

Owning Our History: First Church¹ and Race 1636-1873

by David Kidder

Building the Beloved Community

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC²

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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.

Charlestown Covenant, 1630

Introduction

For over two hundred years, First Church evolved in its understanding of the inclusiveness of covenant, of the “we who are brought together” to make a faith community. Who should be included, and on what terms? Should infants be baptized? Should children of unbaptized persons be baptized? Should enslaved persons and indentured servants be offered baptism and membership? This last question was debated but not resolved until the 18th century. The argument follows from Puritan conceptions of predestined salvation. God has elected some to be saved. We cannot know whom God has chosen. In fact, the elect could well include others outside the community of European settlers gathered in the first churches in the colonies. And while works could not guarantee salvation to anyone, it was clear that these gifts of baptism and membership “becometh all those whom He hath redeemed and sanctified to himself...” Therefore, some among the enslaved African and Native Americans could be among the elect, and thus be legitimate candidates for baptism and church membership.

In the early 18th century, Cotton Mather used this argument to urge slave owners to

¹ “First Church” is used in this paper to refer to the first Congregational church, gathered in Newtowne in 1636 under Reverend Thomas Shepard. Reverend Thomas Hooker had served a congregation gathered in Newtowne in 1633. In 1636, Hooker and most of the congregation left to found and settle Hartford and the Colony of Connecticut. In 1636, Reverend Thomas Shepard, newly arrived from England, gathered a congregation in Newtowne (renamed Cambridge, in 1637). In 1829, the congregation of First Church split, and the First Parish Church, Unitarian Universalist, separated from the Congregational church. The Congregational portion took the name Shepard Congregational Society (now First Church in Cambridge Congregational, UCC). After 1829, “First Church” in this paper refers to the Shepard Congregational Society.

² Researched and written for the 375th anniversary of First Church in Cambridge Congregational.

baptize their enslaved persons. This helped inspire a wave of baptisms and educational initiatives targeted to enslaved persons in the first half of the century. But as the Puritan doctrine of election waned in New England Congregationalism, and as slavery and the established Native American nations disappeared from the region, Congregationalists and other white inhabitants came to see persons of color as the “other.” No longer feeling bound to care for the souls of enslaved black persons, New England white intellectual, political and religious leaders increasingly saw free persons of color as undesirable (if not inexplicable) inhabitants of the region, to be excluded from full participation in communities of faith and civil society by law and by custom.

This is a brief study of how slavery and the struggles to abolish slavery affected attitudes and policies of whites toward persons of color in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and in First Church and other Congregational churches. Throughout the period covered in this paper, events in Massachusetts and the Congregational Churches in Massachusetts provide a context for what is a very scanty record of First Church's experience. We rely heavily on secondary sources, though important contributions come from primary sources, particularly First Church records from the archives maintained at First Church, as well as First Church and other materials in the Congregational Library in Boston, Andover-Harvard Library at the Harvard Divinity School, and Houghton Library at Harvard.³

Slavery in Massachusetts: 1636-1783

In 1873, Alexander McKenzie, the 11th minister of First Church, asserted in a lecture on First Church history that “(Massachusetts) loved freedom so well that with slavery sent upon it, there has not been a slave born in Massachusetts since 1641.” (14:85)⁴ He was wrong, both about Massachusetts and about First Church. Slave holding was common in urban and rural areas of Massachusetts throughout the 17th and most of the 18th centuries, though enslaved persons were a much smaller percentage of the population than in the south. Prominent members of First Church owned enslaved servants during this period.

Our Puritan forbears followed Mosaic law in their justification of slavery. Leviticus and Deuteronomy define two categories of servitude. The first was a form of indentured servitude. “Members of your community” (the tribes of Israel) who become “so impoverished that they sell themselves to you” are not to be made slaves, but rather are

³ Quotes and citations are given by number from the list of references at the end of the paper, followed by page number(s), where relevant

⁴ McKenzie was the eleventh minister, counting from Thomas Shepard and excluding two interim ministers: Henry Dunster (1649 – 1650) and Charles Chauncey (1668 – 1671)

to serve as “hired or bound laborers.” After six years, in the year of jubilee, they must be freed. (Leviticus 25:39 – 42; Deuteronomy 15: 12 – 16) The second category included “male and female slaves whom you may have (taken) from the nations around you” as well as “from among the aliens residing with you. ...they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property.” (Leviticus 25:43 – 55) Under Mosaic law, enslaved persons must come from “outside the community,” which for early Puritans meant both Native Americans and Africans.

The Massachusetts Great and General Court incorporated this Biblical justification for slavery in the Body of Liberties (1641), an act that defined free (and un-free) persons under the law. This act legalized a practice already in place in Massachusetts. Africans had first been imported into Massachusetts from the West Indies in 1638, two years after the founding of First Church, in exchange for the male survivors of the colonists' war on the Pequot Nation. While the Body of Liberties guaranteed certain rights to most Massachusetts residents, it also legalized slavery: “There shall never be a bond slaverie, villinage or captivitie amongst us unless it be lawful captives taken in just warres and such strangers as willingly selle themselves or are sold to us.” A 1670 law closed a loophole in the original legislation, to allow slave holders to buy and sell children born of enslaved persons. (11: various)

Horton and Horton compare northern to southern slavery: “(Northern slavery was characterized by) the small size of slave-holdings, the greater frequency and variety of interracial contacts, the slaves' facility with English, access to some education, the more urban character of slavery, and the relatively small number of black people in northern society.” (12:29) Enslaved persons in New England also occupied a peculiar position under law. On the one hand, an enslaved person was “property” to be bought and sold. On the other hand, those enslaved were “persons” under the law, able to sue, to give testimony in court, and to own property. Many years later, New England religious, intellectual and political leaders who did not simply overlook the existence of northern slavery referred to it as a benign institution.⁵

Persons of Color at First Church 1636-1783

Many of the most prominent families in First Church, including two pastors (William

⁵ Melish quotes Jeremy Belknap, founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society: “The condition of our slaves was far from rigorous... (in) the maritime towns, the negroes served either in families or at mechanical employments; and, in either case, they fared no worse than other persons of the same class. In the country, they lived as well as their masters, and often sat down at the same table, in the true style of republican equality.” (17:222) However benign later observers saw slavery in New England, enslaved persons escaped their owners with sufficient regularity to suggest an alternative, less favorable view.

Brattle and Nathaniel Appleton) owned enslaved persons. Information on ownership of enslaved persons at First Church comes from church records from 1696 through 1783.⁶

Early in the 18th century, slave holders throughout Massachusetts, encouraged by Cotton Mather's *The Negro Christianized* (1706), began to have their enslaved servants baptized. Before Mather's book, slave holders had assumed that baptism would be equivalent to manumission, on the theory that all Christians are members of the same community of equals. Mather refuted this position, asserting that slave holders had a Christian duty to convert and educate their enslaved servants, not to free them. "Poor Negroes are under your Government and Protection. You take them into your Family; you look on them as part of your Possessions; and you Expect from their service, a Support, and perhaps an Increase, of your other Possessions. Who can tell but that this Poor Creature May belong to the Election of God. ... (therefore) teach your Negroes the Glorious Gospel. Your Servants will be Better Servants, for being Christian Servants." (17:32)

Once baptisms of enslaved persons began, First Church established different classes of membership. Alexander McKenzie notes that three classes were in use at First Church through the early years of the 18th century:

Persons in full communion. In the 17th century, these were the "freemen" who, as church members, had full civil and religious suffrage. Later, the term came to be applied to anyone admitted to membership with the right to vote, hold office, rent pews, and otherwise fully participate in church affairs.

Persons who owned the covenant in order to their children's being baptized. In the late 17th century, there had been a brief dispute over the legitimacy of infant baptism, settled finally in its favor. Later, many Congregational churches had also accepted the so-called "Half-Way Covenant" that allowed parents who had not joined the church to "own the covenant" (without a personal confession of faith) so that their children might be baptized. This class of membership remained in use until 1828.

Persons adult who owned the covenant and were baptised. McKenzie notes that "(this class of membership) extends to 1782 (one year before slavery in

⁶ First Church records from 1666 show that no enslaved persons were baptized or admitted over the prior decade. Since records for other years between 1636 and 1690 have been lost, we cannot confirm that no enslaved persons were admitted during this later period. However, there were few enslaved persons in Cambridge in the 17th century. Only 56 persons of color lived in Cambridge in 1700 (11:62). Also, the practice of baptizing enslaved persons was rare in Massachusetts before the early 18th century.

Massachusetts was declared unconstitutional) and is quite largely made up of the names of negro servants.” (14:112)

We know of five enslaved persons at First Church who owned the covenant and were baptized between 1698 and 1705, including Scipio, servant to the fifth minister of First Church, William Brattle. (21: various).⁷ In the late 1720s, four more baptisms occurred, three among church members' enslaved servants (including Pompey, an enslaved person owned by Nathaniel Appleton, sixth minister of First Church). Between 1735 and 1745, First Church baptized eighteen enslaved persons. It is not clear why numbers of such baptisms accelerated at this time. One hypothesis links First Church's actions to a general upsurge in baptisms and joinings in Massachusetts that was, in turn, driven by the religious revival, with its relatively more egalitarian Wesleyan views, that swept the region during the First Great Awakening.

This explanation, while it might serve for the newer, more evangelical congregations that gathered during this period, seems an unlikely one for First Church, which was not particularly receptive to Wesleyan evangelism. Paige notes that “(the) Pastor of the Cambridge Church and the Faculty of Harvard College set their faces as a flint against Mr. Whitefield (a prominent Wesleyan preacher from England who joined Jonathan Edwards in evangelizing during the Great Awakening), who had denounced the College and the New England clergy, as teachers of an unsavory and unprofitable religion, and alleged that a large number of grave and learned divines, held in honor and reverence throughout the vicinity, were in fact unconverted and destitute of vital piety. Professor Wigglesworth and others published vigorous replies to Mr. Whitefield, who was finally induced to retract or essentially modify his accusations against the College. Mr. Appleton declined to admit Mr. Whitefield into his pulpit, in accordance.” (19:293)

Between 1745 and 1776, First Church baptized twelve adult enslaved persons and nine infants born to enslaved families. Two cases deserve special mention. First, Jane, “a negro woman of Mr. Kent” who first gained admission to First Church through baptism and owning the covenant in 1753 was, after Mr. Kent’s death, admitted to full communion in 1754, one of only two enslaved persons to achieve this status. (The other was Titus, Harvard President Benjamin Wadsworth’s Indian manservant, admitted in 1729). A second case illustrates the importance our ancestors attached to baptism (preceded by a sincere confession), whether of free or enslaved persons. Nathaniel Appleton adds this note to his record of the baptism in 1768 of “Jane, negro servant of

⁷ Detailed information on baptisms, membership, marriages and deaths taken from reference 21 are displayed at the end of this paper. First Church records follow a pattern, used consistently in the north and in many parts of the south, of designating enslaved persons as “servant,” “manservant,” “negro man,” “negro woman,” “Indian man,” and so on. The terms “slave” or “enslaved” never appear.

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...She was desirous to have that ordnance (baptism) administered. Accordingly, She was propounded to ye Congregation & I delivered by word of mouth her confession for her gross and scandalous Breach of the Seventh Commandment and ye Church voted acceptance of ye same.”

We do not know if she lived to the next Sabbath.

The family of Edmund Trowbridge also took seriously Cotton Mather's plea to provide religious instruction to their enslaved servants. In 1767, First Church baptized Violet with the following note from Nathaniel Appleton in the baptismal record.

“Violet a negro female child born in ye house of the Hon Edmund Trowbridge, who with his Lady undertook for ye religious Education of ye Same if God Should Spare ye life of it. The child being dangerously Ill was Baptized in Private. May 7th the child died.”

Between 1736 and 1778, First Church ministers married five couples, each of which included at least one person of color. Three were enslaved couples. One in 1778, between “a negro freed by Mr. Soley and Jenny a negro lately of Mr. Denute,” united two freed persons. The 1740 marriage of “Simon Cooper and Judith negro servant of Samuel Smith” is intriguing. A case can be made that this was an interracial marriage, because during this period, no enslaved persons, and few who had been freed were referred to in First Church records with last names.

However, there are reasons to reject this argument. Although Paige's genealogy of Cambridge includes a Simon Cooper, great grandson of Deacon John Cooper of First Church, the year of Simon's baptism (1741) makes him an unlikely candidate. (19) Additionally, interracial marriages were illegal in Massachusetts at the time. In 1705, Massachusetts' General Court passed an act that “prohibited anyone English, Scottish or of another Christian nationality from contracting matrimony with any negro or molatto, for the better preventing of a spurious and mixt issue.” It seems hard to believe that an orthodox, established Congregational church would flout the law in this manner.

First Church records begin to include deaths after slavery was declared unconstitutional. Between 1789 and 1825, First Church recorded 41 deaths of persons of color. None could be matched to baptismal/membership records for that time period. It seems likely that death records included persons living in the Cambridge parish, many of whom might have attended services, and some of whom might have simply been known of by First Church members.

What did membership mean for persons of color in 18th century First Church? We have already noted the usual racial distinctions between members admitted “in full communion” and “owning the covenant.” In most Congregational churches, African Americans, free or enslaved, (together with Native Americans and young children) were confined to a separate pew, well away from the center of the building. In the 19th century, this came to be known as the “negro pew.” Segregation within the congregation symbolized the second-class membership status held by persons of color at First Church and other Congregational churches. A person of color had limited or no access to Communion, could not vote at Annual Meeting and could not hold office.

Scanty evidence suggests that before 1756, African Americans at First Church sat in a gallery. Paige recounts discussions that took place between Harvard and First Church between 1753 and 1757 over the construction of a new meetinghouse. “In 1753 the First Parish resolved to erect a new meeting-house, and desired the College to defray a part of the expense; whereupon the corporation voted, Dec. 3, 1753, to pay 'one seventh part of the charge of said house,' provided the students should have the use of the whole front gallery, and at least the third or fourth pew as to the choice set apart for 'the President for the time being and his family.'” The new meetinghouse was completed in 1756, after further negotiations between Harvard and First Church regarding placement of the building and the arrangement of pews and the gallery (which was to be occupied by Harvard students). Paige also notes that a portion of “the mitral part” of the gallery⁸ was relinquished (by Harvard), “provided, that the part we thus cede to the Parish shall not be occupied by the negroes” -- a provision agreed to by First Church. (19: 291, 292) We have no record of how First Church seated persons of color who attended worship following this decision, but First Church continued to baptize persons of color after 1756.

A Note on Native Americans in Massachusetts and First Church

In 1644, the Massachusetts General Court resolved to “civilise” Indians in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. John Eliot, pastor of the Roxbury church, working with Daniel Gookin, Thomas Shepard from First Church and an interpreter, began preaching to neighboring Indian villages in the 1640's. Mr. Shepard apparently shared Eliot's evangelizing zeal. Paige quotes Shepard (19: 386) from his tract entitled “The Clear

⁸ The gallery in the fourth meetinghouse extended around three sides of the sanctuary, at a second story level. At First Church, as in most Puritan churches, enslaved persons, Indians and children would normally be seated in the gallery, far removed from the box pews on the floor of the sanctuary. Under the agreement with Harvard, students would be seated in the central gallery, facing the pulpit. On the floor, prominent white families purchased pews. The choicest (and most expensive) pews were located beneath the gallery. The meaning of “mitral” in this context is unclear. It is possible that a portion of the gallery was beneath or adjacent to an arch (the shape of a miter, a bishop's hat), but this is pure speculation.

Sunshine of the Gospel breaking forth upon the Indians in New England," printed at London, 1648: "As soone as ever the fiercenesse of the winter was past, March 3, 1647, I went out to Noonanetum to the Indian Lecture, where Mr. Wilson, Mr. Allen of Dedham, Mr. Dunster, beside many other Christians were present."

Over time, Eliot learned to speak and write Algonquian, and by 1646 he was preaching in that tongue. Eliot and Shepard established the first Indian mission station in Nonantum (now a village in Newton). Eliot also founded towns of "Praying Indians" in Natick. Eliot's high hopes for the conversion of Native Americans in Massachusetts are expressed in his instructions, written about 1658, for gathering Native American churches:

"When we purpose to gather the Gospel Visible church in any of the Indian Towns or Parishes, we first appoint a day to keep a solemn Fast, and all the Inhabitants (whose hearts Christ hath made willing) to keep that day in fasting and prayer, to confess all their sins, both former and latter, and especially that sin of Drunkenness and loveing strong Drink, and to promise to GOD and to each other to reforme that sin and all other scandalous evils, by the Assistance of the Good Spirit of Jesus Christ, in the use of discipline. A convenient season after this, on a Sabbath day, six, seven, or eight, more or less, of these penitents shall agree to gather a Gospel Visible Church. (The process of joining) Every penitent confessor agreed on shall personally make his Oral confession of his Faith, Doctrinal and Experimental, by rehearsing the Covenanting confession, as for matter, in such a serious and Reverent manner, as may make it to appear that his confession of Faith cometh from his heart sincerely." (6:1)

In 1661, Eliot published the New Testament in Algonquian, the first Bible printed in New England. The Cambridge Platform and other Congregational texts were also translated. (14:110) In the 1660s, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (based in England) established an "Indian College" near the Harvard campus. Apparently, the College only graduated one person, "Caleb Cheeshateumuck, Indus," 1665. (19:399) Daniel Gookin observed, "The design...was prudent, noble, and good; but it proved ineffectual... The awful providences of God (frustrated) the hopeful expectations concerning the learned Indian youth, who were designed to be for teachers unto their countrymen."

All these efforts at evangelism and education came to nothing after King Phillip's War (1675-1676). As had been the custom since the Pequot War in the 1630s, Massachusetts shipped all male Native American captives to slavery to the West Indies. Inhabitants of the Natick villages, though loyal to the colonists during the war, were interned on Deer

Island for some time after the war before being returned to Natick. Many of Massachusetts' remaining Native Americans gradually moved west out of the Colony. Of those who remained and intermarried with escaped enslaved Africans, tribal identity disappeared, with white Americans labeling children of all "mixed" marriages as black.

At First Church, three enslaved Native Americans owned the covenant and were baptized between 1696 and 1830: in 1727, "Joseph English, an Indian manservant living with William Russell"; in 1729, "Titus, Indian Servant of Pres. Wadsworth"; and in 1740, "Lucy, an Indian servant of Mr. Bordman." In addition, Titus later joined "in full communion," one of only three persons of color admitted under this category before 1830. (21)

Abolition of Northern Slavery, Colonization Initiatives and the Growth of Racial Prejudice in the North: 1783-1828

Abolition of slavery in Massachusetts came late in the 18th century, preceded by a public anti-slavery movement that was relatively muted, in contrast to the noisy, divisive efforts in the north to promote abolition of southern slavery during the early 19th century. Among the major speakers against slavery in Massachusetts was Nathaniel Appleton, son of First Church minister Nathaniel Appleton. Von Rohr cites Appleton (the younger) in a 1767 pamphlet *Considerations on Slavery*, which described the horrors of the slave trade and the cruelties inflicted on slaves, urging the case for abolition on purely human grounds of compassion.

Appleton denounced the hypocrisy of slavery during the time when white colonists were engaged in a struggle for liberty. (23:239) However, Appleton added an economic argument to his moral condemnation, asserting that the presence of enslaved persons idled the white poor who could provide cheap labor. And in a final note that foreshadows 19th century racialist views of Emerson, Theodore Parker and other abolitionists, Appleton asserts that it would be imprudent to "blacken these fair northern climates, as the West Indies are black." (20:116) Melish summarizes 18th century abolitionism in New England: "...pre-Revolutionary antislavery protest structured the problem as one of the presence or absence of enslaved Africans, of introducing closure to the process of open-ended increase in their numbers and in fact reducing their physical presence by attrition of one kind or another...implicitly (equating) ending slavery with eliminating people of African descent." (17:53)

Enslaved persons in Massachusetts had certain rights under the law, a fact that contributed to slavery's abolition in the Commonwealth. In the late 18th century, an enslaved Massachusetts man, Quok Walker, brought suit against his former owner. After

a series of lower court rulings unfavorable to Walker, Chief Justice John D. Cushing of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court held that “without resorting to implication in constructing the constitution, slavery is in my judgment as effectively abolished as it can be by the granting of rights and privileges wholly incompatible and repugnant to its existence.” (11:65) In support of his ruling, Cushing drew on human rights language in the recently approved Massachusetts Constitution, drafted by John Adams, which held that all men are “created equal” (replacing the phrase “created equally free” in an earlier draft of the Constitution that had been rejected by Massachusetts voters).⁹ Of all the New England states, only Vermont ratified a constitution, in 1777, that explicitly outlawed slavery. Slavery remained legal in Connecticut and Rhode Island until the 1830s. The judicial approach to abolition of slavery in Massachusetts proceeded “in a manner so ambiguous, with results so protracted, as to merit consideration as a form of ‘gradual emancipation.’ ” (17:64)

Appleton and other Massachusetts abolitionists in the 18th century had assumed that emancipation would revive the Puritan vision of Massachusetts as a “shining city on a hill,” re-conceived, after 150 years of slavery in New England, as a society without persons of color. But a small (and growing) population of freed enslaved persons remained in the Commonwealth after 1783. In the early 19th century, this fact provoked efforts at colonization and re-settlement, new legal restrictions on freed persons of color, and mob action against communities of persons of color in Massachusetts cities.

The American Colonization Society was founded to encourage freed black persons to emigrate and ultimately to convince slaveholders to emancipate their enslaved persons and send them to West Africa. The effect of this would be to remove black people from America and to establish an American Christian foothold in West Africa. McKivigan notes that “(before) the 1820s, the old Congregational establishment had given only modest support to emancipation programs in its home regions. In the following years (Congregationalists) discriminated against northern free blacks and had endorsed colonization schemes.” (15:26)

According to Melish, “(literal) attempts to reduce the black populations in New England cities and towns included targeting people of color for ‘warning out’ as undesirables under the legal settlement laws; taxing their presence; advocating their wholesale transportation to Africa under the aegis of the American Colonization Society...” (17:165) In 1788, the Massachusetts legislature passed a vagrancy law that required the expulsion of all African Americans who were not citizens of the state. Over the next several years, 158 free persons of color were “warned out” of the state. (17:101) In addition, Boston became the hub of a vicious campaign using “broadsides” to ridicule

⁹ As chair of a Constitutional Committee of 30, Adams received his charge to redraft the constitution from 250 prominent citizens gathered in First Church in Cambridge in September of 1779. (massmoments.org)

the physical characteristics, social behavior and institutions of black persons. Mobs led violent attacks against communities of color in Boston and other Northern cities during the 1820s.

First Church in Cambridge: 1783-1828

A dramatic drop in the number of persons of color baptized at First Church after 1783 suggests that white church members did not believe that Mather's admonition applied to freed formerly-enslaved persons. Once slavery was declared unconstitutional, First Church admitted to membership only three more persons of color between 1783 and 1830. Two were admitted under the old designation of "owning the covenant": Cato, in 1809, "admitted at the alms house" and Cuba Vassal, in 1812, "admitted by her own desire, in private, dangerously ill." Only Diana Steed, "a black woman," was admitted "in full communion" in 1822.

The missionary dimension of colonization appealed to Congregational churches (including First Church), which had begun to send and support missions in the first two decades of the 19th century. Most of the missionary focus at First Church during these years was outside New England. The constitution of the First Church Missionary Sewing Circle, established in 1819, calls on the members to "meet to spend at least three hours in some industrious employment, the avail of which shall be appropriate to the clothing of heathens or Indian children, under the care of missionaries." The society forbade membership to those "who do not believe all the truths and declarations of the Bible" and to anyone "guilty of immoral conduct." This society maintained a relationship for over 50 years with missionaries to the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands, a popular destination for Congregational missionaries during this period. The Circle occasionally heard talks from returning missionaries and once heard from a Christianized Cherokee man. (10: various)

Radical and Gradual Abolitionist Movements in New England: 1829-1860

Throughout the 1820s, emancipation was not an issue of importance to New England Congregationalists. Many supported the American Colonization Society's efforts to convince freed black persons to resettle in West Africa. But in 1829, William Lloyd Garrison, in a public lecture at Park Street Church on Independence Day, challenged American Christians to reject colonization schemes: "I call upon the ambassadors of Christ everywhere to make known this proclamation: Thus saith the Lord God of the Africans, let this people go, that they may serve me."

Garrison made four propositions: 1. Enslaved persons in America deserve “the prayers, and sympathies, and charities of the American people.” 2. Non-slave holding states are “constitutionally involved in the guilt of slavery” and must “assist in its overthrow.” 3. Slavery is not justified, by law or by religion. 4. Enslaved persons of color in America should be freed, educated, and accepted as equal citizens with whites. However, Smallidge notes that “(while) Garrison in his speech had pointed out major flaws in orthodox Congregationalist views on slavery, he had also agreed with the church’s view that gradual abolitionism was the best solution to slavery,” a position he almost immediately regretted and, within two years, publicly abandoned and replaced by a radical demand for immediate emancipation. (22:32)

Garrison and other radical abolitionists (or “destructivists,” in the jargon of the time) demanded immediate rather than gradual emancipation and called on the northern churches to declare slavery a sin and cut ties with southern churches.

Clergy and laity in many of the established New England churches, representing the “gradualists” or “reformers,” pushed back. McKivigan notes that the “American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and most of the orthodox clergy were hostile to immediate abolition. Many feared it would quench the flames of revival stoked during the Second Great Awakening in the early years of the 19th century.” (15:132) Smallidge notes “...the (Board’s) report from 1845 is particularly telling of the need to compromise when it came to the missionaries’ dilemma over how to denounce slavery and at the same time not abandon the southern missionary outposts, especially those involved with Native Americans.” (22:7) McKivigan adds that “denominations that had already removed slave holding as a result of northern emancipation, such as the Congregationalists, felt little need to endorse abolitionist principles. (Although) some local congregations seconded abolitionist demands (to) cease all forms of fellowship with churches with slave holding affiliations, the New England state Congregational associations refused... (T)he most influential clergy and laymen continued to express hope that programs of colonization and amelioration could end slavery without the disruptions...that immediate abolition might cause.” (15:48,54)

Interestingly, the most principled public stand taken by the Massachusetts Congregational Association against radical abolition involved women’s rights. In May 1837, the feminist and abolitionist sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke set out to lecture to the women of New England on abolitionism. In July 1837, the clergy responded with a *Pastoral Letter of the General Association of Massachusetts to the Congregational Churches Under Their Care* declaring that when “a woman assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer...her character becomes unnatural.” The letter urged that all lectures in Congregational churches by any but ordained ministers be barred.

(gutenberg.org)

We need to recognize that zeal for abolition did not exclude views that reflected strong personal prejudice and racism. Horton and Horton point out that “(many) white abolitionists were unwilling to advocate black voting rights, and few promoted the social integration of the races. Boston's Wendell Phillips confessed to feeling uncomfortable sharing a room with black fellow abolitionists on lecture tours, Abbott Lawrence refused to shake the hand of a black man, and Edmund Quincy insensitively told racist jokes at antislavery meetings.” (12:221)

Melish notes that Emerson, though opposed to slavery on somewhat abstract grounds, also confidently predicted “the dark man, the black man declines. ...It will happen by & by, that the black man will only be destined for museums like the Dodo.” (17:218) And Theodore Parker, a prominent Boston minister and committed abolitionist, preached that “the Anglo-Saxon people...is the best specimen of mankind which has ever attained great power in the world...” (17:221)

Although most orthodox, established Congregational churches in Massachusetts supported the gradualist argument, some took principled stands on immediate abolition. Paige reports that members of the Second Evangelical Church which was gathered in Cambridge on March 30, 1842 “at the easterly corner of Austin and Temple streets...were zealous advocates of the immediate abolition of slavery.” (19:326) The members of Bethany Congregational Church in Quincy had strong feelings about total abstinence of the use and sale of “ardent spirits”, the observance of the Sabbath, and strict regulations on slave holding, withholding fellowship from those who engaged in it. In 1842, when it was not only unpopular but almost dangerous to do so, this congregation rented its meeting house for lectures on the abolition of slavery. Over a century later, in 1954, the first black person in the history of the State Conference was elected moderator at its annual meeting convening at Bethany church.”

(quincybethanychurch.org)

St. John’s Congregational Church (Springfield), one of the oldest active Black Churches in New England, was founded in 1848 and was known as “Free Church.” Its first pastor, the Rev. Leonard Collins, defended the right of Blacks to organize their own churches in a debate against Frederick Douglass. Douglass eventually came to accept the importance of establishing Black churches. John Brown attended St. John's while living in Springfield. (sjkb.org) According to their websites, Trinitarian Church, Wayland, (tccwayland.org), First Congregational Church in Rockland (firstchurchrockland.org) and the Evangelical Congregational Church, Grafton (eccgrafton.com) invited speakers on abolition, passed resolutions condemning slavery and lobbied Congress on

antislavery issues.

In addition to Garrison's speech on abolition, Park Street had hosted an antislavery lecture series, begun in 1823, dedicated to raising funds for African missions. However, Park Street also illustrates the racism that often prevailed among abolitionist individuals and institutions in New England. Englizian recounts the following: "(A Negro), through a commercial transaction with a white person in 1830, became owner of a pew on the central aisle of Park Street Church. Soon afterward, he occupied the pew on Sunday with his family. Although permitted to remain that day, the church trustees informed him that it would be impossible for him to hold the pew. His appearance and that of his family in that fashionable house of worship was accounted by all Boston as an outrage scarcely less flagrant than would have been the use of a pew as a pigpen. In a church business meeting immediately after this incident, the following action was adopted: The Prudential Committee is requested to consider the expediency of so altering the deeds of pews as to prevent colored persons procuring deeds of the same." (7:132, 133)

First Church in the Antebellum Period (1829 - 1860)

For the most part, First Church does not appear to have been part of the great debate over abolition. However, Nehemiah Adams, First Church's ninth minister (1829-1834), advocated positions on abolition so gradualist that they verged on support of slavery. Called in 1829 as co-pastor with Abiel Holmes after the Congregational/Unitarian split and remaining as senior minister for three years after Holmes left, Adams was a fiery evangelist and confirmed Unitarian fighter. In a letter to his parents (July 30, 1829), musing over his desire for a call to a Boston church, Adams wrote "I hoped the Boston people wish to put me into their mortar like a bomb and throw me over into the unitarian fort to blow them up." (3) He probably saw First Church as a stepping stone to Boston, hence his short tenure in Cambridge. In 1834, he left to become minister at the Essex Street Congregational Church, but not after warning the congregation in his Farewell Sermon at First Church that "some of you to whom I have preached the Gospel, there is at present reason to fear, will not be offered a happy eternity."¹⁰

We have no evidence that Adams' views on abolition were fully formed or forcefully expressed while he was at First Church. However, over the thirty years leading up to the Civil War, he developed a sympathetic view of the south and southern slave holding society. In 1854, he spent a year on a plantation in South Carolina, an experience that

¹⁰ Adams' pugnaciousness was in full play once he arrived in Boston. He preached sermons condemning Unitarianism, arguing that a Unitarian cannot achieve salvation. He also refused to approve the transfer of several of his congregation to the new Payson Church, prompting a well-documented battle by letter with Payson's Rev. J.H. Fairchild. (1)

led to the publication of *A South-Side View of Slavery*, an apology that drew strong attacks from abolitionists. Adams' response to his critics appeared in *The Sable Cloud*, written in the first year of the Civil War. In it, Adams mocks northern "liberals" ("destructivists") for their hypocritical combination of virulent anti-slavery rhetoric and personal anti-black prejudice. In a hypothetical dialogue with a northern abolitionist, Adams argues: "Now suppose...that God chooses to supply this nation with menial servants to the end of time. Suppose that he has designed that one race, the African, should be that source from which he will draw this supply...and that for permanence of the relation ...there should be 'ownership' such as he himself claimed when he prescribed the boring of the ear.? (Leviticus 25) For my part, I cannot see in this the sum of all villainies...I am not arguing for slavery (but) who will say that the tenure of 'ownership' may not be the wisest and most benevolent arrangement for all concerned?" (5:243)

From 1835 to the Civil War, there is no evidence that First Church or its minister John Adams Albro, took active part in the abolitionist movement or the controversies surrounding federal judicial and legislative moves to protect southern slave owners' "property rights" and deny enslaved persons basic human rights. Alexander McKenzie, called as eleventh minister of First Church in 1867, began keeping a daily journal in 1846. From it, we learn little about his views on the major issues of the day beyond a brief notation following a speech by Charles Sumner on January 10, 1849: "(attended) the lecture of Charles Sumner...on the Law of Progress. Thought slavery was not the bulwark of the American Constitution. ...Mr. Sumner's eloquence and impressive manner, and the novelty and truth of his remarks and quotations, drew for him strict attention." (13: January 10, 1849) Beyond this brief note, McKenzie is silent on the turbulent political events leading up to the Civil War.

War and Reconstruction 1861-1873

On January 4, 1861, designated as a "national day of fasting", Alexander McKenzie wrote in his journal: "The times are full of trouble. People North and South are excited. Slavery is, as usual, the bone of contention. States are seceding, violence is apprehended. There is certainly danger of civil war. God only can deliver: to him we turn. God save our land and keep us a united people glorifying himself through us." (13: January 4, 1861) He did not comment further on the war or its progress until President Lincoln's assassination: "The nation shocked this morning by the news of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Prest. US.... Prest. was shot at a theatre in Wash.... A good, great man...The friend of his country...the emancipator of a race." McKenzie offered the opening prayer at a memorial service in Cambridge on April 16, and participated in a procession and services on April 17, the day of Lincoln's funeral. (13: April 14, 1865) Two years later, in 1867, Alexander McKenzie was called as the

eleventh minister of First Church.

First Church groups worked to support the war effort and in relief of newly freed enslaved persons. During the war, the Missionary Sewing Circle at First Church turned from sewing for “the heathen and Indian children” to sewing “flannel shirts for the soldiers.” In 1865, they appear to have taken up the freedman’s cause, reporting that they “sewed for the coloured people.” (10) From the minutes of the Freedman’s Aid Society (a First Church women’s group, formed largely to sew for freedmen and other causes): October 3, 1867. “Met at Mrs. George Sanders’. Fifty-three present. Sewed for the Freedmen.” This group also sewed for the inmates of the Freedman’s Home and for the Home Mission Society. (9)

In 1864, before the war’s end, First Church, along with Christ Church Episcopal, Old Cambridge Baptist Church and the Harvard College Chapel, joined together in the Old Cambridge Freedman’s Aid Society, an ecumenical organization that was a branch of the New England Freedman’s Aid Society. The secretary, in the Society’s First Annual Report, November 29, 1865, wrote: “About a year ago, we met to form ourselves into an Association for the purpose of aiding a lately enslaved people, now for the first time to take their rightful place in the country as free-men. For this day of their liberty, many friends of that enslaved race had watched and waited in faith and hope, and now that the dawn had come, wished that all should join hands for the sake of making this deliverance truly freedom to them. The object in view had been to educate the freed people in taking care of themselves, to give them the rudiments of useful knowledge, to make them ready to enter upon this new life, and meanwhile to help their sick, their feeble and infirm...” (18) The Society collected money for the New England Educational Commission for Freedmen and supported teachers in new schools serving the children of former enslaved persons in the south.

The minutes from December 21, 1864, record that “Prof Childs (recommended) the society to undertake the support of a teacher (Miss Carter) in Washington, it being very desirable to have, if possible, a model colony in a city where so many visitors are brought together ...” The Washington project implemented the “Industrial Branch” of the Freedman’s Society’s educational program, focused on “useful” skills (sewing, weaving for women and children). In 1865, the Society took on the support of a teacher in Charleston, SC. In contrast to the Washington program that focused on “useful” knowledge, the South Carolina schools taught reading and arithmetic to children of freed enslaved persons. The society sent clothing and other supplies to Miss Carter in Washington and, at the peak of its efforts in 1868, supported three other teachers in and around Charleston with financial assistance and supplies.

Enthusiasm for these educational efforts waned in the north, even as demand for them increased. In 1868, the secretary of the Old Cambridge Freedman's Aid Society was pained to report that “although with many of our friends, the interest in the cause continued unabated, we are obliged to record a sensible decrease of interest as indicated in the amount of subscriptions.” In 1869, the Society acknowledged a report from Miss Hosley in South Carolina that “(there has been) very commendable progress among the coloured people generally – improvement in manners together with increase in means.” However, the secretary admitted that “(our) treasury is nearly empty and our pledges are yet unfulfilled.” The secretary also reported that “(the New England Freedman's Aid Society), with the feeling that its work is nearly finished, will close its labors in July next.” (18) Although the New England Freedman's Aid Society ended its work in 1870, the Old Cambridge branch continued through 1873. The Society continued to support one teacher, but by 1873 only seven members attended the annual meeting (down from a peak membership in 1868 of around 200), and the treasurer reported \$85 in the bank.

McKivigan sums up the programs launched by northern churches to help newly freed enslaved persons after the war: “Despite an energetic beginning, the northern churches' commitment to assisting the freedmen began to falter even before the end of Reconstruction. Even the American Missionary Association finally succumbed to a segregationist policy for its schools at the behest of northern Congregationalists, who provided most of the society's funds and who desired to shift their missionary efforts to southern whites.” (15:199)

Conclusion

Over its first 240 years, First Church preserved a Congregational orthodoxy, rooted in our Puritan beginnings, that made the congregation resistant to the evangelical enthusiasm of two Great Awakenings and slow to address the challenges of abolition and a growing Massachusetts population of free persons of color. With few exceptions, First Church ministers and the organizations within the congregation most involved in external missions adhered to whatever middle ground was appropriate to the time. A strong sense of charity was evident, particularly in the 19th century. First Church groups participated in Freedman's relief after the Civil War and supported foreign and domestic missions throughout the antebellum period.

We have very little definitive to say about numbers and participation of persons of color at First Church during this period. When First Church members owned enslaved persons in the 17th and 18th centuries, several were baptized and admitted to a kind of second-class membership, common to most Congregational churches of the time. In 1756, First Church excluded black persons from the gallery, at Harvard's request. After

Massachusetts determined slavery to be unconstitutional in 1783, the number of persons of color baptized and admitted to membership dropped dramatically. Indeed, there were diminishing incentives for persons of color to attend or join white churches in the 19th century. Most Congregational churches maintained segregated “negro pews” through the end of the Civil War. Mr. Adams pastorate, immediately after the Unitarian split, cannot have provided a welcoming environment at First Church for persons of color. Increasingly, black families found more welcoming options in the growing number of predominantly black churches in New England.

In many ways, First Church mirrored the beliefs and practices of other orthodox, established Congregational churches in New England. As the historical core of civil and religious life in Puritan New England, these churches were slow to challenge the social or political order in later years. Keeping to a “middle way” in theology and politics probably gave First Church a degree of stability that helped preserve it as a gathered congregation over 240 years. At the same time, First Church and many other Congregational churches remained on the sidelines in the great debates over abolition and did little or nothing to stem the rising tide of racism and prejudice toward persons of color that emerged in the north, after northern emancipation. Discernment of the boundaries between “we” of the covenanting community and “they” -- increasingly defined in racial terms -- became more rather than less restrictive over this period.

First Church in Cambridge
375 Years on the Way
Owning Our History: First Church and Race 1636-1871

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Persons of Color at First Church: 1698-1830

as noted in the records of First Church in Cambridge

During the Years of Legal Slavery in Massachusetts

Persons Adult Who Owned the Covenant and Were Baptized

- 1698 Phillip, a negro servant of ye Mr. Danforth
- 1705 Mingo and Charles, ye negro servants of Mr. Town
- Jeffery, ye negro servant of Mr. Goff
- Scipio (Wm. Brattle's) Servant
- 1727 Joseph English, an Indian manservant living with William Russell
- 1728 Pompey, (Nathaniel Appleton's) negro manservant
- 1729 Rosa, Negro Maid Servant of A. Bordman,
- 1735 Margarett a Molatto Servant of ye widow Oliver
- 1736 Hannibal, servant of Dr. Wigglesworth
- 1739 Roger, a negro manservant of Henry Prentice
- Zillah, negro servant of Major Brattle
- 1740 Lucy, an Indian servant of Mr. Bordman
- Venus, a negro servant of Madam Wadsworth
- Cuffy, negro Servant of Lieut. Gouvernor Phipps
- Toby, servant of Samuel Whitemore
- 1741 Jack, Negro servant of ye Widow Tufts
- Cuffy, servant of Mr. Judah Monis
- Flora, negro servant of Mr. Foxcroft
- York, a negro servant of Mr. Trowbridge
- Hannibal negro of Dr. Wigglesworth
- Roger, Negro of Henry Prentice
- Rose, negro of Mr. Bordman
- 1744 Harry, a negro servant of Mr. Brandon who lives at my (Appleton's) house
- 1745 Rose, a negro servant of Lieut. Gourvernor Phipps

- Cato, a negro servant of Madam Brown
- 1749 Leos, negro man servant of Mr. Foxcroft
- 1753 Jane, negro woman of Mr. Kent, who is Hannibal's wife
- 1755 James, negro servant of Lieut. Gov. Phipps
- 1760 Peter, negro servant of Moses Bordman's widow
- 1761 Cato, negro servant 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...She was desirous to have that ordnance (baptism) administered. Accordingly, She was propounded to ye Congregation & I delivered by word of mouth her confession for her gross and scandalous Breach of the Seventh Commandment and ye Church voted acceptance of ye same.

- Violet a negro woman of Mr. Faneuil
- 1769 Philip, negro servant of Elizabeth Nutting
- Philip, a negro servant of Mr. Abraham Watson
- 1771 Jerusha, a negro woman living with Lieut. John Dickson
- Anne, a negro servant of Jonathan Hastings, Esq.
- 1776 Dilla, a negro servant of Samuel White of Watertown (As with Jane, Dilla was baptized at White's home.)

Admitted to Full Communion

- 1729 Titus, an Indian servant of Pres. Wadsworth
- 1754 Jane, first admitted in 1753 owning the covenant, was admitted to full communion in 1754, listed as a “negro woman of Widow Kent.”

During the Years After Slavery in Massachusetts

Persons Adult Who Owned the Covenant and Were Baptized

- 1809 Cato – a black man at the alms house
- 1812 Cuba Vassal (Negro woman) by her own desire (in private, dangerously ill)

Admitted to Full Communion

- 1822 Dianah Steed (a black woman)

Baptized Infants

- 1753 Gerald of Hannibal, Dr. Wigglesworth's Negro Man
- 1754 Hannibal of Hannibal, Dr. Wigglesworth's Negro Man
Bial daughter of Jane, a negro woman of Mrs. Kents, by Hannibal, her husband lately deceased
- 1760 Jane of Peter a Negro Servant of ye widow of Moses Boardman, by Mrs. Kents negro Woman, his wife
- 1763 Ezekiel, a Son & Achsay, a daughter of Simon Barjona, a Negro Freeman
- 1767 Violet a negro female child born in ye house of the Hon Edmund Trowbridge, who with his Lady undertook for ye religious Education of ye Same if God Should Spare ye life of it. The child being dangerously Ill was Baptized in Private. May 7th the child died.
- 1771 Rose a negro Child of Jack and Anne, a negro woman of Mr. Hastings
- 1774 Cato of Anne Negro Servant of Jonathan Hastings Esq
- 1777 Mary of Violet a Negro woman of Mr. Faneuil

Marriages of Persons of Color at First Church

- 1736 Primus, Mr. James Oliver's Negro Man and Flora, Mr. Foxcroft's Negro Woman
- 1738 Cuffy and Zillah, both of ye Negro Servants of his Honour Col. Phipps
- 1740 Simon Cooper and Judith negro servant of Samuel Smith.
- 1771 Jack a negro servant of William Tufts, Ann a negro servant of Johnathan Hastings Esq
- 1778 Charlestown a negro freed by Mr. Soley and Jenny a negro lately of Mr Denute
- 1811 Charles Leno and Seney Rogers (Blacks)
- 1817 Henry Felsed and Affa Nichols (Blacks)
- 1822 John Levi and Sophia Lewis (persons of Color)

Deaths of Persons of Color, First Church Records¹¹

- 1789 Caesar, a Negro man Servant to President Willard, aged about 40
Mark, a Negro man in the service of Judge Lee, aged 22
- 1792 Neptune Frost (black)
- 1795 Infant of Jethro Gardner (Negro), suddenly; William, child of Jethro Gardner (suddenly)
- 1797 Cato Bordman (Negro)
Prudence (Negro)
- 1798 Peter (a Negro), consumption
Mark (Negro), consumption, a stranger
Jacob Russell (Negro)
Anningdine (Negro, Mr Stedman's)
Frank Freeman, a Negro
Sylvia Mason (a mulatto)
- 1799 Belinda, Negro (lived with T. Mason)
Nancy, Negro, daughter of Mingo Russell
- 1800 Russell (Negro)
- 1801 a negro girl (at Mrs. Lee's)
Juno Lee (negro woman)
Juba lee (negro)
- 1802 Nancy Vassall (negro)
Thankful Gardner (negro)
- 1805 Domingo Russell (Negro)
- 1807 John Jackson (Negro)
- 1808 Mark Lewis (Negro)
Bathsheba Frost (Negro)
- 1811 Briah Crosby (Negro)

¹¹ Deaths were not included in First Church records until the 18th century. As with marriages, recorded deaths represented persons known to have lived in the parish, not necessarily church members. In fact, none of the reported deaths can be linked to any names of persons of color who were baptized and owned the covenant during this period.

- Anthony Vassall (Negro)
- 1812 Christine Waters (Negro)
- Cuba Vassall (Negro)
- 1814 Infant child of. (illegible) (black)
- Rosanna Morris (black)
- 1815 Cato, form a sevt of Mr. Bossinger Foster
- 1817 Infant of Violet Cassimere (black)
- 1818 Infant of Mary Nickels (black)
- daught of Harry Felstead (black)
- 1821 Infant of Harry Felstead (blk)
- 1822 Eliza Lenox (blk)
- 1823 Infant of Harry Felstead (blk)
- Dianah Steed, black woman
- Sylvia Morris (black)
- Infant of Harry Felstead (blk)
- 1825 Venus Whittemore (black woman)