



Black Springfield: A Historical Study

Item Type	Article
Authors	Kazini, Imani
Download date	2025-07-21 19:18:58
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7394

Imani Kazani

BLACK SPRINGFIELD: A HISTORICAL STUDY

This study is dedicated to my brothers and sisters in Springfield whom I love dearly. I hope that we can use this work as a jumping off place to develop the Black community of Springfield as a hip place to be.

The Colonial Period

Springfield was founded in 1636 by William Pynchon, an influential and respected leader of the Puritans. Followed by his friends, he sought a place away from Roxbury, Massachusetts where they would have greater freedom to practice the Puritan religion. Although these Puritans believed strongly in freedom for themselves, this philosophy didn't apply to black men. John Pynchon, son of William Pynchon, is the first person on record as having black slaves in Springfield. Records indicate that he owned at least one female and one male slave. Upon his death among his list of valuables was his slave, Tom.¹

For some, the presence of slaves in Massachusetts would seem unbelievable. The fact is, that New England slave trade of the seventeenth century seems to have been centered almost wholly in Massachusetts.² "While it is true that the vast majority of the slaves taken from Africa by New England traders were left in the West Indies . . . there was sufficient demand on the part of the Puritan masters to cause some of them to be brought to New England."³

Note: The following is the opening chapter from an undergraduate senior thesis prepared by a student in the W. E. B. DuBois Department. The study covers the history of the Black community of Springfield, Massachusetts from colonial times to the present. The rest of the study will appear in subsequent issues.

The Editors

Puritans gave the institution of slavery triple sanction. Economically, they *rationalized* it because of the chronic labor shortage in the growing colony. In addition, indentured servants were far more expensive than perpetual slave labor. Spiritually, they thought of Blacks as, "heathen people whose souls were doomed to eternal perdition. . . ." ⁴ They felt superior to the black race which they regarded as culturally primitive and immoral. Resulting, was the easy passage of the Body of Liberties in 1641 in Massachusetts which gave slavery the sanction of law.

While historians point out that slaves of Puritan masters did not feel the merciless oppression that slaves in the South felt, ⁵ there is proof that life under the Puritans was not entirely pleasant.

Jack, a runaway slave from Wethersfield, Connecticut arrived in Springfield in 1681 claiming that his master sometimes beat him with 100 blows. He was imprisoned in Springfield and records show that he was still there at least one year later. ⁶ In nearby Longmeadow, Massachusetts, Cato, another black slave drowned himself in a well after repeated whippings from his master. ⁷

The slave woman of John Pynchon became pregnant and accused an Englishman by the name of Cornish of being responsible. He managed to escape town but she was whipped and fined. ⁸ Another case in 1680 involved a slave named Roco who received 15 lashes for having sex with a white woman who he testified had tempted him. ⁹

While it is true that some of this punishment was due to infringements of the Puritan moral codes, many of the punishments were based on the infringement of a certain code of behavior set down for black slaves. Such laws as the one in 1693 which made the sale of liquor to black people illegal and the one passed in 1705 which prohibited marriage and sex acts between black and white persons indicate that there were special codes of behavior and special punishment for Blacks.

By the mid 1700's there seems to have been no more than 40 slaves in Springfield mostly owned by prominent and affluent people who could afford them. One such owner was Jedediah Bliss for whom a street was named. He owned a half dozen or so slaves, among whom were Prince, Peter, Pompey, Cambridge, and Presence. ¹⁰ Another was Reverend Robert Breck, ancestor of the present-day wealthy hair products family. He died in 1784 leaving his slave attendant, Pompey to his wife. ¹¹

Freedom of the 1800's

The abolition of slavery in the Bay State was achieved in 1791. The spirit of liberty in the Revolutionary War was partially responsible for the abolition. Appealing to the revolutionary spirit of white people “. . . Negroes themselves were petitioning the General Court of Massachusetts for their freedom on the grounds that it was their natural right.”¹²

One historian concluded that, “the legislation which abolished slavery in Massachusetts transformed the state into a haven for fugitive slaves.”¹³ There are indeed many accounts of runaway slaves moving to Springfield during the 1800's. John N. Howard was a slave born in 1822, near Baltimore, Maryland and escaped along with his slave sweetheart from another plantation. They found their way to Springfield where they lived until the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law.¹⁴ For fear of being recaptured they fled to Canada.

After experiencing the extreme degradation prevalent in the rest of the country, freedmen as well as fugitives ventured to Springfield. Thomas Thomas was born a slave in Maryland in 1817. After purchasing his freedom by hiring out his labor, he travelled about performing all types of jobs. As a hotel worker in Springfield, Illinois, he once met Abraham Lincoln. As a free Black travelling in the deep South, he experienced numerous problems, so he ultimately moved to Springfield, Massachusetts where he joined his mother and sister.¹⁵

Primus Mason is an example of a free black man who fared rather well in Springfield in the early 1800's. He was born in 1817 just north of Springfield in a town called Monson. Coming from a family of seven children, he had to work and earn his own way. Menial jobs were to be found in Springfield and after a time he was able to save enough for a journey to California. His search for gold proved fruitless so he returned to Springfield and began investing his money in property. He was one of the major property owners in the then undeveloped area around the site of the Springfield Armory, now the heart of the black community. He increased his fortune by raising hogs.

During the height of his real estate ventures he sold a triangle of property on the Hill to the city for a very small sum. He also practically gave (selling it for only \$1.00) to the city another parcel adjoining this triangle on which a fire station was built. It happens

to be the present center of the black community and activity. He is perhaps best known for his bequest at his death of his estate worth \$29,451.95 to the establishment of a home for aged men which stands and flourishes today. Ironically, this home has traditionally had no black men in it although it alleges that, "from its beginning the Home has always had some colored men in its family but they usually prefer to be cared for among their own people and the trustees of the Home pay for their care."¹⁶

There seemed to be ever present in Springfield a certain percentage of white residents who were of assistance to and concerned with the black population. This perhaps stemmed from the revolutionary spirit of the times and possibly the gallant performance and service of black soldiers in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. A particular example of their benevolence is the group purchase of a female runaway slave. In 1808 a Dutchman from New York State showed up in Springfield to claim his runaway slave, Jenny and her son. She was living with her husband Jack in the area on the hill called "Hayti" where she worked as a washerwoman for the local white residents and also served spruce beer to travelers along Boston Road (now State Street). A number of people contributed a total of \$100 for her purchase so she could remain. Her son, however, had to gain his freedom by escaping into the woods of Wilbraham where he stayed.¹⁷

To a limited extent, Springfield may have been a "haven" for fugitives, it certainly was not a "heaven" for black people as it was for the white population. By 1830 Springfield had become the industrial center for Western Massachusetts. Springfield was adjacent to the Connecticut River whose water power was a real attraction to industry of all types. In 1830, there were 73 machine shops, 6 cotton factories, 3 paper mills, 4 printing shops, a sword factory among others. The Springfield Armory which produced the Springfield rifle established in 1794 was also the most prominent employer. It does not seem that black people were able to benefit from the jobs these industries represented. Primus Mason and most other black people were *reported* as having only menial and odd jobs.

The early 19th century was also marked by the settlement of "Hayti." This was a tract of land from State Street to Bay Road in the now Winchester Square area. It was described as consisting of yellow pine trees and Negro cabins.¹⁸ The land was owned and

developed primarily by Primus Mason, William Clark and Emptson Brown. The settlement or colony is significant because it indicated a need for black people to live together in defense of their community. Dr. DeBerry reported that these black people settled there due to the small prices for those lots and because of "the natural tendency of people of the same race to colonize under *such conditions*."¹⁹ There is also a possibility that discrimination in housing in other areas existed even then.

The discriminatory treatment of the black population was articulated by the Hampden County Colonization Society in its circular explaining its purposes and beliefs. The document outlines that the purpose for its founding in 1825 was "in the firm belief that great blessing would follow from the removal of this unfortunate and despised race."²⁰

It specifically pointed out that in the state of Massachusetts where Blacks were only 1/74 of the population in 1826, 1/6 of the prison population was Black.²¹

The slavery question and treatment of Blacks did cause a severe split in the white community. There were those whites who like Samuel Osgood worked toward and believed in the abolition of slavery. He was a member of the Colonization Society and went on to be a major contributor to the successes of the Underground Railroad. Then, there were those who opposed such action because of economic reasons. In 1846 there were 10 cotton mills whose owners and workers had a vested interest in slavery.

In 1844 several members of First Church split off and formed a new church on Pyncheon Street and stated in its rules that, "colored people who desire to attend meetings if they choose . . . be requested to do so. . . ." ²² Evidently, Blacks had been previously prohibited from attending First Church.

In 1846, John Brown moved to town to engage in his wool business. He constantly talked against slavery and slave catchers. It was here that he began his plans for and the implementation of the Underground Railroad with the help of many others including Reverend Samuel Osgood, mentioned earlier, who used his home in the Underground Railroad network. Brown proved his sincerity to black people in many ways. Not only did he hire black men into his wool business, but he also worshipped with them at Free Church.²³ It was also in Springfield that he had his first meeting with Frederick Douglass in 1847, where he revealed his thoughts

on insurrection which were later to result in the unsuccessful attempt at Harper's Ferry, Virginia.²⁴

Enough emphasis cannot be placed on the role of black citizens in the successes of the Underground Railroad and other exploits of John Brown. Eli Baptist, Thomas Thomas and many others were extremely important in helping to formulate plans and carrying them out. Rufus Elmer, a local black preacher, helped Osgood secure a house in the woods for the sheltering of fugitives on their way to Canada.²⁵ W. E. B. DuBois wrote in his book about John Brown, that, "one thing alone reconciled him (Brown) to his Springfield sojourn and that was the Negroes who he met there."²⁶ DuBois' book also revealed that in 1857 while John Brown was in hiding from United States officers, he was probably among his black friends in Springfield for a week or more.²⁷

Many of these men had been very inspired and active before they met John Brown. Thomas Thomas, as was mentioned before, was born a slave in 1817 and some of his boyhood companions were Frederick Douglass and Rev. Henry Highland Garnett. In the South he had always been involved with talking about freedom for slaves which led him into much difficulty and ultimately to Springfield. With a spirit of black self-determination he strove on and joined the Gileadites and later helped to form the Masonic Lodge.²⁸

Eli Baptist, too, had a long history of determined resistance. Although he was born free, he was appalled at the conditions of his race. He worked at odd jobs as a porter and soap peddler and was very helpful in the workings of the Underground Railroad. His decision in 1860 to leave the country with his family and two other men from Springfield to colonize Haiti showed the level of his disappointment with the conditions here. The Haitian experiment was a failure mainly due to sickness. He returned to Springfield to continue the fight for survival. He and Thomas Thomas were the backbone of Free Church and later the Masonic Lodge as well as many other beneficial activities.²⁹

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in Congress which demanded that free states return fugitive slaves to their owners, caused considerable stir in Springfield. In 1850 there were only 150 free Blacks out of a total of 271 black people. Even then slaves were being taken out of Massachusetts and returned to their former masters. The Springfield branch of the United League of

Gileadites was formed by approximately 44 black men and John Brown to resist this repressive law.

All over the country,

people held indignant meetings and organized committees of vigilance whose duty was to prevent a fugitive from being arrested, if possible, or to furnish legal aid, and raise every obstacle to his rendition.³⁰

The following passage indicates the militancy with which the Springfield branch operated. This is an excerpt from their "Agreement and Rules":

. . . make clean work with your enemies; and be sure you meddle not with any others. . . . After effecting a rescue, if you are assailed, go into the houses of your most prominent and influential white friends with your wives, and that will effectually fasten upon them the suspicion of being connected with you, and will compel them to make a common cause with you. . . . Stand by one another, and by your friends, while a drop of blood remains, be hanged, if you must, but tell no tales out of school. Make no confessions.³¹

The motto of the organization was "Union is Strength."³² This militancy and unity seems to have been very effective since the importance of the town as a way-station on the Underground Railroad increased after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill.³³ Many of the fugitive slaves on the way to Canada decided to settle in Springfield causing the black population to increase to 539 by 1870.³⁴

Tensions throughout the country increased with the outbreak of the Civil War. During this war, one basis of which was the argument over the destinies of black people, black men were not initially allowed to fight in the northern armies. There was protest from black people. From Springfield, Rev. John Mars, ex-slave from Connecticut and minister of Free Church was very vocal. He and his congregation which included many of the members of the Gileadites wrote letters to the press protesting the fact that black men were not allowed to fight. Generous contributions from Springfield and Worcester enabled him to travel to North Carolina to assist General Wild in forming black regiments. Mars became the first black commissioned officer when he was appointed by Gerald Wild as Chaplain.³⁵

Another gallant black soldier in the Civil War was Henry Clay. Clay had been born in slavery in Alabama but after being freed by his master he ventured to Springfield. He became a non-commissioned officer in the 11th Regiment of the United States Colored Heavy Artillery during the war after which he returned to Springfield to live out the remainder of his days.³⁶

Black Springfield residents established the Springfield Mutual Beneficial Association in 1865 to help soldiers returning from the Civil War with sick and death benefits. This would tend to suggest that a sizeable number of gallant black men did serve in the Civil War from Springfield.

Post Civil War Reconstruction

The period of Reconstruction when schools, courts and hospitals were being set up all over the South, black people in the North were also busy setting up solid institutions to make up for the lack of economic, social and psychological security in hostile northern communities.

Several secret societies and beneficial organizations were established such as the Union Mutual Beneficial Society founded in 1866. Eli Baptist and Thomas Thomas were the founders having experienced the economic discrimination of being barred from the booming industrial prosperity in Springfield. The members of this cooperative organization received \$3 per week when sick and \$30 for funeral expenses.³⁷

A significant organization which is still functioning today as the largest lodge in Massachusetts is the Masonic Lodge which was chartered in 1866. Also responsible for obtaining the charter were Eli Baptist and Thomas Thomas. The Masonic Lodge is a charitable, benevolent, educational, and religious secret society.

It is charitable in that it shall not inure to the benefit of any particular individual, but it is and shall be devoted to the improvement and promotion of the happiness of all mankind. It is benevolent in that it is and shall be directed to the relief of the poor, sick and distressed brethren, their widows and orphans.³⁸

The Golden Chain Lodge of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows was also established in 1873 when a few men belonging to Third Baptist Church desired a meeting place of their own.³⁹

Most important in the lives of black people of the time and the center of spiritual and social activity was the Black Church. During the latter part of the 1800's there were three churches which served the population. They were Loring Street A.M.E. (presently Bethel A.M.E.), Pilgrim Baptist (now Third Baptist Church), and St. John's Church (formerly Free Church). All of the churches were active in social and economic support and black cultural awareness programs in addition to the normal spiritual activities.

The bulk of the black population at that time lived in the area now known as the South End. All the black churches mentioned had their beginning in that area. Some church histories reveal some of the reasons why black churches were needed. For example, there was discrimination and prejudice as a fact of life toward the Loring Street Church. The white neighbors of that church constructed unusually high fences on both sides which stood from 1838 when the church instigated the passage of a bill in the State Legislature called the "Black Fence Act" which called for the removal of such fences. The legislation limited the height to which fences could be built.⁴⁰ Later in 1938 when fire consumed the Loring Street building it relocated its new quarters up on the hill, south of State Street where the black population was concentrated and took on its present name, Bethel A.M.E.

Third Baptist Church began as Pilgrim Baptist with 16 members in 1871 growing to a congregation of 200 members most of whom were migrants from Virginia by 1881 at which time it was renamed Third Baptist.⁴¹ Its political activity was highlighted around 1914 when the pastor, Garnett Waller was the organizer of the local branch of the NAACP.

Free Church, later renamed St. John's Congregational Church, was the first Black Church in Springfield. A book written on St. John's History tells that in 1844 the entire free black population of 150 belonged to Free Church.⁴² This was also the church to which John Brown belonged. It was within this church that abolitionist activity occurred with rallies and speeches by such prominent people as Sojourner Truth. Eli Baptist mentioned previously in connection with the Gileadites, Masons, etc., was also a leading member and activist of Free Church. The work of the church continued with the establishment of a mission among the growing numbers of black folk on the Hill during the late 1800's.

- ¹ Mason A. Green, *Springfield 1636-1886—History of Town and City* (Boston: C. A. Nichols & Co., 1888).
- ² Lorenzo J. Green, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1966).
- ³ John H. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).
- ⁴ Green, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- ⁵ Franklin, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
- ⁶ Colonial Justice—Smith, p. 298.
- ⁷ Green, *op. cit.*, p. 256.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- ⁹ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
- ¹⁰ David Bryant, *Papers and Proceedings of the Connecticut Valley Historical Society* (Springfield: 1881).
- ¹¹ Green, *op. cit.*, p. 332.
- ¹² Franklin, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- ¹³ Harold Taylor, "A Study of the Negro Youth in Springfield," p. 3.
- ¹⁴ B. F. Thompson, Scrapbook, V. 15, p. 12.
- ¹⁵ B. F. Thompson, Scrapbook, V. 1, p. 121.
- ¹⁶ *Springfield News*, 5-24-1933.
- ¹⁷ *Springfield Script.*, V. 28, p. 48.
- ¹⁸ Barrows, C., p. 50.
- ¹⁹ *Springfield Republican*, 2-5-1905.
- ²⁰ Ham. City Colon. Soc. Circular
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² History of St. John's, p. 16
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ²⁵ Green, *op. cit.*, p. 471.
- ²⁶ DuBois, p. 98, John Brown.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- ²⁸ B. F. Thompson, Scrapbook, V. 1, p. 121, 3-9-1894.
- ²⁹ B. F. Thompson, Scrapbook, V. 3, p. 66, 5-25-1905.
- ³⁰ W. Siebert, p. 71.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- ³² Joseph Bowers, p. 4.
- ³³ Subert, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- ³⁴ History of Saint John's Church, p. 34.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ³⁶ Bowers, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
- ³⁷ *Springfield Daily News*, June 5, 1936.
- ³⁸ Marvin Jacobs, member of the Masons and NAACP, March, 1972.
- ³⁹ Kings Handbook, p. 218.
- ⁴⁰ *Springfield Daily News*, November 19, 1971.
- ⁴¹ Kings Handbook, *op. cit.*, p. 203.
- ⁴² Saint John's, p. 16.