s half of the estate included “68 and ½” enslaved people, according to a letter from William Vassall that states that Penelope never paid anything on the mortgage.¹³
 - In 1791, Thomas Oliver bought Isaac Royall’s half of the plantation and leased Penelope Royall Vassall’s half. In 1806, Penelope’s heirs sold her half to Oliver. See Batchelder, *Notes on Henry Vassall*, 60.
 - 137 people enslaved in 1824
- Long Lane/Delap’s
 - Owned by John Lavicount, son of Lucy Vassall Lavicount
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls 1768 (marriage)-1790**
 - John Lavicount owned Delap’s from 1756
 - owner in 1790 was John Delap Halliday
 - 216 enslaved people in 1817
 - 250 enslaved people in 1829
- Windward
 - Inherited by John Lavicount in 1756, along with Long Lane and Delap’s¹⁴
 - No other information at present
- Gravenor’s
 - ¼ owned by Ann Buckley Gravenor, wife of John Lavicount
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls 1791 (marriage) to 1815**

¹³ William Vassall to Penelope Vassall, 1 Jan 1776, letterbooks, Sheffield Archives.

¹⁴ “Delaps” in “Antigua Sugar Mills,” a project by students and faculty at Bucknell University’s Griot Institute for Black Lives and Cultures: <https://sugarmills.blogs.bucknell.edu/delaps/>.

- 70 people enslaved in 1821
- Montpelier
 - Owned by Joseph Lavicount, son of John Lavicount, through his wife, Margaret Spenser Harman, who inherited from her first husband, William Harman
 - 190 enslaved people in 1817
 - 215 enslaved people in 1821
 - Claim: Antigua 279
 - 101 people enslaved in 1834
 - A counterclaim from John and George Athill — possibly creditors, but also possibly cousins of Joseph Lavicount through his great aunt, Elizabeth Athill Vassall (wife of John Vassall (1762-1800))
- Mount Estate/Gobles
 - Owned by Joseph Lavicount, son of John Lavicount, through his wife, Margaret Spenser Harman, who inherited from her first husband, William Harman
 - 104 enslaved people in 1817
 - Claim: Antigua 269
 - 97 enslaved people in 1834

Barbados:

St. George Parish

- Brighton Estate
 - Purchased in 1804 by John Gittens Archer, the husband of Mary Vassall (1777-1806), the daughter of John Vassall (1738-1797) and Elizabeth Oliver Vassall.
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: in 1804, sold by 1817**
 - 214 acres in 1804
 - 75 enslaved people in 1804
 - 137 enslaved people in 1817
 - By 1817, Brighton was in the possession of Conrade Pile.
 - 216 people enslaved in 1826

Christ Church Parish

- Chatley Lodge
 - Owned by John Gittens Archer
 - **Definitely owned by Vassalls: 1823 to 1826, probably before**
 - 85 enslaved people in 1823
 - 87 enslaved people in 1826

- The Archer family also had a house in Wiltshire, England (near Bath) that was called Chatley Lodge. John Vassall (1738-1797) and his family stayed with Mary and her family at Chatley Lodge for part of their time in the UK.
- Another document in the UK National Archives refers to 24 people enslaved by John Gittens Archer in 1817, though it is not clear which plantation they may have been enslaved on.¹⁵

N.B. Some white Vassalls did not own their own sugar estates, but worked for other members of the family or other enslavers. In these capacities, they frequently had direct contact with enslaved people—overseeing work, allotting rations, punishing people, sexually assaulting enslaved people. They may also have enslaved some people directly.

- George Gale Vassall (1771-1797)
 - overseer at Lacovia, a large sugar estate, from 1792-1794
 - 346 enslaved people in 1817
- Leonard Steadman (1738-1761)
 - agent for his uncle, William Vassall, at Green River in 1760
 - helped suppress rebellion of 1760-1 (Tacky's War)

N.B.: John Vassall and Anna Lewis Vassall also had Black descendants. In the British West Indies, free people of color sometimes owned slaves. In some cases, they purchased family members, but more often, they bought enslaved people to profit from their labor.

- Eleanor Vassall was a mixed-race woman who was probably born in the 1790s and died before 1851.¹⁶ She was the common-law wife of Samuel Glanville (1785-1862), a status that was common in Jamaica for relationships between enslaved women or free women of color and white men. They lived in Manchester Parish, which is directly east of St. Elizabeth. It is possible that Eleanor was the daughter or granddaughter of one of the white Vassall men; it is also possible that she acquired her surname because she (or her mother or grandmother) was enslaved by them. LBS notes that Samuel Glanville purchased a 3-year-old child named Lewis Vassall from Elizabeth Vassall's Content Estate in 1826, so it is possible that Eleanor Vassall was also connected to Content.

Eleanor Vassall and Samuel Glanville had nine children:

- Caroline Glanville, baptised 26 April 1821, "mestee free child"
- John Glanville (1821-1853)
- Mary Glanville (1823/24-1891) "colour mestee"

¹⁵ T71/521 10, TNA.

¹⁶ See entry for Eleanor Vassall in LBS database for sources.

- William Henry (or Drewry) Glanville (1825/26-1858) “colour mestee”
- James Samuel Glanville (1827) “colour quadroon”
- Eleanor Glanville (1828/29) “mestee”
- Tryphena Glanville, (1829/30) “mestee”
- Samuel Glanville, (1832/33-1867)
- Thomas Glanville, baptised 13/10/1832, died 1910 “mestee”

Several of their children went to England and lived with their white Glanville relatives and at Alfington House in Devon.¹⁷

Eleanor Vassall personally enslaved at least eight people between 1817-1820: Samuel Lewis (b.1793), Caroline Foster alias Rose (b.1781), Bossy (b.1792), Thomas (born c.1787), John (born c.1790), London (born c.1787), Mary (born c.1787), Ned (born c.1785). In 1835, she was compensated for five enslaved people (Claim: Manchester 336).

Samuel Glanville was a part owner of several properties in Manchester Parish, including:

- Devon
 - Claim: Manchester 298
 - 133 enslaved people in 1834
- Green Mount and Endeavour
 - Claim: Manchester 328
 - 43 enslaved people in 1834 (27 at Endeavour; 16 at Green Mount)
 - This claim paid out to three people: Samuel Glanville, John Browne, and Eleanor Maxwell. LBS notes that “Eleanor Maxwell registered 7 enslaved persons, as owner, in 1832.” This is very similar to the 8 people Eleanor Vassall registered in 1817-1820. It is possible that Eleanor Maxwell and Eleanor Vassall are the same person.
- Green Vale and Norway
 - This was a large plantation, with an enslaved population of 375 in 1817.
 - Samuel Glanville and his partner, William Abell, purchased the plantation in 1820, when 292 people were enslaved there.
 - Claim: Manchester 335
 - 226 enslaved people in 1834

¹⁷ For more about the Glanville children in Devon, see Gillian Allen. *Vassall Devon/Jamaica Connections*. Digital publication. Global Centre, Devon Development Education, 17 October 2020. https://www.globalcentredon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Vassall_Devon_Jamaica_connections.pdf

APPENDIX D

PEOPLE ENSLAVED BY THE WHITE VASSALLS

Lower Works Pen, Jamaica, 1757¹

Name	Age/Sex
Scotland	adult man
Sampson	adult man
Sampson	adult man
Philip	adult man
Old Man	adult man
Hugh	adult man
Billy	adult man
Pompey	adult man
Kingston	adult man
London	adult man
Hector	adult man
Peter	adult man
Andrew	adult man
Tone	adult man
Mason Quaco	adult man
Johnston (runaway)	adult man
Cedric	adult man
George	adult man
Jack Dave	adult man
Mingo	adult man
Daniel	adult man
Jeffrey	adult man
Young Sayras	adult man
Little Quaco	adult man
Dover	adult man

Darby	adult man
Nero	adult man
Old Sayras	adult man
Toby	adult man
Amow	adult man
Isaac	adult man
Dick	adult man
Secheus	adult man
Jack	boy
Thomson	boy
Fuller	boy
Will	boy
Billy	boy
Hodges	boy
Quamin	boy
Cudjoe	boy
Jammie	boy
Ben (mulatto)	boy
Malcolm (mulatto)	boy
Johnny (mulatto)	boy
Young Grace	adult woman
Young Joan	adult woman
Clary	adult woman
Eve	adult woman
Little Bess	adult woman
Little Priscilla	adult woman

¹ Inventory of John Vassall (1757), IB/11/3/37, 160, JARD.

Venus	adult woman
Benny	adult woman
Rachall	adult woman
Queen	adult woman
Lucy	adult woman
Violeta	adult woman
Celia	adult woman
Esther	adult woman
Prew	adult woman
Nansie	adult woman
Rachall	adult woman
Sarah	adult woman
Young Margareta	adult woman
Harriot	adult woman
Dianna	adult woman
Hope	adult woman
Mary	adult woman
Young Agnes	adult woman
Ruth	adult woman
Judy	adult woman
Betriss	adult woman
Rose	adult woman
Fidelia	adult woman
Franky	adult woman
Peggy	adult woman
[Juby]	adult woman
Lucretea	adult woman
Old Bess	adult woman
Old Phibba	adult woman
Old [Beck]	adult woman
Old Joan	adult woman
Old Margareta	adult woman
Old Nelly	adult woman

Old Leticea	adult woman
Bony	adult woman
Agnes	adult woman
Morotta	adult woman
Old Grace	adult woman
Majoe	adult woman
Vietty	adult woman
Wooden foot Nancy	adult woman
Flora	adult woman
Old Peggy	adult woman
Old Doll	adult woman
Nancy Bitt	adult woman
Old Dianna	adult woman
Priscilla Big	adult woman
Catalena	girl
Ambar	girl
Pettinie	girl
Cecely	girl
Bastian	girl
Camillia	girl
Lidday	girl
Lucey	girl
Partheny	girl
Nancy	girl
Kitty	girl
Deborah	girl
Bessy (mulatto)	girl
Magg (mulatto)	girl
Prew (mulatto)	girl
Molly (mulatto)	girl
Suckey Magg (mulatto)	girl
Sally (mulatto)	girl
Kitty (mulatto)	girl

Venus (mulatto)	girl
Betty (mulatto)	girl
Fanny (mulatto)	girl

Newfound River, Jamaica, 1757²

Name	Age/Sex
Pompey	adult man
Dublin	adult man
Quashie	adult man
Quashie	adult man
York	adult man
Cesar	adult man
Bob	adult man
Dick	adult man
Yammonie	adult man
Cato	adult man
Adam	adult man
Punch	adult man
Andrew	adult man
[Tegroe?]	adult man
Billy	adult man
Hercules	adult man
Philip	adult man
Pope	adult man
Scipio	adult man
Appia	adult man
Anthony	adult man
Ben	adult man
Bristol	adult man
Corridon	adult man

Dick	adult man
Hector	adult man
Jasper	adult man
Mingo	adult man
Ned	adult man
Ned	adult man
Port Royall	adult man
Spaniard	adult man
Scipio	adult man
Stephen	adult man
Tony	adult man
Will	adult man
Sampson	adult man
Abraham	adult man
Dunnu	adult man
Cesar	adult man
Bacchus	adult man
Cudjoe	adult man
Tom	adult man
Assuma	adult man
Cato	adult man
Cromwell	adult man
Dick	adult man
Quamino	adult man
Titus	adult man

² Inventory of John Vassall (1757), IB/11/3/37, 160, JARD.

Guy	adult man
Jack	adult man
Romulus	adult man
Sampson	adult man
[illegible]	adult man
[Dunnu?]	adult man
Oxford	adult man
Asberry	adult man
Colin	adult man
Essex (runaway)	adult man
Robin (runaway)	adult man
Titus	boy
Jemie	boy
Dunnu	boy
Fortune	boy
Will	boy
Bacchus	boy
Tom	boy
Jeffrey	boy
Tom	boy
Quau	boy
Daniel	boy
Rodger	boy
Scotland	boy
Harry	boy
Ratchell	adult woman
Ambrose	adult woman
Aurelia	adult woman
Betty	adult woman
Bague	adult woman
Bella	adult woman
Belinda	adult woman
Clarinda	adult woman

Clarinda	adult woman
Deborah	adult woman
[Annie]	adult woman
[Eve]	adult woman
Hagar	adult woman
Hannah	adult woman
Julina	adult woman
Juba	adult woman
Lucia	adult woman
Lemon	adult woman
Madam	adult woman
Marina	adult woman
Nany	adult woman
[Betty]	adult woman
[Margery]	adult woman
Rosie	adult woman
Salinda	adult woman
Sobrina	adult woman
Belinda	adult woman
Celia	adult woman
Eve	adult woman
Lucretia	adult woman
Molly	adult woman
Maria	adult woman
Nanie	adult woman
Patience	adult woman
Phibba	adult woman
Ruth	adult woman
Rosalinda	adult woman
Kittah	adult woman
Sarah	adult woman
Daphne	adult woman
Mirrylla	adult woman

Quasheba	adult woman
Madam	girl
Dianah	girl
Venus	girl
Doll	girl
Kittah	girl

Bess	girl
Nancy	girl
Flora	girl
Phillis	girl
Priscilla	girl

105 Brattle Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Name	Birth	Death
Dinah ³	before 1755	
Malcolm ⁴	before 1755	
William ⁵	before 1755	
Cuba Vassall ⁶	1733-4	1812
James Vassall ⁷	c.1755- 1759	1812
Darby Vassall	1769	1861
Cyrus Vassall	1771	1812
baby boy ⁸	1774	1775
baby Vassall [possibly Nancy]	1777	1802
unknown (possible) ⁹	before 1763	
unknown (possible) ¹⁰	before 1763	

³ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁴ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁵ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁶ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁷ John Vassall Loyalist Claim, AO 13/90, TNA.

⁸ Petition of John Simonds, Passed Resolves, Resolves 1784, c.51, SC1/series 228, Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions, MSA, Boston MA, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/892BX2>, Harvard Dataverse V4, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/892BX2>.

⁹ 1763 Christ Church Census. William Stevens Perry, *Papers relating to the history of the church in Massachusetts, 1676–1785* (1873), 502.

¹⁰ 1763 Christ Church Census, 502.

People Enslaved by Henry and Penelope Vassall

Name	Birth	Death
Mary ¹¹	1700s-10s	
Jack ¹²	1736	after 1756
Placy ¹³	1720s-30s	
Dorinda ¹⁴	1720s-30s	1784
Abba ¹⁵	1705	
Robin ¹⁶	1725	after 1755
Cuba ¹⁷	1733-4	1812
Walker ¹⁸	1735-9	
Nuba ¹⁹	1735-9	
Trace ²⁰	1735-9	
Tobey ²¹	1735-9	
Anthony ²²	1713-1720s	1811
Dick ²³	1730s or earlier	after 1769
James ²⁴	1758	1812
Flora ²⁵	1767	1815

¹¹ Isaac Royall Esq. & Wife to Penelope Royall their Daughter: Deed of Gift for four Negros, Records of Enrolment (ROE) 67, Liber D. Vol. 2 (1737–8), f. 267, NAAB.

¹² Deed to Penelope Royall, 1737.

¹³ Deed to Penelope Royall, 1737.

¹⁴ Deed to Penelope Royall, 1737.

¹⁵ Isaac Royall, Middlesex County Probate #19545 (1739), MSA.

¹⁶ Will of Isaac Royall, 1739.

¹⁷ Will of Isaac Royall, 1739.

¹⁸ Will of Isaac Royall, 1739.

¹⁹ Will of Isaac Royall, 1739.

²⁰ Will of Isaac Royall, 1739.

²¹ Will of Isaac Royall, 1739.

²² Henry Vassall Inventory, 1769, Batchelder, 79–84.

²³ Henry Vassall Inventory, 1769.

²⁴ Henry Vassall Inventory, 1769.

²⁵ “Flora Miranday & Family, Uncovering the Past: Exploring Black History through Primary Sources, King’s Chapel,” accessed 18 August 2025, <http://www.kings-chapel.org/uncover11.html>. Hall also was also appointed guardian of the Maranday children in 1807: Probate Records 1648–1924, Middlesex County Probate Court, Ancestry.com. Massachusetts, US, Wills and Probate Records, 1635–1991, Ancestry.com.

baby ²⁶	1761	1761
possibly George ²⁷	1707	
possibly elder man ²⁸	1682	
possibly Captain ²⁹		
possibly Old Cook ³⁰		
possibly Santo ³¹	1702	
possibly unnamed girl ³²	1746	

²⁶ John Winthrop, Annotated almanac, 1761, HUM 9 Box 6, Volume 6, HUA, <https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.arch:10354694?n=8>.

²⁷ Isaac Royall Inventory, 1752, Middlesex County Probate, 1746–1754, vol. 26, 390.

²⁸ Isaac Royall estate after death of Elizabeth Royall, 1752.

²⁹ Isaac Royall estate after death of Elizabeth Royall, 1752.

³⁰ Isaac Royall estate after death of Elizabeth Royall, 1752.

³¹ Isaac Royall estate after death of Elizabeth Royall, 1752.

³² Isaac Royall estate after death of Elizabeth Royall, 1752.

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Samuel Crocker Lawrence Library

Records of the African Lodge

Sheffield City Archives. Sheffield, UK.

William Vassall Letterbooks, 1769–1798

The National Archives. Kew, UK. (TNA)

Loyalist Claims

Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834

Newspapers and Magazines

Boston Courier

Boston Evening Post

Boston Evening Transcript

Boston Gazette

Boston News–Letter

Boston Post

Cambridge Chronicle

Columbian Centinel

The Gentleman’s Magazine (London)

The Liberator (Boston)

Nantucket Inquirer

New–York Weekly Journal

Royal Gazette of Jamaica

Weekly American Workman (Boston)

Databases

American Ancestors, www.americanancestors.org

Ancestry, www.ancestry.com

Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813–1834

England, Select Marriages, 1538–1973

London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538–1812

Newspapers.com

United States Federal Censuses, 1790–1860

The British Newspaper Archive, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

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