



Enslaved Africans and Native Americans at First Church in Cambridge

The Covenant of First Church in Cambridge

We who are now brought together and united into one Church under the Lord Jesus Christ, our Head, in such sort as becometh all those whom He hath redeemed and sanctified to Himself, do solemnly and religiously, as in His most holy presence, promise and bind ourselves to walk in all our ways according to the rule of the Gospel, and in all sincere conformity to His holy ordinances, and in mutual love and respect each to other, so near as God shall give us grace.

The image above is from the original manuscript *Records of the First Church in Cambridge, 1632-1792*, at Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School. Other sources: *Records of the Church of Christ at Cambridge in New England, 1632-1830*, comprising the ministerial records of baptisms, marriages, deaths, admission to covenant and communion, dismissals and church proceedings; copied and edited by Stephen Paschall Sharples, 1906. "Owning Our History: First Church and Race, 1636-1873," David Kidder, 2011.

Between 1698 and 1776, when slavery was legal in Massachusetts, 36 enslaved people — 33 Africans and 3 people identified as Indians — were admitted to membership in First Church in Cambridge, according to church records. Each accepted the church's covenant and was baptized. Twelve were "admitted to full communion." The rest had limited or no access. Enslaved members and Harvard students sat in the balcony — in separate sections.

The owners of these 36 people also belonged to First Church. Among them were two ministers of First Church and a president of Harvard College. The owners' names live on in Cambridge street names: Brattle, Appleton, Wadsworth. Their biographies are well known.

What about Scipio, Pompey, Titus, Venus, Violet and the others? They were often called "servants" but they were not free. Their stories exist in fragments, names on a list of property or a deed of sale. This exhibit is an initial effort to remember enslaved people whose presence at First Church for years was all but forgotten.

We do not know if they joined willingly or unwillingly. We do know this congregation was complicit in the sin of slavery. We regret and repent of this history. We seek to honor and remember them today.

These are the names of 36 enslaved Africans and Native Americans who were members of First Church in Cambridge, according to church records. The first was Philip, in 1698. The last, Dilla, in 1776. As for the possibility of earlier enslaved people at the Cambridge church, records from 1649 to 1696 are missing. The earliest records, from soon after the congregation gathered in 1636, are silent on the subject of slavery, which was legal in Massachusetts from 1641 to 1783.

The 36 accepted (or “owned”) the church covenant and were baptized. Twelve of them were also “admitted to communion,” a privilege granted to some, but not all, white members of the congregation. On the list below, those admitted to communion are noted by [C] and the date.

For this exhibit, names and descriptions appear exactly as the ministers wrote them in the 17th and 18th century church records. The language may be jarring to read. To be clear, the use of “Negro servant” or “Indian servant” almost certainly indicates that this person was enslaved.

In addition to the 36 people who were both enslaved and church members, church records include at least 60 Africans and indigenous persons — some of them enslaved, some free — who were baptized, married or buried by First Church ministers in the decades before and after slavery ended in Massachusetts.

1698

Philip [C 1705]

a Negro servant of ye Mr. Danforth

1705

Mingo [C 1705]

ye Negro servant of Mr. Town

Charles [C 1705]

ye Negro servant of Mr. Town

Jeffry [C 1705]

ye Negro servant of Mr. Goff

Scipio [C 1705]

my [Rev. Wm. Brattle’s] Servant

1727

Joseph English

*an Indian manservant living
with Wm. Russell*

Pompey

*my [Rev. Nathaniel Appleton’s]
Negro manservant*

1729

Titus [C 1729]

*an Indian servant of [Harvard]
Pres. Wadsworth*

1730

Rose [C 1741]

Negro Maid Servant of A. Bordman

1731

Philicia [C 1731]

Servant to Major Brattle

1736

Hannibal [C 1741]

manservant of Dr. Wigglesworth

Margaret

a Molatto Servant of ye widow Oliver



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1737

Roger [C 1741]

a Negro manservant of Henry Prentice

Zillah

Negro maid of Major Brattle

1740

Lucy

an Indian servant of Mr. Bordman

Venus

a Negro servant of Madam Wadsworth

Cuffy

Negro Servant of Lieut. Governor Phips

Toby

servant of Samuel Whittemore

1741

Jack

Negro servant of ye Widow Tufts

Cuffy

servant of Mr. Judah Monis

Flora

Negro servant of Mr. Foxcroft

1742

York

a Negro servant of Mr. Trowbridge

1744

Harry

*a Negro servant of Mr. Brandon
who lives at my [Rev. Appleton's] house*

1745

Rose

a Negro servant of Lieut. Governor Phips

Cato

a Negro servant of Madam Brown

1749

Leos

Negro man servant of Mr. Foxcroft

1753

Jane [C 1754]

*Negro woman of Mr. Kent,
who is Hannibal's wife
Admitted to full communion in 1754
as Negro woman of Widow Kent.*

1755

James

Negro servant of Lieut. Gov. Phips

1760

Peter

Negro servant of Moses Bordman's widow

1761

Cato

Negro manservant of Jonathan Hastings

1768

Jane

*Negro servant of Elizabeth Nutting Baptised
at her house in ye Presence of a Number of ye
Brethren of ye Church. She being in a very
low state So that it was not Expected She
would live to ye Sabbath....*

1768

Philip

a Negro servant of Mr. Abraham Watson

Violet [C 1769]

a Negro woman of Mr. Funeuil

1771

Jerusha

*a Negro woman living with
Lieut. John Dickson*

Anne

a Negro woman of Jonathan Hastings, Esq.

1776

Dilla

*a negro woman belonging to
Mr. Samuel White of Watertown, by reason
of bodily illness and weakness, I
[Rev. Appleton] baptized her at her Master's
house, the Deacons and a number of
ye Church being Present.*