

The African School and Meeting House

On March 26, 1825, Jeffrey Summons conveyed for the token price of \$10.50 a piece of land “in Newtown on Pleasant Street in West Monomoy Shares” to the Trustees of the School Fund for the Coloured People” provided that the trustees would build and maintain a schoolhouse there “and a school to be kept in it forever.”¹

This was not the first school in New Guinea. Historian Obed Macy recorded in his journal that in December 1819 “The cry of Fire alarmed the Town at 10 o’clock in the night, which proved to be Rhoda Harris’ house at Newtown, which took fire in the School room.”²

Already the year before, at the town meeting, a committee had been appointed to report on the need for free public schools. They immediately reported back that three hundred children in the town did not attend school or receive competent home schooling.

For thirty years Nantucket had been out of compliance with a Massachusetts law mandating free public schools. Quaker families were uninterested in having their children educated together with non-Quaker children. Non-Quaker families who could pay depended on private schools, and there was considerable reliance on home schooling. For children of some indigent families charitable organizations such as the Fragment Society provided clothing and basic education. Nonetheless, the town-appointed committee had identified three hundred children for whom none of these alternatives was providing even the most basic of primary education. Probably many of them were children of New Guinea, but it is important to understand that in 1820 African-Nantucketer children were not excluded from Nantucket’s public schools. There simply were no public schools.

A year prior to the town committee report about unschooled children, Samuel Jenks had moved to the island, where—some years later—he married Martha Coffin. Martha was a descendant of the first English settler families. She was as patrician as one could be in the Quaker-dominated white community, and she was active in the Fragment Society. In 1821 Martha’s husband-to-be bought the *Nantucket Inquirer* and launched a campaign for free public schooling on Nantucket. Such a school system was finally established in 1827, and Samuel Jenks was elected to the Nantucket school committee.

By then New Guinea already had its own neighborhood school. The time was overdue for public education, and African Nantucketers had taken the initiative ahead of the Town of Nantucket.

Their school was underfunded from the start. Nantucket Town’s appropriation “in part support of the African school” was \$75 per year to begin with but later was reduced to \$60.³ Between 1825 and 1829 three different men held the post of schoolmaster, one of them a missionary circuit teacher who spent a

¹ Nantucket Registry of Deeds Vol. 28, pp. 207–08.

² Entry for December 1819, Obed Macy’s journal 1814–22 (Nantucket Historical Association MS. Collection 96, Journal 3). I find no other documentation on Rhoda Harris. Peter Boston’s wife Rhoda Jolly Boston signed documents with a mark rather than a signature, so she does not seem to be a likely school mistress.

month each at a number of schools on the Cape and islands and otherwise left the school in the hands of a Miss Thomson.⁴ Minister Jacob Perry, the first black schoolmaster at the African School, announced in May of 1829 that he would have to give up the job, because he could not live on the salary.⁵ Nonetheless, he was the speaker that summer at the Fourth of July exercises.

The construction of the African Meeting House on the corner of York and Pleasant Streets that housed the African School apparently began before Jeffrey Summons formally deeded the land to the trustees. At the time of the January 3, 1825, announcement of its consecration, it was at least framed, although acknowledged to be unfinished. An 1829 letter to the editor of the *Nantucket Inquirer* refers to school being conducted in “the African meeting house in this town.” An 1831 letter to the editor from Jeffrey Summons speaks of “the African School house and Meeting house.”⁶

Two different late nineteenth-century sources describe Jeffrey Summons as a Quaker. Betsy Cary’s account of the house at 117 Main Street contains the statement “In the mansion that I have described, there yet remains on some panes of glass in the back part of one of the rooms names written with diamond. One is Jeff Summons, who was a colored servant. I remember him well as a good old Quaker. Another is Richard Cary, who was a son of Edward [Cary].”⁷ A.M.M., writing in 1895, recalls “old Quaker Jeff with his Clara and his Chloe.”⁸ Since Paul Cuffe was a prominent black Friend, it would not be entirely out of the question for Summons to have been. Summons’s act of selling the land to the school trustees for “so low a price...to save the expense of another deed” is certainly in line with Quaker thrift. Membership in the Society of Friends is also consistent with books being part of Jeffrey Summons’s probate inventory. Yet despite owning books, he signed the deed of land to the school trustees with a mark rather than a signature, and he and his wife signed other deeds that way as well.⁹ Only when she signed the settlement of her husband’s estate after his death did Martha Summons sign her own name.¹⁰

Sometimes illiterate people possess books they are unable to read, and that might be the case with Jeffrey Summons’s two Bibles and three other books,¹¹ but it is hard to reconcile illiteracy with Summons’s role as executor of John Gordon’s will in 1831 or his eloquent letter to the *Nantucket Inquirer* on September 17, 1831, describing Gordon’s difficult funeral arrangements.¹²

³ Town Records 182529, pp. 381, 398. The Polpis School, which then had an enrollment equal to that of the African School, received only \$20 per year.

⁴ *Nantucket Inquirer*, May 2, 1829, letter printed in “Communications” section.

⁵ *Ibid.*, May 5, 1829.

⁶ *Nantucket Inquirer*, May 2, 1829, and September 17, 1831.

⁷ E. Mitchell 1894–96, spelling modernized. A.M.M.’s 1895 memoir of prominent residents of New Guinea also refers to “the Old Quaker Jeff.” I have found no documentary evidence of Jeffrey Summons belonging to any Nantucket Quaker Meeting.

⁸ A.M.M. 1895. Clarissa Summons, aged 35, appears in the local 1830 census, p. 228, living in the household headed by Jeffrey Summons. Chloe Ann Summons married John Lemon in 1845. *Vital Records of Nantucket IV*, p. 368.

⁹ Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Vol. 27. p. 194; Vol. 28, pp. 208, 438; Vol. 29, p. 230.

¹⁰ Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Vol. 32, p. 546.

¹¹ Nantucket Probate Book 13, pp. 297–98.

¹² Nantucket Probate Book 13, p. 222.

What else can be learned from census records and deeds of sale is that Jeffrey Summons was born around 1756 and that beginning in 1798 he engaged in active buying and selling of land. He married twice. His first wife's name was Nancy, and after her death he married a Mashpee Wampanoag woman named Martha Dartmouth who outlived him.¹³ He died in 1832 leaving a rather large estate that included, along with his books, two silver watches, silver shoe buckles, four walking canes, quite a lot of clothing and furniture (including a looking glass, bedsteads, and a feather bed), "sundry tools," livestock, meat, and grain. His estate also included fifteen chairs, precisely the number of chairs that had been listed in schoolmaster Benjamin Tashama's estate inventory.

Summons, benefactor of the African School, is an enigmatic character. He seems to have come out of slavery, probably to the Cary family, but unlike the younger Absalom Boston and Edward Pompey—whose occupations as mariners, traders, and storekeepers are well documented—Summons appears to have simply had his wealth rather than working for it. At death it was distributed to his widow, surviving children, and grandson. When his son George died just two years after his father, the two silver watches were part of his estate.

Cyrus Peirce and Public Education

Throughout much of the twentieth century Nantucket had a "north school" and a "south school." The proper name of the north school was the Academy Hill School and that of the south school, on Atlantic Avenue not far from the African Meeting House, was the Cyrus Peirce School. Students at both schools had only the vaguest idea, if any at all, of who Cyrus Peirce was and why the school bore his name.

Two years before the outbreak of the War of 1812, Cyrus Peirce—newly graduated from Harvard College—had come to Nantucket to teach in a private academy. When the war began, he left the island, not to fight but to pursue theological studies. As soon as the war ended, he returned to the island to teach for another three years. Then he departed again to begin his deferred preaching career.

In the prewar years of the early 1800s when corporal punishment was the rule in boys' schools, Cyrus Peirce was unconventional in his approach to education. He sought the cooperation of his students through positive expectations rather than the threat of pain and humiliation. Upon his return in 1815, he began teaching girls and boys together, in the spirit of Quaker education. The following year, he married one of his students, Harriet Coffin, sister of Martha Coffin, future wife of newspaperman Samuel Jenks. Although the Peirces left Nantucket in 1818, just when Samuel Jenks arrived on the island, they continued in contact with the island through family connections, which eventually included Samuel and Martha Jenks.¹⁴

¹³ In order to settle her husband's estate, Martha Summons needed a document signed by Gideon Hawley in his capacity as Mashpee Tribe guardian. Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Vol. 32, pp. 545–47.

¹⁴ Samuel Jenks's father, Samuel Jenks Sr., had also moved to Nantucket and married widow Eunice Swain.

Throughout the next dozen years, Cyrus Peirce gradually came to the conclusion that teaching, rather than preaching, was his vocation. He left the ministry and gained more experience in an off-island school before he finally accepted the call to resume teaching in Nantucket. By the time he returned, he had developed an educational methodology that completely rejected corporal punishment, and he shared his principles and techniques with Harriet. For six years the couple managed a large private academy on Nantucket, assisted by other personally trained assistants, one of whom was Maria Mitchell.¹⁵

At the same time that he was directing the private school, Cyrus Peirce, like his brother-in-law Jenks (both members of Nantucket's Union Lodge), was working for the development of Nantucket's fledgling public school system. Following his plan it was organized into four levels: primary, intermediate, grammar, and—ultimately—high school. In May of 1837, right after his fellow Masons had voted to rent their meeting hall to Peirce to use as a schoolroom, he gave up his private school position to become principal of the new Nantucket High School.¹⁶

Peirce's efforts had a number of unintended consequences. First, the enthusiasm for public schools that he and Jenks promoted from their influential positions within the community led to the collapse of most of Nantucket's private schools with the exception of the privately endowed Coffin School, which was also founded in 1827.¹⁷ Second, after only two years as principal of Nantucket High School, he was called off-island by the newly created Massachusetts Board of Education to serve as principal of the first normal school in North America and to oversee modern teacher training. Like his protégée Maria Mitchell, Cyrus Peirce in death was laid to rest in Nantucket's Prospect Hill Cemetery, but in life his professional career had taken him away from the island's students once again and forever.

Yet another consequence of Cyrus Peirce's organization of a high school on Nantucket was the racial integration of Nantucket's schools. Recounting Peirce's life work, the Rev. Samuel May wrote:

The private schools were, to a considerable extent, relinquished; and the children of all classes came together, as they were able, to enjoy alike the common bounty, —of all classes except that which had always been subjected to the greatest disadvantages, and therefore needed assistance and encouragement the most. The *colored* inhabitants of the town were not allowed to send their children into the public Grammar Schools; but a provision was made to educate them by themselves. Against this decision, Mr. Peirce remonstrated and contended, with his wonted earnestness and determination. But the “prejudice against color” was too mighty for his appeals to prevail.¹⁸

¹⁵ May 1857, p. 13.

¹⁶ *History of Union Lodge*. 1941, pp. 52.

¹⁷ Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin's Lancasterian School continued as a school until well into the twentieth century. Its handsome brick building, completed in 1854, now houses the Egan Institute of Maritime Studies. Entirely overlooking the children of New Guinea, a brochure printed in the 1990s states that “In addition to ‘giving a good English education to the youth who are descendants of the late Tristram Coffin’ (which included almost every child on Nantucket), the school emphasized nautical skills.”

¹⁸ May 1857, p. 17.

Cyrus Peirce may have been defeated by conservative forces in the town—not least of whom was his brother-in-law Jenks—but a decade before May’s words were published in 1857, Nantucket’s schools had been integrated and black students admitted to all levels of the Nantucket school system. This had been accomplished through unremitting public pressure from two sources: white abolitionists in Nantucket and their off-island allies on the one hand, and on the other eloquent voices and determined action arising from within the African Nantucketer community. It was the town’s refusal to admit to higher education two daughters of New Guinea that proved to be the tip-point in the struggle for integration.

As everywhere, the notion of separate but equal education was popular in the white community but impracticable. Just as it short-changed female students and female teachers, so it short-changed African Americans. On Nantucket, while Cyrus Peirce was building public school facilities with “improved desks and seats, effective ventilators, better text-books, and...the services of well-qualified teachers,”¹⁹ as many as fifty children in New Guinea studied together in the single room of the African Meeting House, where—due to poor salary—there was a high rate of teacher turnover. One black man served for a short time as teacher, as did several white men.

One of the white male teachers was Cyrus Peirce’s fellow Mason Wilson Rawson, whose career and community involvement mirrored that of Absalom Boston to a remarkable degree. Both were master mariners, although Rawson captained coastal freighters rather than whaling ships. On land Rawson, like Boston, operated an inn. While Boston was trustee of the African Baptist Society, Rawson was a deacon of the First Congregational Church (the North Church). Rawson was characterized as an “enthusiastic Mason,” and he may have been the member to initiate the decision on the part of the lodge to donate its chandelier to the African Church in 1837.²⁰

Often, however, the teachers at the African School were white women, who in the 1800s were considered unqualified to teach advanced topics.²¹ Consequently they were paid less, and the education they imparted was considered inferior. In the first years of the African School’s existence Miss Thomson took over teaching from circuit-teacher Frederick Baylies, who had a number of schools to look after, and had her contract extended throughout the year. Eliza Bailey, daughter of Nabby Gurrell, the woman whose disorderly house catering to a biracial clientele had been censured in 1811, began teaching at the African School in 1834, but two years later epilepsy made it impossible for her to continue.²² Then Anna Gardner took over and taught for four years. While teaching in New Guinea, Gardner herself attended the new Nantucket High School. At the same time, she prepared Eunice Ross, the youngest child of James Ross and his wife Mary, for entrance to high school.

¹⁹ May 1857, p. 17.

²⁰ *History of Union Lodge*. 1941, pp. 52, 58–59.

²¹ Linebaugh 1978, pp. 7–11, 42.

²² Eliza Bailey died in 1841 at the age of 29. *Vital Records of Nantucket V*, p. 28.

In 1840 Eunice Ross was examined by the Nantucket school committee and found qualified for admittance. When Eunice was barred from the high school because of race, Anna Gardner resigned her teaching position at the African School and dedicated herself to antislavery and equal-rights activism. An interim woman teacher was appointed, and then in the spring a new advertisement for a teacher for the African School was published, this time stipulating that only male candidates would be considered.

While Anna Gardner was still teaching at the African School, it was reported to the town that the trustees of the African Meeting House were unwilling to continue renting it to the town for use as a school building. It was deemed necessary to erect or purchase another building. Six hundred and sixty dollars was set aside for the African School the following year in a category that also included “fitting” other schools and purchasing books and stationery. Whether the school was moved to a different building at this time is unclear.²³

The prospect of moving into a better building coincided with Eunice Ross’s exclusion from the high school and Anna Gardner’s resignation from teaching. When African Nantucketers refused to send their children to the school (whether it was old or new), accusations of ingratitude were leveled at New Guinea parents who would not take advantage of “the School they [the school committee] established at their door” and “the ample provision made by the town in the premises.”²⁴ Samuel Jenks, in his capacity as member of the school board, delivered himself of the opinion that the African School had offered the children of New Guinea real advantages: “a convenient location; an able instructor; and so few pupils (about 30) that consequently, each commanded more of the attention and services of the teacher.”²⁵

During the first half of the 1840s Nantucket witnessed simmering, sometimes explosive public debate about school integration on-island and abolition of slavery off-island. In 1842 cobblestones and eggs were thrown at abolitionists meeting in the Atheneum.²⁶ The composition of the school board teetered back and forth between integrationists and segregationists. Town meetings erupted in scathing proposals and counterproposals. Black children were admitted into schools with white students and then, after a while, pulled from their classes and returned to the African School, a painfully humiliating experience.²⁷

Through it all, white writers peppered the editors of the newspapers with opinion pieces, some of them inflammatory. A frequent contributor to the *Nantucket Inquirer* writing under the name “Fair Play”

²³ Town Records 1838–40, pp. 53–56, 139.

²⁴ Petition presented to the Massachusetts House of Representatives, February 4, 1845.

²⁵ Town Records 1841–45, pp. 273–74.

²⁶ Reference to this violence is made in a letter from “Abolitionist” and an editorial introduction to the letter in the *Nantucket Inquirer*, August 20, 1842. It is also mentioned in Arthur Gardner 1916, p. 39, although he mistakenly places the event a year earlier. George H. Gardner recorded the events of mid-August 1842 as they unfolded day-by-day in his diary, Nantucket Historical Association MS. Collection 335, folder 325, which is excerpted in Appendix 1j.

²⁷ For a comprehensive description of the events of this period, see Linebaugh 1978, which describes in detail the forty-two-year-long process from the founding of the African School to the admission of the first two black students to the higher-level schools from which they had been excluded. This study—beautifully written and well documented, with illustrations, excerpts from newspaper articles and letters to the editors, and appended primary documents—is unsurpassed in its coverage of the racial integration of Nantucket’s public schools.

argued that the school committee had been obliged to refuse Eunice Ross admission to the high school because her presence would have been fatally disruptive of school order. The letter asserted that “there is a difference of color; there is a difference of odor,” and concluded by saying, “We say that the presence of coloured children is as obnoxious to us, and even more so to some of us, than the presence of contagious disease. Some dislike canker-rash, measles, whooping cough, and other contagious diseases more than they do coloured children, others dislike the coloured children the most... Whatever is so obnoxious to a large portion of parents and children as to threaten the dissolution of the schools ought to be excluded in ‘self defense,’ that this exclusion is ‘*in maintenance* not in *derogation* of the equal rights of education.”²⁸

The New Guinea community would have none of it. Already in 1842 in an address to the school board published in both the *Nantucket Inquirer* and the *Islander*, they had taken the position that their children were being denied access to the full range of education available to white children—access guaranteed to all as a constitutional right.²⁹ In a four-level system (primary, intermediate, grammar, and high school) only primary and intermediate education had been offered at the African School. Students there did not receive even grammar-school-level instruction, much less admission to high school. In the latter part of 1844, when African-Nantucketer parents boycotted the African School, some white families withdrew their children from the public schools in solidarity with them.

Legal counsel was sought but offered no route to forcing the town to desegregate its schools. Finally, in 1845 a pair of petitions was directed to the Massachusetts State House. The first, on behalf of “between thirty and forty children who are deprived of their right to equal education... for no other reason, but... *color*” was signed by Edward Pompey and over a hundred other residents of New Guinea, including Absalom Boston, Arthur Cooper, and several of Eunice Ross’s relatives.³⁰ The second petition was signed just by Eunice Ross, who had been waiting five years to begin high school.³¹ On March 25, 1845, both houses passed House Bill 45, guaranteeing equal education to all students and permitting parents to sue their towns for damages if their children were excluded.

The town of Nantucket, which had remained out of compliance with the 1789 mandate for free public education for so long, was not ready to comply with the new law. The name of the African School was changed to the York Street Grammar School, and—with a male teacher—it was expected to meet state standards for offering equal education.

The new law, however, offered parents recourse that they had previously lacked, and the person who stepped forward to avail himself of it was Absalom Boston. During the years since Eunice Ross had taken the high school entrance exam, Absalom’s and Hannah’s daughter Phebe Ann had exhausted the resources of the African School and was ready to move on. When Phebe Ann was denied admission to

²⁸ *Nantucket Inquirer*, May 20, 1843.

²⁹ *Islander*, March 12, 1842, and *Nantucket Inquirer*, March 2, 1842. The address is reproduced in full in Linebaugh 1978, pp. 51–54.

³⁰ Entire petition reproduced in Linebaugh 1978, p. 55.

³¹ Entire petition reproduced in Linebaugh 1978, p. 50.

higher education, as Eunice Ross had been, her father brought suit on her behalf. As a result, on September 3, 1845, a special town meeting was called to try to decide what course to take “in relation to an action brought by Phebe Ann Boston, by her father and next friend, for depriving her of the advantages of Public School instruction.”³²

The town ducked the issue by referring it to the school committee, and a stalemate ensued. Delays held up the Boston case in court, while the black boycott of the African School, now called the York Street Grammar School, stretched on and on. Nantucket voters finally resolved the issue once and for all by voting out the conservative school board members, including Samuel Jenks, and voting in a completely new school board that set about integrating the schools during the year 1846–47.³³

Absalom Boston dropped his suit against the town. He had once run for the board of selectmen with no success, and he had also run for the school board with the same result. In 1844 Wesley Berry of New Guinea rose in town meeting to speak in favor of school integration, and two years later he ran for the school board. Although he did not win election either, it was no longer unthinkable that African Nantucketers would have a voice in Nantucket politics.

The succession of personal losses that accompanied Absalom Boston’s financial success continued. In 1849, less than four years after her father had moved heaven and earth to secure her all the education she wanted or needed, Phebe Ann Boston died of dysentery.³⁴ Absalom and Hannah didn’t survive their daughter by many more years. Absalom died in 1855 just short of his seventieth birthday, and Hannah soon followed.³⁵ Of all the children born to Absalom Boston, only Caroline, Oliver, and Thomas remained, and the two young men left Nantucket, never to return.

Unmarried, unemployed, and rather solitary, Eunice Ross lived until 1895, finding her pleasure in French literature. Her sister Sarah worked as a domestic servant all her adult life. When Sarah died in 1896, she was laid to rest beside Eunice, and twin headstones mark their graves.³⁶ Other Rosses benefited from Nantucket’s public education. A hand-written note on an 1895 newspaper clipping identifies an otherwise unnamed Nantucket-connected black clergyman in Florida as the Reverend J. Gardner Ross, born on Nantucket and an 1877 graduate of Newton Theological Seminary.³⁷

³² Town Records 1845–46, pp. 53–54.

³³ There is no evidence that Eunice Ross exercised her hard-won right to attend Nantucket High School. There are two lists, one manuscript and one printed, of the students who attended the high school from its opening in 1838 until the 1860s (Nantucket Historical Association MS. Collection 88, Book 32; and Barney, Robinson, and Starbuck 1865). Her name appears in neither, although the names of other African Nantucketers do. The original registration books for Nantucket High School between 1838 and 1862 ((Nantucket Historical Association MS. Collection 88, Books 25A, B) also do not include her.

³⁴ *Vital Records of Nantucket V*, p. 67.

³⁵ Hannah Cooke Boston died in Nantucket on December 6, 1857, at the age of 61. She had been born in Dartmouth to Benjamin and Catherine Cooke. Office of the Nantucket Town Clerk, Deaths 1850–1887, p. 28, line 106.

³⁶ See Appendix 1k for obituaries of Eunice and Sarah Ross.

³⁷ A.M.M. 1895. An article published on May 10, 1897, in the *Jacksonville, Florida, Metropolis* reported a celebration of the work of Reverend J. Gardner Ross at Trinity Baptist Church. It concludes, “Rev. Ross is much beloved by his members and hosts of friends outside of his church.” Grand nephew of Eunice Ross, James Gardner Ross was born in the mid 1840s, during the struggle for school integration.

The African-Nantucketer community had taken giant strides in the course of a century, and especially during the two decades between the opening of the African School and the integration of all the public schools. Beginning in slavery, succeeding generations had become landowners, diversified their employment, established businesses, developed a literate middle class with its own social institutions, and successfully claimed its place within the Nantucket community, not on its margins. Just when all this had been achieved, Nantucket's maritime economy collapsed, and within a decade of African-Nantucketers' greatest victory—the integration of the schools—the community dissolved, leaving its accomplishments behind along with its dead interred in their cemetery downhill from the windmills.

Ills

From the Nantucket death records, including the dates on headstones in the cemetery, a sense of longevity is perceived within the African community on Nantucket. In 1796 Pompey Nailor died at the age of 78. In 1815 Ruth Forting died at the age of 89; Cato Barlow at 76 in 1816. In 1819 Rebecca Pompey, aged 70, died; 1821 took Violet Arnold, 75, and Betsey Arnold, 82. Absalom Boston's brother-in-law Michael Douglass, "a Cape di Verde Portuguese Negro" drowned in a Nantucket pond in 1836 at age 70. Douglass's wife Mary Boston Douglass had preceded him in death two years earlier at age 66. When Lucy Cooper, born in Africa and brought to Nantucket via Newport, Rhode Island, died "of general debility" in 1866, she was reportedly a centenarian.³⁸

Nonetheless, New Guinea was not always a comfortable nor a healthy place to live. Despite its residents' industriousness, poverty was their close companion. Mary Eliza Starbuck, who lived on Pleasant Street not far from the edge of New Guinea writes that during a period of her childhood "there was a group of people on the outskirts of the town who used to send their children out with baskets, begging for 'cold pieces.'"³⁹

The ancient Hagar was not the only black person certified as one of the town poor. In 1819 four African Nantucketers were among those at the poorhouse, while eleven of the 109 households receiving town aid were headed by New Guinea widows. After the town established a "poor farm" in Quaise in 1822, eight black people moved there. They were not, by any means, proportionally over-represented at these institutions, where most of the recipients of the town's support were white, but there was dreadful humiliation attached to being in need. Of the poor in the alms house Obed Macy wrote in his journal in 1822 that they were, "miserably provided for; it is represented that they are nasty & wicked, etc., etc." He adds some historical perspective on the punitive attitude of the town toward indigent people: "Somewhere about 1796 it was concluded that all who wanted supplies from the town must come & reside at the work

³⁸ The 1860 census listed her age as 95. An article in the *Inquirer and Mirror* on June 25, 1936, states that she was 110 years old at the time of her death, but this is probably based on a transposition of 101.

³⁹ M. E. Starbuck 1929, p. 89.

house (so called). This plan by midwinter came near to starving some of the poor to death, for rather than take their families & go to the work house, they would suffer.”⁴⁰

There were always “childhood diseases” such as measles and whooping cough to contend with. Children also died of something recorded as “canker.” Dysentery could and did turn deadly, carrying off Phebe Ann Boston before she could enjoy the fruits of her public education. And there had come another killer. Among the people of New Guinea the first recorded death from tuberculosis, which went by the names of “consumption” and “lung fever,” occurred in 1834. From then on, hardly a year went by without at least one documented tuberculosis death. Some years three or four people died of it. Insidiously, the disease crept through families, carrying off members at intervals.

Isaac Barlow died of it in 1835, his wife Annie two years later. Eight years after that Sarah Barlow, by then thirty years old, died of it, too. In 1842, the Valentine family lost 66-year-old Mary and eight-year-old Ann.

The Boston family was particularly hard hit. Tuberculosis began to plow its destructive swath through the family in 1834. That year Peter and Rhoda’s daughter Priscilla Quinn died of it, and then Absalom’s oldest son Charles and his young wife died. On one day—September 15, 1838—Freeborn Boston’s son William and William’s niece Harriet both died. Eight years after Priscilla Quinn’s death, her husband Frederick succumbed to the disease, and then Absalom’s son Henry, and Priscilla’s mother Rhoda.

The residents of New Guinea, whose families had grown rapidly in the late 1700s, could hardly be faulted for feeling that their houses had been infected by an insidious agent, one more slow-acting than what had destroyed Miacomet in the previous century but equally deadly. When the center of Nantucket town burned to the ground in 1846 and the news of gold in California exerted its mighty pull on Nantucket’s men in 1849, what wonder is it that the houses of New Guinea emptied as swiftly as the tide running out?

From New Guinea to the Outback

The 1860 census shows vacant houses in New Guinea. One that was still occupied was where Patience Cooper lived. She was approaching her fiftieth birthday, and although she was twice married, she had been alone for nearly a decade, living in the house she had inherited from her mother.⁴¹ The 1860 census

⁴⁰ Obed Macy’s journal 1814–22, entry for April 13, 1822. Nantucket Historical Association MS. Collection 96, Journal 3.

⁴¹ The 1860 census gives her age as 47, but both the 1840 census and her eventual death date place her age in 1860 at around fifty. According to Stackpole 1946, she had inherited the house from her mother, Patience Dyer. From Nantucket Vital Records, it appears that Patience Cooper had been married twice: to Fred Quoin in 1827 and to Rufus Cooper from the Vineyard in 1840, but by 1850 she was living alone and owned real estate worth \$200. Ten years

describes her as a mulatto woman who worked as a domestic. It also places a value on her piece of real estate double what it had been a decade earlier, despite the fact that many houses in its vicinity had been abandoned.

Four hundred yards away on Silver Street, just around the corner from Orange Street, Phebe Fuller, a white woman in her sixties, operated a shop in one room of her home. She may have begun to suffer from forgetfulness. According to a sworn deposition to the court by Trillania Pompey, Mrs Fuller “displayed a difficulty remembering the proper names of colored people with whom she came in contact often.”⁴²

On a night in late November of 1860, Phebe Fuller was found brutally beaten, lying in a pool of blood in her blood-spattered living room. Her skull had been fractured with a whalebone fid, which her attacker had left behind on the living room floor. For nearly two weeks she passed back and forth between unconsciousness and lucidity before she died from her injuries.⁴³

During intervals of consciousness, she told different stories about her assailant. When first asked who had done this to her, she said it was Patience Cooper. A while later she said she had been attacked by a white man she had never seen before. On a third occasion she gave a detailed account of Patience Cooper coming to see her about a bill and then hitting her with something wrapped in a white handkerchief.

Patience Cooper was arrested and interrogated, but while she admitted that she had seen Phebe Fuller in her shop that day about some sewing and that she had been carrying a soup bone wrapped in a napkin, she steadfastly insisted that she had not bludgeoned her neighbor.

After Phebe Fuller died, Patience Cooper was indicted for murder. A jury found her guilty, and a retrial had the same outcome. Confident that her innocence would prevail, she was stunned to be sentenced to ten years of confinement in the Nantucket House of Correction. Finding imprisonment unbearable, she eventually announced that she wished to clear her conscience by making a confession. She stated that on that November day, in the shop on Silver Street, she and Phebe Fuller had indeed argued over a bill. Mrs. Fuller had used very bad language to her and had so provoked Patience that she hit the elderly woman in the face. When she left the shop, she said, Mrs. Fuller was standing leaning against the shop counter, and when Patience got home there was no need to wash blood off herself or her clothes because no blood had been spilled.

If Patience Cooper hoped that this admission and her contrition would earn commutation of her sentence, she was disappointed. She was kept in the Nantucket House of Correction until 1871, when she was transferred to the Bristol House of Correction in New Bedford to complete her term. Finally released in 1873, she returned to Nantucket and lived on until 1885. Once a robust, active, independent woman, she

later, she was still living alone in her house and supporting herself as a domestic. The value of her real estate had doubled to \$400.

⁴² Quoted in Stackpole 1946.

⁴³ A fid (sometimes spelled “phid”) is a blunt, tapered piece of wood or whalebone used in splicing ropes.

had grown old and debilitated during her long confinement, and she passed her last years in the town asylum.⁴⁴

In retrospect, Patience Cooper's confession appears to exonerate her. The attack on Phebe Fuller took place in her living room, not in her shop, and it was executed with such violence that the victim could not have been left standing. The weapon, a spike for separating strands of a rope, was a seaman's tool, and a cash drawer ajar in the shop suggests a motive. Phebe Fuller having sustained severe head injuries, it is plausible that her last clear memory would be of an argument that had taken place earlier in the day. Little wonder if she believed that Patience Cooper had struck her suddenly from behind with her napkin-wrapped soup bone.

After a long time, murder had again been committed on Nantucket, and once again the person on trial was a person of color.⁴⁵ But times had changed since Sabo and his successors had passed through the Newtown Gate to the gallows. Some Nantucketers felt ten years' imprisonment was scandalously light punishment for murder. Others were convinced that Patience Cooper had been unfairly deprived of her freedom. But against the violent background of the Civil War and in spite of the declining influence of the Society of Friends, Nantucket had ceased to exercise capital punishment.

The 1860s were the sunset years of both the Quakers and the African Nantucketers on the island. Patience Cooper lived in a recently emptied neighborhood, and the remaining descendants of the families who had once owned slaves also lived surrounded by vacant houses.⁴⁶ The population, recently at an all-time high, was in free fall. Where had everyone gone?

When she confessed to having slapped her white neighbor, Patience had said it right out. She had brought disgrace on her family, she said, and on her "dear brother in Australia."

He was not the only one to have gone to the ends of the earth. By the 1860s William West had reestablished himself in Nelson, New Zealand. William had come to Nantucket from Philadelphia and married Sophia Godfrey in 1845. It was a promising match. Young Sophy Godfrey, according to a memoir published in 1895, had been the belle of many a New Guinea ball, and William was a barber with a shop on Main Street.⁴⁷

The Great Fire of 1846 left New Guinea untouched, but it destroyed every business on Main Street from Straight Wharf right up to the Pacific Bank. William and Sophia had to start over again. On April 17, 1849, William left Sophia with her parents and took sail for California. By 1852 she had gone to San Francisco to join him, but five years later William moved on again, this time to Nelson, New Zealand,

⁴⁴ A fictionalized version of Phebe Fuller's murder and Patience Cooper's confession published by Charles Smith in 1967 was embellished with details not in the original sources.

⁴⁵ According to Kezia Fanning's diary there had been another island murder since the last hanging. In 1798 Hannah Cata (Carter?), a married black woman, had been murdered. *Vital Records of Nantucket* V, p. 111, from Private Record 64. A search through the court records between 1798 and 1800 has not turned up anything about this.

⁴⁶ The 1860 census shows over a hundred unoccupied houses located throughout the town of Nantucket.

⁴⁷ A. M. M. 1895.

where he operated a barber shop and a tobacco shop for the rest of his life. After another sojourn with her parents in Nantucket, Sophia once again set out after her husband. When William died in late 1891, a throng of Nelson residents attended his funeral, despite bad weather, because of the “innumerable” kind deeds he had done over the years. His Nelson obituary in *The Colonist* was reprinted in Nantucket’s *Inquirer and Mirror* with the added information that Sophia had survived him. She lived on in Nelson until 1900, and when she died, she was buried beside William, there on another island as far away from Nantucket as it is possible to go on this globe.⁴⁸

Leaving New Guinea

Death kept some of New Guinea’s residents from even beginning the exodus. A walk through the cemetery recalls the community that once was. Clustered together near the southeast corner are the graves of Absalom’s children Sarah, Charles, and Absalom Jr. and of their aunt Mary Douglass. Phebe Ann’s last resting place is a bit apart from them, as is Henry’s. There, too, are the graves of dance-hall owner John Pompey and his wife Hannah. By the time Charles Godfrey Sr. was buried west of the Bostons, his daughter Sophia was



Family enclosures and headstones for New Guinea’s most prominent citizens remain, although no known descendants of the early African Nantucketers reside on the island. *Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association (photo by Pat Butler), P21263.*

living in New Zealand. Out in the middle, in a fenced enclosure, lies fugitive slave Arthur Cooper flanked by his first wife Mary, who had been born free, and his second wife Lucy, who had been taken from Africa as a child. The Reverend James Crawford, his mother Mary, his wife Ann, their daughter Julianna, and Ann’s sister Diana share another enclosure. Captain Edward Pompey lies to the south of the enclosed family plots and Eunice Ross to the west.⁴⁹

By the time Eastman Johnson recruited Nantucket children to pose at his studio on the Cliff for his 1871 painting *The Old Stage Coach*, there were few children of the African-Nantucketer families living on the island, but he found a girl to play one of the lead horses in his painting.⁵⁰

Most of the young and the healthy had left the island, seeking new ways in new places to support themselves and their families. Nantucket’s economic collapse left them few alternatives, and African

⁴⁸ *Nelson Evening Mail*, May 18, 1900. With thanks to James Traue of Wellington, New Zealand, for this information.

⁴⁹ A map identifying the burials was made by Ann Huppert in 1988 and is available at the library of the Nantucket Historical Association.

⁵⁰ Sarah Burns in Carbone and Hill, p. 189: “Johnson had come across the derelict vehicle...in the Catskills and had made a sketch of it. Back on Nantucket, he built a platform and, recruiting local children as models, designed an elaborate arrangement of players...(led by a black girl and a white boy) capering in harness.”

Nantucketers must have been more than content to leave behind a place where they had been recently subjected to so much disrespect. In town meeting and in letters to the *Nantucket Inquirer* it had been insinuated that black children in integrated schools might infect white children with diseases (a fear easy to internalize in the face of so much tuberculosis and of Phebe Ann Boston's death).⁵¹ Teachers at the African School, Anna Gardner among them, had been lavishly praised for their efforts to "improve the condition of this class of children" and in "elevating a race," as though educating the children of New Guinea was a Herculean task.⁵² A great deal of disgust had been publicly expressed not only at the thought of "amalgamation" but even at the prospect of sitting next to a black person. The Atheneum had closed its doors to African Nantucketers, and the North Congregational Church had offered to make its premises available for meetings of the Women's Antislavery Society only on condition that no black people attend.⁵³ Even if economic survival had not been the issue, African Nantucketers—having just come through all this—had little reason for nostalgic attachment to their island home.

William H. Harris Jr. had served with his father on the committee in charge of the antislavery library and reading room, and in 1842 he was chairman of the committee that demanded that the town integrate its public schools. In the course of the 1840s he and his wife Phebe Godfrey Harris became the parents of four children who might have attended those schools, but despite William's 1848 election as deacon of the African Baptist Church and although Phebe was expecting their fifth child, they decided to leave the island far behind them. In 1849 they were halfway across the Pacific when Phebe's pregnancy reached term. She died after giving birth to a daughter in Hawaii. The Harrises baptized the baby Phebe Ann, a name that seems to have spelled doom to those who bore it. Phebe Ann Harris, having miraculously survived her mother's death, died two months short of her eleventh birthday and her father soon followed her in death.⁵⁴

There had been earlier trailblazers to faraway lands. Before 1800, when slavery had just ended on Nantucket, Thomas Gardner chose to exercise his freedom by leaving the island. In Newburyport, Massachusetts, he married the daughter of Tobias Wornton and his wife. Africa-born Tobias had been taken into slavery, acquired by a family in Salem, and given the slave-name Bacchus. By serving in the Revolutionary Army and fighting at the Battle of Bunker Hill, he had won his freedom at about the same time that African Nantucketers had completely achieved theirs. His wife was "an Indian of this country" bound in service to an English family. Their granddaughter Nancy was born in Newburyport in 1799. Just months after Nancy's birth, Thomas Gardner died, and Nancy grew up with an Africa-born stepfather and many half-brothers and -sisters.

⁵¹ Letter from "Job" to the *Nantucket Inquirer*, April 1, 1843; letter from "Fair Play" to the *Nantucket Inquirer* on May 20, 1843.

⁵² Town Records, 1827, p. 354.

⁵³ *Islander*, January 16 and January 30, 1841. The copy of the letter to the Congregational Church from Harriet Peirce and Eliza Barney published on January 30, 1841, had been written some years earlier.

⁵⁴ William Harris's election as deacon on July 24, 1848, is documented in Nantucket Historical Association MS. Collection 84, folder 29. There are handwritten notes of the death dates of William, Phebe, and their daughter Phebe Ann in the "People of Color" section at the back of the 1830 local census at the Nantucket Atheneum.

Thomas Gardner had not traveled far from the island before tuberculosis ended his life, but his daughter became one of the most cosmopolitan and activist of the descendants of the African Nantucketers. After a difficult and poverty-stricken childhood and adolescence in and around Gloucester and Salem, Nancy literally met her prince. He was a black seaman named Nero Prince, an eminent member of Boston's African-American community and a founding member of the first black Masonic lodge in America. Nero Prince met and married Nancy while he was home in Boston from a sojourn in St. Petersburg, Russia, and after their wedding, he carried her back with him to the czarist court. Throughout the 1820s she learned foreign languages, sewed exquisite baby clothes for the czarina, and took notes on daily life and grand state occasions in Russia.

When Nero Prince's health began to decline, they decided to return to the United States. Nancy Prince left Russia first, while her husband remained behind to conclude his obligations. To her grief, he died before he could rejoin her.

A childless widow, Nancy Prince threw herself into religious and social work within Boston's African-American community, and then she turned her attention to the people of Jamaica. During the 1840s she worked diligently, although with indifferent success, to raise money to found a women's vocational school there to help Jamaican women achieve economic independence. Among the people she turned to for assistance in fund-raising was Nantucket-born Lucretia Coffin Mott.

Returning to Boston from a discouraging stay in Jamaica, Nancy Prince continued work in abolitionism and women's rights, gave public lectures about life in Russia, was a speaker at the 1854 Women's Rights Convention in Philadelphia, and published her autobiography, which was sufficiently popular to go through three editions.⁵⁵ In accomplishments she was a sister in good standing to the white Nantucketer abolitionists Lucretia Coffin Mott, Anna Gardner, Harriet Coffin Peirce, and Eliza Barney, and among them she was without question the most far-traveled.

Some African Nantucketers put the whole globe between themselves and Nantucket. Others joined white Nantucketers going to California, where opportunity seemed to abound. Still others left the island, but did not leave New England, and some went only as far as a community on Cape Cod that had much in common with New Guinea—namely Mashpee.

California constituted the middle distance, between the most distant destinations of Australia, New Zealand, and Russia on the one hand and New England mainland towns on the other. San Francisco had been a staging area for William and Sophia West while they gathered themselves for crossing the Pacific. For the Berry family San Francisco became as much a symbol of tragedy as New Orleans had for Daniel Gardner's family.

⁵⁵ Prince 1850 and 1990. The Nantucket Atheneum holds a rare first edition in its nineteenth-century collection as well as the 1990 annotated edition of the 1853 second edition.

The Berry brothers had come to Nantucket from Maryland by way of New Jersey around 1830 and married into the New Guinea community. Lewis Berry married Freeborn and Mary Boston's daughter Eliza, and his younger brother Wesley married the widow Mary Marsh, who had been one of the signers of the 1831 reorganization papers of the African Baptist Church.

Wesley kept a sailors' boarding house in New Guinea and devoted great effort to antislavery and equal-rights work. He appears as one of the signers of the 1842 resolution that threw down the gauntlet before the Nantucket school committee, demanding integration of the public schools.⁵⁶ In 1846 he ran for the board of selectmen. Having adopted the island as his home, he never left it, dying on-island in 1883. In his will he conferred on his widow a life-right in his estate. Then, since they were childless, it was to pass on to his wife's nieces and their children should they have any. Otherwise, upon Mary's death, he named the town of Nantucket as his beneficiary.⁵⁷

Lewis Berry, a whitewasher by trade, would probably have done well to follow his brother's example of remaining island-bound. Instead, he went to California in 1852, and his sons Lewis Jr. and Isaac joined him there, while his wife Eliza and their two daughters remained on Nantucket. During Lewis's first three years in San Francisco he accumulated more capital than the total value placed on Absalom Boston's Nantucket estate in 1855. Then he lost everything and had to start over. Once again he prospered, and like Absalom Boston, was in a position to lend out substantial sums of money. Having been sexton of the Zion church of Nantucket, he continued as a material supporter of the Zion Church in San Francisco.

Lewis Berry passed his seventieth birthday in San Francisco, and then in 1875, violence struck him in the way it had stricken Phebe Fuller. One day he was found dead in bed, bludgeoned to death in the early-morning hours by his thirty-three-year-old son Isaac, who was described as insane. Two years later his son died in Stockton, California.⁵⁸ Back on Nantucket, Lewis's widow Eliza wrote her last will and testament leaving whatever remained of Lewis's estate to her niece and nephew. Understandably, there is no mention of either of their sons. No provisions were made for daughters Mary and Sarah Ann either. According to the censuses, Eliza Berry had been living alone since 1860, and so she lived until her death on Nantucket in 1883, more than thirty years after Lewis had left the island.⁵⁹

Others fared better in California. In addition to Sophia Godfrey West, a number of other members of the Godfrey family—Joseph, Edward, and Nathaniel—gave it a try. Joseph had relocated to California in 1856, just before William and Sophia moved on. Working as a steward and a waiter, he eventually became a saloonkeeper. He married in California and eventually was widowed there. Edward Godfrey,

⁵⁶ *Nantucket Inquirer*, March 5, 1842.

⁵⁷ Nantucket Probate Book 21, pp. 553–54.

⁵⁸ The town clerk of Nantucket registered the death of not Isaac but Lewis in Stockton, California. Cause of death is listed as insanity. The informant for this information was John F. Brown, who frequently provided information to the town clerk. Either the informant was mistaken about which brother had died in Stockton, or both sons of Lewis and Eliza succumbed to insanity.

⁵⁹ Nantucket Probate Book 21, p. 541.

widowed on Nantucket, moved to San Francisco in 1862 and found a new wife. Nathaniel Godfrey left his half-Irish wife Rebecca and their children in Nantucket and in 1860 was living the life of a bachelor miner. Somehow Rebecca managed to get the family to California, and ultimately they had eight children in all. Rebecca survived Nathaniel. In 1896 she was a widow living alone in San Francisco.⁶⁰

Joseph and Edward Godfrey were lucky to find wives in California. The ratio of marriageable women to men there in the 1850s was even more skewed than it had been in New Guinea. Unattached women were at a premium and greatly appreciated. Perhaps this is why middle-aged Peggy Skinneman, having divorced her absent husband on the grounds of adultery and having been awarded their Nantucket property, departed the island for California, where she lived out the rest of her life.⁶¹

In contrast to the adventurers who went to California and beyond, some African Nantucketers moved just a little way off. The community of Mashpee was a special case. To understand the attraction of that nearby town on the Cape in the mid 1800s, one needs to look back nearly a hundred years to the dissolution of a distinct Wampanoag community on Nantucket. During Puritan times Mashpee was a closed Wampanoag praying town. Coincident with the epidemic in Nantucket, a legislative act in 1763 opened Mashpee to nonwhites from elsewhere, making it possible for the first time for them to be taken in and made proprietors of the town. Between 1765 and 1776, the number of Mashpee households increased from 73 to 81. In Gideon Hawley's records of births, deaths, marriages, and "removals," it is recorded that at least one Nantucket Wampanoag family, that of Sam Robin, contributed to Mashpee's growth.

At that time other survivors from Miacomet married into New Guinea. The Wampanoag school teacher Benjamin Tashama, having been widowed in the epidemic, married Jenny Richards, a black woman. They had a New Guinea house that can be seen on the 1821 town map situated north of the burial ground and labeled "Tashama's house." By the time the map was made, the house had been for decades in the hands of Benjamin's daughter Sarah Esop, who had sold her grandfather's house in Miacomet and lived in her father's New Guinea house with her daughter Dorcas. Dorcas over the years married several men in New Guinea, the last of them being Thomas Honorable, and she ended her days as Dorcas Honorable, the very last of Nantucket's "last Indians."

Essex Boston's description of the New Guinea community as "coloured" is significant. The people living there were not simply "black" in the sense of being of African descent. They were of mixed race—people of color—and one of the major strands from which the community was woven was the Wampanoag strand as witnessed by Wampanoag/African marriages recorded in Nantucket after 1763. The marriages of Seneca Boston to Thankful Micah and of Benjamin Tashama to Jenny Richards are only two of the three dozen or more unions of Nantucket Wampanoags with African-Nantucketers. Additionally there were marriages between African Nantucketers and people with the names Pocnet and Couit, who

⁶⁰ Franklin Dorman, personal communication.

⁶¹ Nantucket Probate Book 16, pp. 108, 144–45 and handwritten note on 1830 census.

probably had come to the island from Mashpee. It is certain that Martha Dartmouth and Mehitabel Keeter had come from Mashpee to marry on the island. Rhoda Jolly Boston's mother was also from Mashpee.

As for the Mingos, who could say if they were Wampanoags or Africans? Early Nantucket records identify Mingos as the former, and later records record Mingos as "black." As the people of Mashpee learned over time, so too on Nantucket an individual's ethnic/racial identification could change from census to census. Abram Quarry was counted as black in the 1830 census, and Dorcas Honorable was recorded as a mulatto woman in the 1850 census.

Although New Guinea was considered African and Mashpee was considered Indian, their constituencies were much the same. In these two towns (as throughout New England after the seventeenth century) being African or Indian became ultimately a matter of self-identification, a personal matter of which strand in one's heritage was given allegiance.

In any case, Mashpee Wampanoags were comfortable in New Guinea, and Nantucket's African Nantucketers were comfortable in Mashpee. Marriages between Nantucket men and Mashpee women such as those between Jeffrey Summons and Mary Dartmouth and Peter Boston and Rhoda Jolly created bonds between families in the two locations and, in the case of Mashpee, conferred the right to proprietorship. When Nantucket fell into bottomless depression in the 1850s, Mashpee offered a haven for some, such as Mashpee-born Phebe Ann Weeden/Pompey/Amos and Nantucket-born Benjamin Pompey. The mother later died on Nantucket, while the son died in Mashpee, but both were buried in the Mashpee churchyard, and the name Pompey continued in Mashpee through two sons born there to Benjamin and his wife Rose. Censuses show the way the Mashpee population grew as the Nantucket population crashed. Nonetheless, despite the depression two large Wampanoag families from Cape Cod were still residing on Nantucket in 1857: the Dennisons from Herring Pond and the Amoses from Mashpee.⁶²

During the years leading up to and through the Civil War, prejudice against African Americans hardened, as can be seen locally from letters to the *Nantucket Inquirer* during the struggle to integrate Nantucket's schools. Simultaneously a romantic nostalgia for the "vanishing Indian" developed. Under the circumstances, self-identification as "Indian" became attractive to some sons of New Guinea. Absalom Boston's sons Oliver and Thomas had a Nantucket Wampanoag grandmother, but it was through their mother, Hannah Cook of Westport, that they enrolled in the Dartmouth tribe.⁶³ When the young men left Nantucket after their parents' deaths, they had more opportunity to experiment with their identities than they ever had on the island, where genealogies were known in details back in all directions for a hundred or more years.

Oliver Boston's documented career history is straightforward. He was born in 1836, and—although not yet twenty years old—was already identified as a mariner when his father died. Absalom Boston's will named his wife Hannah his executrix, but she died so soon after her husband that Oliver, his

⁶² Compiled from Doughton 1997.

older half-sister Caroline, and his younger brother Thomas petitioned for a new executor.⁶⁴ Oliver and Thomas took up residence in their mother's hometown of Westport, near New Bedford. Oliver continued to be employed as a mariner, and in 1862 he married a New Bedford woman. During the Civil War he served in the U.S. Navy for a year. After his discharge he lived for a while in Boston before returning to New Bedford, where he died at age 36, leaving no children.

Thomas Boston's life was much longer, and it was filled with twists and turns. Much was apparently expected of Thomas as the youngest of Absalom and Hannah Boston's surviving children, and the burden of those expectations and his own ambitions was more than he could sustain. He was, by several descriptions, very light-skinned, fastidious about his appearance, and florid of speech—not at all suited to life at sea. Instead he was trained as a barber, an elite profession among African Americans. Moreover, he owned a violin and took lessons—perhaps with Harry Wheeler, New Guinea fiddler, or perhaps from a white instructor. Mary Eliza Starbuck later wrote of Thomas that “He was a violinist, and he was so anxious to be with white people that he would offer to play without pay at balls and parties in private houses.”⁶⁵ Both Starbuck and her contemporary Joseph Farnham agreed that despite his father's high status in New Guinea, Thomas was unreconciled to being an African American. Farnham said that Thomas “was a dandy but not a fop” who regretted bitterly that he wasn't white.⁶⁶ Mary Starbuck goes a little further, reporting that “we had been told that he often said that he would gladly be skinned if he could only be white.”⁶⁷

Early in the spring of 1857, the same year he was listed as a Dartmouth Indian by race and a daguerreotypist by profession, resident in Westport, Massachusetts, Universalist minister Phebe Hanaford wrote in her Nantucket diary: “Thomas Boston, a colored young man, was in this afternoon to bid us goodbye. He awoke my sympathies for his race. He is now in Phillips, Sampson & Co. store in Boston and has won their respect. Would that all his race were free!”⁶⁸ Thomas would probably have cringed at her sentiments. We might wonder how he could be in two or three places at once pursuing two different occupations, all the while being black by birth and upbringing in Nantucket and Indian by registration in Westport. In hindsight, the contradictions reflect stress fractures in Thomas Boston's psyche.

In October 1869 the *Inquirer and Mirror* printed a description of Thomas Boston's lavish wedding to Anna Wilson, daughter of a cashier at the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company main office, located across the street from the U.S. Treasury Building in Washington, D.C. The wedding reception was held at the home of the father of the bride, and the guest list was celebrity studded. Thomas Boston was described as Assistant Cashier at the Freedmen's Bank and leader of a Washington, D.C., dance band. The

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Nantucket Probate Book 19, pp. 122–27, 446–49.

⁶⁵ M. E. Starbuck 1929, p. 84.

⁶⁶ Farnham 1923, p. 140.

⁶⁷ M. E. Starbuck 1929, p. 84.

⁶⁸ Hanaford 1857. Diary entry, March 6. Phillips Sampson & Co. was a bookstore and auction house located at 110 Washington St. in Boston.

Inquirer and Mirror noted that he was the son of Captain Absalom Boston and a product of the Nantucket public schools, concluding on the self-congratulatory note that Thomas's "success in life has been owing to the liberal system of education here, which gave all alike, black or white, an opportunity to profit by it if so disposed."⁶⁹

It seemed that Absalom's and Hannah's aspirations had been fulfilled beyond anything they might have imagined. Their son was in a position of responsibility at a new institution founded to provide security for the earnings of African Americans throughout the former slave states. In the nation's capital he had married a veritable African-American princess in the presence of the black and white elite of that cosmopolitan place.

But once again there were inconsistencies. In later documentation, it is specifically denied that Thomas Boston had been a cashier at Freedmen's. Instead, he is described as a clerk.⁷⁰ A critical article that was printed in newspapers in both Savannah and Washington in 1871 described Boston as "young, airy, dressed in the height of fashion, and the color of Java coffee" and went on to assert that "Daddy Wilson and Brother Boston are mere figure-heads kept there in dumb show by cunning fellows who work the machinery from behind the scenes and are filling their own pockets." It was also reported that both men lived well beyond their means.⁷¹

Three years later, despite bringing Frederick Douglass on board as president to restore patrons' confidence, the bank—eaten away from within by massive corruption—collapsed. With few exceptions, all the embezzlement and bad loans had been the work of white officers of the bank. One of those exceptions was Thomas Boston, who had emptied the account of an illiterate depositor of nearly a thousand dollars of savings.⁷² Testimony that the "little failure in 1874 did more to rob the Negro of hope and to rob him of faith in banks than any other occurrence that has happened since he landed in Jamestown" would have broken Absalom Boston's heart.⁷³

Dismissed from a bank that had already closed its doors, Thomas Boston moved from his prestigious address in Washington to a more modest one and went to work in a laundry. By 1877 he was no longer listed in the Washington directory.

Anna Boston did not separate from her disgraced husband. From 1883 to 1893 she and Thomas lived in Chicago, where Thomas patched together a living by playing and teaching music and by working as clerk and salesman. In 1883 a favorable review of a piano recital he gave in Cleveland, Ohio, appeared in the *Cleveland Gazette*. Some years later his name turns up again on a list of dignitaries at a Masonic

⁶⁹ See Appendix 11 for the full text of the wedding description. The bride's name was omitted by the newspaper, but appears on the application for a marriage license the couple applied for in Washington on October 12, 1869.

⁷⁰ Osthaus 1976, p. 169.

⁷¹ Fleming 1970, p. 64.

⁷² The deposition of the depositor is reproduced in Fleming 1970, pp. 65–66.

⁷³ Fleming 1970, p. 160.

convention in Springfield, Illinois. Sometime before 1926, Thomas died and left the widowed Anna living in Illinois.⁷⁴

Benajah Boston Jr. was second cousin to Oliver and Thomas. His grandfather Peter was brother to their grandfather Seneca. Both Benajah Sr. and his father Peter before him had served in the U.S. Navy, so it is hardly surprising that Benajah Jr. followed the same course. After gaining experience on whaling ships out of Nantucket beginning at the age of seventeen, Benajah Jr. enlisted in the Navy and served during the Civil War. When a list of Nantucket men eligible for state militia service in 1864 was made up, he was unavailable by virtue of being “at sea.” Nantucket heard nothing more of Benajah for half a century. Then early in 1916, a ten-verse poem about retirement from the sea appeared in the *Inquirer and Mirror*. It began:

Neptune, I bid you a long farewell.

And as I did not drown

I have come to Snug Harbor in peace to dwell

And have got both anchors down.

The poem came from a rest home for old sailors on Staten Island, New York, and had been handed on to the newspaper for publication by William Bowen. The author was Benajah Boston, who had given a copy to his friend Bowen.

His poem’s publication came as a pleasant surprise to octogenarian Boston, who— at the end of a lengthy interview granted to the *Inquirer and Mirror* from temporary quarters in Providence—remarked, “I don’t know what made me think that I could write poetry.”

According to the interviewer, he also claimed to be “a full-blooded Indian.” Through his grandmother Rhoda Jolly Boston he traced a line of Mashpee Wampanoag descent, but unlike his cousins Oliver and Thomas, Benajah Jr. does not appear in the 1859 Earle Report list of Indians of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Nonetheless, he too at some point had decided that an Indian identity was preferable to an African one.

In the course of the interview he brought Nantucketers up to date on his long and eventful life on whalers, in the Navy, and in the merchant marine, where he served until past sixty years of age. He told of having his leg broken by a whale on his first voyage and how the captain had him strapped to a stanchion while setting the bone with a weight and pulley. He told of fifty-month cruises and of being at sea in gales and hurricanes, of military service and defecting from the Navy at the end of the Civil War. In his poem, he described shipboard brutality, beatings, robbery, and being “twice in my life shanghaied.” What is remarkable about the interview and the poem is how well spoken Benajah Boston was for a man who had

⁷⁴ Franklin Dorman, personal communication.

gone to sea at seventeen and worked at sea until he was past sixty. He must have been a good man in a gam.

In 1896 he had finally come ashore, married, and even applied for a pension from the Navy, which he received despite his irregular departure. Now past eighty and a widower with two monthly support checks, he had “decided to pull up anchor and sail for New Bedford, where I would tie up during the rest of the voyage of life.”⁷⁵

He didn’t tie up in New Bedford, however. Ten years after his interview, past the age of ninety, he died in Rock Island, Illinois, where he had gone to live with his cousin Thomas’s widow.⁷⁶

Back on Nantucket, Eliza King, “the oldest colored person and woman on the island” died in 1902 just short of her ninety-fifth birthday.⁷⁷ She was the oldest child of Arthur and Mary Cooper, one of the children who had been hidden in Anna Gardner’s family home in 1822, and the last surviving member of her family. Her obituary concludes: “She was buried Wednesday from the little church at the corner of York and Pleasant Streets, within a stone’s throw of the little home in which she so long dwelt.”

The last service was held in the African Meeting House in 1910, and two years later its last custodian, Edgar Wilkes, turned the key in its lock for the last time.⁷⁸ A long hiatus ensued until the building was restored and reopened to the public in 1999.

The closing of the African Meeting House did not mark the end of an African presence on Nantucket. The descendants of Nantucket’s first people of color had departed, but their place was taken by Cape Verdeans who settled in the old neighborhood but, as Catholics, did not take over the old black churches.

The Cape Verdeans had come as labor for commercial cranberry growing, a new economic enterprise on Nantucket. The cranberry industry had success to the point that the cranberry bog north of the Milestone Road came to be the largest single bog under cultivation in the world. The real replacement for the lost maritime industry was, however, the summer trade. As wealthy families sought refuge on Nantucket from the summer heat in American cities, they brought along African-American cooks, maids, and chauffeurs to staff their households. Numbers of those domestics saw opportunity in Nantucket and managed to stay, some in New Guinea and others in a new settlement “under the bank” in ’Sconset—a neighborhood that came to be called Codfish Park.

The stories of these new African Nantucketers will be told in Parts II and III.

⁷⁵ *Inquirer and Mirror*, March 4, 1916. The poem appeared in the *Inquirer and Mirror* on January 29.

⁷⁶ Franklin Dorman, personal communication.

⁷⁷ Obituary in the *Inquirer and Mirror*, Nov. 15, 1902.

⁷⁸ Letter from Edouard A. Stackpole to Byron Rushing of the Museum of Afro-American History, October 4, 1979. Nantucket Historical Association MS. Collection 335, folder 136.