

Essay

The Fullness of Enslaved Black Lives as Seen through Early Massachusetts Vital Records

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Abstract: In genealogy, tracing names and dates is often the initial goal, but, for many, desire soon turns to learning about the embodied lives of those who came before them. This type of texture is hard for any genealogist to locate, but excruciatingly hard for those seeking to trace family histories that include ancestors who were enslaved in the northern parts of the colonies that would become the United States. Often, records thin to nearly nothing and frame all lived experiences through the lens of an enslaver. This is true especially of public records, created, maintained, and curated by the state apparatus. By adhering to the proposition that even materials that do not immediately reveal much about Black life may be useful if we consider what is missing and left out, this article suggests that these types of documents might help breathe some fullness into the individual and collective lives of those Black ancestors whose humanity the state denied. Emerging from a larger project to locate stories and histories of Black residents of one of the first colonized spaces in British North America, this article focuses on the ways in which the publicly available Massachusetts pre-1850 Vital Records—which have specific “Negroes” sections—serve as an unexpected source of useful, if fragmentary, evidence of not only individual lives, but collective histories of the communities in which Black ancestors lived. Highlighting creative approaches to analyzing these particular vital records, and centering women’s lives throughout, this article demonstrates what is possible to learn about patterns of childbearing, relationships between and among enslaved persons owned by different families, the nature of religious lives or practices, relationships between enslavers and enslaved, and the movements, over time, of individuals and families. Alongside these possibilities, the violence, limitations, and challenges of the vital records are identified, including issues related to Afro-indigenous persons, the conflation of birth and baptismal records, and differential access to details of the lives of enslaved men vs. women.

Keywords: Massachusetts; vital records; women; African American; community; slavery



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1. Opening Salvo: The Longing and the Possibilities

When doing genealogy, tracing names and dates is often an initial goal. But for many who begin this work, the hope of genealogical research is to learn about the embodied lives of those who came before them. What did ancestors feel? How did they live and love? What were the rhythms of their days and weeks and years? What did they wish and long for? Who did they spend their days with? What did they believe or value? This type of texture is a challenge for nearly all genealogists, but excruciatingly hard for those seeking to trace family histories that lead to ancestors who were enslaved in the United States (or the North American colonies that would become the United States). In New England, despite the widespread and longstanding practice of enslaving Black persons in the region,¹ many archival holdings, museums, and library collections contain few if any permanent, readily accessible records expressly on the topic. At a certain point, especially moving backwards to the early 18th century and beyond, collections such as family papers, business records, probates, and wills often thin to nearly nothing and frame complex lived experiences through the lens of the enslaver. This is true not only of private records but also

public ones, created, maintained, and curated by various state apparatus. So, it may seem strange to suggest that this last set of documents—those kept or made available by a central governmental body—might help breathe some fullness into the individual and collective lives of those Black ancestors whose humanity and freedom the same state denied. Yet, that is precisely what I want to explore here by suggesting the value of one set of such documents: the Massachusetts Vital Records to 1850 (MAVR).²

Over the past 2 years, a colleague and I have scoured regional archives to try to locate the stories and histories of Black residents of one of the first colonized spaces in British North America: Essex County, Massachusetts. Here, as was true throughout Massachusetts, Black residents were enslaved until 1783.³ Additionally, the settler colonial, white framing of historical records ensures that silences, erasures, and obfuscation abound, especially related to enslaved persons. As a seasoned researcher I have been stymied again and again trying to locate and trace well-known individual enslaved Black residents' lives in these collections. Even more difficult, in a region that has long downplayed its slave-owning and slave-owner past, has been finding a way into locating those enslaved residents who were not well known, that is, the other 99%, the ancestors of today's genealogists. In both my broader work and in this article I take as a starting point that the archive is not just a site of disappointment but of violence, as scholar Saidiya Hartman has made clear.⁴ In fact, Hartman's specific focus on "recuperating" enslaved Black women's lives in the face of archival trails that render them often only as objects of violation and violence is both the impetus for this article and informs its orientation towards women's lives more than men's. At the same time, I adhere to two additional, critical propositions: That the archive is not silent as it concerns Black people, and that even those materials that do not immediately reveal much about Black life are useful if we consider what is missing and left out.⁵

As a result, while I have often struggled to locate persons and stories in regional archival collections, I have found the MAVR to be an unexpectedly rich source of information surrounding the lives of the hundreds of enslaved Black residents. Examined alone or in conjunction with records such as probates, wills, and bills of sale, the MAVR can build out individual lives and narratives in new ways. These vital records, available electronically and easily searchable for most of Massachusetts thanks to the work of the digital *Massachusetts Vital Records Project*, have not only shed more light than I had expected on the "facts" of enslaved Black history going back some three centuries, but also offered glimpses into the richness and texture of the same.⁶ I have been struck again and again by the ways in which genealogists might use this tool to reconstruct not only the individual lives of specific ancestors, but to gain a greater feel for the texture of the collective histories of the Massachusetts communities in which enslaved Black ancestors lived, unearthing a sense of their humanity despite efforts to erase it.⁷

Therefore, with a particular, albeit not exclusive focus on enslaved Black women, and by highlighting a few key examples, I explore and suggest some of what is possible to learn and begin to imagine about life as an enslaved person when we take creative approaches to these collections of Massachusetts' earliest vital records. What emerges includes but is not limited to evidence of patterns of childbearing, relationships between and among enslaved persons owned by different families, the nature of religious lives or practices, hints about relations between enslavers and enslaved, and some of the movements and separations, over time, of individuals and families. At the same time, the limitations and challenges of these records are revealed, including issues related to Afro-indigenous persons, the conflation of birth and baptismal records, and differential access to details of the lives of enslaved men vs. women.

2. Early Massachusetts Vital Records Pre-1850

The MAVR represents a compilation, completed in the early 20th century, of all publicly available vital record data that was kept pre-1850. Its contents are drawn from a wide range of town, cemetery, and church records as well as some early private records and newspapers. Collectively, these volumes are understood to constitute one of the most

complete vital records collections for over 200 cities and towns in the commonwealth. In most cases, these records include references to primary source material that no longer exists. A few key elements of the MAVR make them particularly useful for genealogists. First, both the print and online versions (the latter of which currently includes the compilations for about 150 localities and is the basis of this study) are searchable by either town/city or surname with lists of births, marriages, and deaths arranged alphabetically by last name.⁸ Second, for those researching the lives of Black residents—enslaved or free—the compilers’ organizing strategy for this group is instructive, if problematic. Rather than integrating Black residents’ records into the general alphabetical lists, early 20th century collators grouped them together at the end of each section (births, deaths, marriages) of each town/city record. This subset was labeled “Negroes”. Here, individuals may be listed by last name (if known, and usually of the enslaver’s family) and/or simply by first name. Those who were enslaved are nearly always identified with the indicator of “servant” to a given white person. It is worth noting that the organization of the records themselves is a reminder of the clear and persistent racialization of residents and past residents in this northern “free” state in the early 20th century. As such, the organization itself is a telling marker of structural racism for those genealogists who are looking to better understand the cultural, moral, emotional, and practical lived experiences of ancestors in the era following the years covered by the records. However, critically, and for our purposes here, there are details in entries for enslaved people that capture some of the agency, the texture, and the fullness of the lives of these same ancestors. In particular, these entries can be used alone or in combination with other archival sources that might offer a name or a date of one ancestor or an enslaver but no additional information.

3. What May Be Found: Some of the Fullness Revealed

3.1. *Religious Life/Connection to Religious Institutions*

Births of enslaved persons recorded in the MAVR often exist thanks to the fact that an individual was baptized at a local church. The fastidiousness of white church leaders in Congregational and other Protestant denominations in recording baptisms of Black residents in the 17th and 18th centuries is valuable for the genealogist.⁹ A combination of legal decisions in Massachusetts that ensured the continued enslavement of persons who became full members of the church, and the desire to ensure enslaved people’s salvation and promote and continue evangelization, meant that white residents regularly and enthusiastically converted enslaved persons to Christianity and baptized enslaved children at birth. At the same time, enslaved persons increasingly sought out baptism as a way to gain some agency and place in a society centered on the church.¹⁰ The resulting data, especially baptismal records, helps us gain a feel for the type of religious environment an enslaved ancestor might have lived in as well as the overall range of faith communities that might have impacted or shaped the collective lives of enslaved people in a given time or place. If, over a period of years, an enslaved person’s own baptism, marriage, or children’s births are recorded by church authorities (and then added to the MAVR), we can begin to imagine the ways in which enslaved people might have been forced (or allowed) to accept certain moral codes or worship. We might also gain insight into the religious life of the families who owned them.¹¹ Because the MAVR often identifies which church records a birth, baptism, or marriage has been culled from, we can link an enslaved person or an enslaver’s family to a denomination in a specific place and time. With a bit more research into that congregation it is possible to begin to explore what rights or roles enslaved people might have had in specific faith communities. Moreover, importantly, we can begin to explore what conceptions of a creator, theology, or morality might have permeated the households in which an enslaved person lived and how these concepts might have shaped a life.¹²

To see how this works in a single case, the records for the town of Newburyport list, among others, the following: “Phillis, d. Neptune and Lucy, servants Asa Porter, bp. at Boxford, 22 July 1777. CR2.” Thanks to the information available in the “abbreviations” tab

on the electronic resource, and the fact that “belonging to”, “servants of”, or “of” someone else marks an individual as enslaved, this entry can be translated to tell us that Neptune and Lucy were enslaved by a man named Asa Porter and that their daughter Phillis was baptized in the town of Boxford on 22 July 1777 at St. Paul’s Episcopal church.¹³ What these notations do not tell us is the date of birth. Only of baptism. While enslavers in New England did often encourage the infant baptisms of enslaved children, not all baptisms reflect infant baptism.¹⁴ More on this later.

To understand the regular presence of enslaving within a range of Christian church communities in a single town, here, below, is a small sample of the “Negroes” Birth section of the Salem records prior to 1788. The letters “bp” in the entries indicate date of “baptism” and any entry that ends with a “CR” notation tells the genealogist that the child’s birth/baptism was recorded by one of the churches in the town. (CR1 = First Church; CR 5 = Tabernacle Church; CR 11 = St. Peter’s Episcopal Church).¹⁵

Esther, mulatto servant child of David and Sarah Glover, bp. 14 September 1735. CR1

Frances, mulatto girl belonging to Mrs. Delany of St. Kitts, bp. 18 November 1774. CR11

Jack, servant of William Lander, bp. Apr. 18, 1773. CR5

Isaac, s. Rebecca, “a woman of Ebenezer Ward”, bp. 8 June 1740. CR1

Lemmon, ch. woman belonging to Ebenezer Ward, bp. 16 August 1752. CR1

—, Elizabeth “of Mr. Sharp’s daughter of Boston”, bp. 1 March 1674. CR1

It is worth considering that the relatively widespread practice of Christian baptism suggests that white enslavers could and did work to ensure the elimination of any traditional religious practices that might have made the journey from Africa or the West Indies to New England. At the same time, all was not lost; the fact that a large percentage of New England’s 18th century enslaved population was from Africa led to a cultural flourishing of a unique Black culture, including religious culture.¹⁶

Looking at marriages between enslaved persons also suggests some of the varied ways that colonial and early federal era faith communities sanctioned (or not) such unions. The MAVR show a lack of consistency in this regard. In Newburyport, for example the MAVR entries include only a few marriages of enslaved residents at all, and among these there is an even smaller subset that were recorded in church records.¹⁷ The same is true of Salem, where only one of numerous marriages between enslaved persons is noted as having been fixed in church record: PETERS, Isaac, belonging to Mrs. Kitchen, and Rebecca Day, belonging to Mrs. Pickman, 14 May 1726. [14 April. CR1]. Yet these limited entries raise more questions than they answer. In Salem, for example, among the recorded marriages is one in 1763 that included an enslaved person owned by a minister.¹⁸ Does the absence of a church record in the MAVR indicate that the partners were not recognized by a church? Might the MAVR have missed some of the church-sanctioned marriages that existed? If so, why?

Genealogists seeking to better understand how religion might have impacted an ancestor’s life even if their union is not noted in a congregation’s records might be comforted to know that enslaved persons often stated their intentions in public meeting as white couples did, and the MAVR records include “int” to mark this fact. Furthermore, some of the most esteemed ministers of the day married enslaved couples. Scholars have noted that enslaved persons whose marriages were acknowledged by the church needed to live up to the exacting standards of that institution just as their white counterparts did.¹⁹ Although it is impossible to fully assess either intent or impact from MAVR records alone, it is worth considering what it might have meant to those enslaved persons whose marriages were (or were not) recorded in/sanctioned by a religious entity. While beyond the scope of this article, the same may be said for those enslaved persons whose deaths are recorded in a church record, as was the case for Rose, a woman who died in 1777 in Newburyport.

Listed as “servant to Benjamin Harris, Esq.”, she is the only enslaved person whose death appears in the town’s MAVR and her death was noted in the records of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church.²⁰

Seeing an enslaved ancestor’s name in records kept by a Christian church makes explicit the ability of New England Christians to justify enslaving others and helps genealogists better assess which Christian spiritual practices might have been known by or common among their ancestors. At the same time, knowing what church an ancestor’s enslaving family belonged to can open up other lines of research for a genealogist seeking to better understand the faith/religious context of a wider community or to explore how/why certain faith traditions present in a 21st century family might have originated or changed over time. It is these types of contextual and communal histories that can work to bring ancestors to life in new ways.

3.2. How an Individual Woman’s Life Might Have Unfolded over Time

The fact that most enslaved persons appear in records of all sorts only in relation to those who have enslaved them makes understanding the life of an individual enslaved ancestor a challenge. This is particularly true of enslaved women whose lives were marked most literally by their ability to produce and reproduce wealth for those who enslaved them and, yet, whose own personhood and unique trajectories are not as often known as their male counterparts due to the predominately domestic sites of their labor. Women’s particular absence from other common archival materials—such as ships logs or manifests, which record enslaved men in Massachusetts— informs my specific focus on enslaved Black women. Tracing the names of Black women in the MAVR offers a rare way to reconstitute intimate moments in their lives in the 17th and 18th centuries. In this way, it is possible to begin to build a collective understanding of their daily existence of enslaved Black women and satisfy a profound curiosity about how they managed in incredibly challenging circumstances. These possibilities are limited, to be sure, but the MAVR offers a way to begin. For genealogists who are able to find a named female ancestor in the MAVR, the insights can be enormous.

For one example, I offer you the life a woman named Violet who was enslaved in both Salem and Danvers in the 18th century and whose adult life coincided with the lead up to the American war for independence and the early years of the republic. The story that emerges from initial research in the MAVR is that Violet’s life involved being enslaved by at least two people in two towns, marrying a man who was, himself, enslaved by more than one person in his life, and giving birth to at least three children. Understanding the details of the records help us map Violet’s life and through it, perhaps, a sense of the lives of some of her contemporaries. In 1749, when she first appears, (see Figure 1) Vilet (note alternative spelling) is enslaved in Salem by a widow named Hannah Pierce. Vilet appears under Marriages because she and a man named Fortune have made a public statement of their intention to marry. Fortune is enslaved by a John Riddan in the adjoining town of Marblehead. We cannot know exactly what happened next; perhaps the enslavers forbade the marriage or perhaps the enslavers’ fortunes changed in a substantive way, but this intention did not lead to marriage. Yet 6 years later, in 1755, Violet and Fortune appear again in the Salem marriage records having stated once again their intent to marry on 8 November of that year.²¹ By this time, both Violet and Fortune had been sold and moved. Violet was now enslaved by Joseph Putnam, Jr. of Danvers while Fortune was enslaved by Capt. William Deadman of neighboring Salem. Their marriage is recorded in the Danvers records just a few weeks later, and it is worth speculating about what this might have meant to them at both personal and spiritual levels to have their marriage named and sanctified.²² On 6 September 1767, Violet’s daughter Catey was baptized at the South Congregational Church in Danvers (now Peabody). At this juncture, Violet was no longer enslaved by Putnam; she was still living in Danvers, but now was enslaved as a “negro woman of Samuel King”. She is listed in the same manner in July 1768 when a son, Peter, was baptized in the same place as his older sister and for a third time in September 1771

when her second daughter Jeney's baptism was registered. Fortune is not listed in these birth records and after this, the MAVR records dry up. There does not appear to be a death record for Violet in Essex County and there is no record of either her or Fortune's death in the towns surrounding Essex County, suggesting that perhaps they both moved/were moved out of the region in later years.

DANVERS BIRTHS

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WYMAN, Humphrey B., at Waltham, Dec. 31, 1824.
 Lucy, d. Francis and Lucy, Mar. 16, 1800.
 Mary P., d. Rufus and Betsey, Dec. 1, 1809.
 Rufus, at Woburn, Sept. 14, 1786.

YOUNG, Benjamin, at Sanford, Me., Nov. 19, 1810.
 Charles Henry, s. Benjamin [brickmaker. dup.] and Fanny C. (Hobbs), July 26, 1843.
 Ellen Jane, d. Benjamin and Fanny C. (Hobbs), May 31, 1841.
 Jacob, at Beverly, July —, 1821.
 Joseph Francis, s. Jacob and Lydia Smith (Elliot), at Beverly, Oct. 22, 1847.
 Louisa Augusta, d. Benjamin [laborer. dup.] and Fanny C. (Hobbs), Apr. 7, 1847.
 Margaret, d. William, weaver, Nov. 26, 1843.
 Mary F., d. Benjamin and Fanny C. (Hobbs), Sept. 30, 1839.
 William A., s. Benjamin and Fanny C. (Hobbs), at Sanford, Me., Jan. 3, 1838.

SURNAMENES MISSING

—, Eleanor, d. —, of Marblehead, bp. Nov. 5, 1775. C. R. 1.

NEGROES

Catey, d. Violet, "negro woman of Samuel King," bp. Sept. 6, 1767. C. R. 2.
 Francis, Augustus A., s. Peter and Judith, Mar. 21, 1808.
 Francis, John L., s. Peter and Judith, Oct. 18, 1806.
 Green, Betsey, d. James and Nancy, bp. Sept. 2, 1792. C. R. 2.
 Green, Dyer, s. James and Nancy, bp. Sept. 2, 1792. C. R. 2.
 Green, James, s. James and Nancy, bp. Sept. 2, 1792. C. R. 2.
 Green, Nancy, d. James and Nancy, bp. Sept. 2, 1792. C. R. 2.
 Green, Silvester, s. James and Nancy, bp. Sept. 2, 1792. C. R. 2.
 Jeney, d. Violet, "a negro woman of Samuel King," bp. Sept. 15, 1771. C. R. 2.
 Jeney, "a negro child of Mrs. Anna Walden," bp. Aug. 30, 1772. C. R. 2.
 Peter, s. Violet, "a negro woman of Samuel King," bp. July 31, 1768. C. R. 2.
 Phillis, servant Stephen Putnam or his mother, bp. Sept. 28, 1777. C. R. 1.
 Venus, "a negro female servant of Dan Jacobs," Feb. 8, 1765. [Feb. 3. dup.]

Figure 1. Scan from *Massachusetts Vital Records*, Danvers, "to the end of the year 1849", with the birth records of Violet's children. Vital Records page image for Danvers, MA. <http://www.mavitalrecords.org> (accessed on 7 September 2021).

The record of the birth for Catey reads: Catey, d. Violet, "negro woman of Samuel King," bp. 6 September 1767, C. R. 2.

The record of the birth for Jeney reads: Jeney, d. Violet, "negro woman of Samuel King," bp. 15 September 1771, C. R. 2.

The record of the birth for Peter reads: Peter, s. Violet, "negro woman of Samuel King," bp. 31 July 1768, C. R. 2.

Imagining that Violet was our ancestor, from these fragments we can get a feel for some of the intimate and difficult realities of her life as an enslaved woman, wife, and mother in Massachusetts in the 18th century. We can imagine her pregnancies: the hot, humid, final weeks in the heat of three New England summers nearly in a row. We can imagine the strains of childbirth. We can picture the small children toddling about or being held. We can begin to imagine Violet preparing for a day of work for another woman, maybe for another mother in the household that enslaved her, while also trying to care for three children under the age of 5. We can imagine her calling her children by name while they play or assist her in some way. We can imagine her bearing and raising children away from her husband. All these details leave us with as many questions: What was it like to give birth to children in bondage? Was she alone? Was Fortune the father? Was

Fortune there? What were her days like, exactly? Were all the children living with her? What did she long for? What did she dream of? For herself? For her children? What happened to her after these three children were born? We do not know why or how these pregnancies happened, nor do we know how she felt about them. However, we do know that her arms were full and her body likely often tired. Yet, she lived and persisted in these years. Here, the search for “facts” of an ancestor’s life in Massachusetts offers us more: We can begin to reconstruct a narrative of the life of a specific, enslaved woman that has some substance. She may be the “servant of” one white man, but she is also wife to Fortune and mother of Catey, Jeney, and Peter. She comes alive in new ways. With these scraps of MAVR information, a genealogist who finds his/her way to Violet or to the many other women like her can add texture and color to mere names.

But Violet’s life is only partially laid out in the MAVR, and anyone seeking to fill in details about all branches of the family tree that includes Violet will be stymied. We can see that she married; however, although she was married, the laws meant that her children took on her condition of servitude and, given the inconsistency within the record keeping, we see here that their father’s name is not recorded.²³ Therefore, with no birth records in Salem or Danvers for a child with the name Violet, we gain no more easily accessible information about Violet’s own age or parentage.²⁴ Furthermore, Fortune’s role in her (and her children’s life) is erased. It is this last point that emerges in many of these MAVR records; exploring marriage lists makes abundantly clear the regular, involuntary, geographic separation of family members who may appear together (on paper) on branches of the genealogist’s family tree.

3.3. Ancestral Lives Apart: Separation of Family Members

When exploring family histories, the “traditional” (aka white) model for mapping family structures is to list parents of a given child on lines next to one another; a visual, graphic representation of a union. Their proximity on a piece of paper or a computer screen suggests geographic proximity in the past. This, of course, is not true of all parents, whether biological or not; but, when tracing the lives of enslaved ancestors, it is often the exception to the rule. The nature of New England slavery, in which an individual enslaver often held very few people in bondage, meant that it was exceedingly common for marriages between enslaved persons to be between people of different households or different towns entirely.²⁵ The MAVR can help a genealogist trace the specific nature of these distances and distancing. The same is true for understanding the separations that occurred between mothers and children and among siblings.

The following are the marriages between enslaved persons registered in the MAVR for Gloucester.

Philis, servant to Anne Baker, and Dick servant to Capt. William Norwood,
28 June 1763. CR5

Prince and Gibbs, servants of Capt. Gilbert, 12 November 1775.

Dinah, servant of Samuel Saword, and Bacchus, servant of Winthrop Sargent,
13 November 1776

In one of these cases (the second), spouses were enslaved by the same person and, therefore, likely living under the same roof. In the other two, spouses were enslaved by different enslavers and appear to be residing in different homes within the same town at the time of their marriages. There are many reasons to note these facts when trying to construct a family tree because they can tell us something about the relative ease of access enslaved spouses might have had to one another (or not). Living apart had implications for childbearing. It also generally suggests that childrearing would not have been carried out in a biological, nuclear family unit.²⁶ We can also surmise that the enslaved fathers of children born of these marriages would likely not have had regular or sustained roles in their children’s lives, regardless of their wishes to this end.

Patterns of this sort are common across the MAVR. The separation of parents from one another as well as parents from children can be identified in the Births sections. Genealogists should be on the lookout for subtle changes or references to this effect, sometimes found in the small notes or by looking for patterns over time. In the following recorded material (listed here chronologically) we can see in the Beverly marriage data for Jethro and Juno Larcom that they were married while enslaved by two different families. The subsequent recorded births of their many children include various levels of detail about the servitude of the parents; but, when traced over time, these details suggest that the spouses continued to reside apart through 1769. During these years Jethro's enslaver changed from Jeoffry Thistle to Eben Ellingwood but always remained different than Juno's. A genealogist might surmise that the entries in which no enslaver is explicitly named for either Juno or Jethro suggest that they were either free or living in the same place. However, when looking more closely at the pattern (in which enslavers are named in earlier and later entries with some in the middle and near the end missing such details), it becomes more likely that the absence of an enslaver's name merely reflects a failure of recordkeeping—not freedom or cohabitation. In the case of Juno and Jethro and their children, this has subsequently been proven to be the case.²⁷

MARRIAGE: Junio, servant to David Larkum, and Jethro, servant of Jeffry Thistle, int. 1 February 1756.

BIRTHS

Flora, d. Jethro and Juno, "Servants of Jeoffry Thistle and David Larcom," bp. 16 May 1756. CR1

Fortune, s. Jethro and Juno, "Servants of Jeoffry Thistle and David Larcom," bp. 16 May 1756. CR1

Titus, s. Jethro and Juno, "Servants of Jeoffry Thistle and David Larcom," bp. 16 May 1756. CR1

Dinah, d. Jethro and Juno, bp. 13 March 1757. CR1

Phillis, d. Jethro and Juno, bp. 13 March 1757. CR1

Juda, d. Jethro and Juno, "Servants," bp. 29 April 1758. CR1

Reuben, s. Jethro and Juno, bp. 10 May 1761. CR1

Cloe, d. Jethro and Juno, "Servants of Eben Ellingwood and David Larcom" bp. 13 November 1763. CR1

Jethro, s. Jethro and Juno, bp. 27 July 1766. CR1

Enoch, s. Jethro and Juno, bp. 14 May 1769. CR1

In Beverly and elsewhere the MAVR data also offer insight into the enslavement of children in homes different from those of their parents. When we look at the three examples below derived from the "births" records (all of whom have the surname Black, despite being of different parentage) we note that the children are labeled first in relation to their enslavers and then in relation to their biological parents, with "s" for son or "d" for daughter. The parents in turn, are identified vis a vis who they, respectively, belong to. In the case of Peulah and Cato Black, the siblings are enslaved together by a "Leut Robert Brisco" of Beverly, while their mother Sue is enslaved by a different family in Beverly and their father Hollon by a third family in the nearby town of Salem. In a separate case, Stephen Black is enslaved by John Ober in Beverly while his mother, Hagar, is enslaved by a Mr. Wiliam Prist in Salem.²⁸ Unfortunately, we are unable to ascertain from these records how soon after any birth these children were removed from their parents.

BLACK, Puelah, "servant to Leut Robert Brisco," d. Hollon, "servant to Capt John Abbit of Salem," and Sue, "servant to the sd. Leut Brisco," 21 January 1713–1714.

BLACK, Cato, "servant to Leut Robert Brisco," s. Hollon, "servant to Capt John Abbit of Salem," and Sue, "servant to the sd Leut Brisco," 15 November 1772.

BLACK, Stephen, "servant to John Ober," s. Hager, of Salem," servant to Mr. William Prist," 7 July 1707.

Genealogists who seek to try to answer the question "why" regarding separations of any sort, are encouraged to explore the possible presence of wills, probates, or financial ledgers among other documents related to the enslaving family. If available, these might reveal that separations were tied to an enslaver's death or debt, circumstances which often necessitated selling or bequeathing property including enslaved persons. Bills of sale (rarer but present in some Massachusetts public archives) function similarly. In ideal cases, the MAVR can augment this other data.

3.4. *The Violence Is Not Over*

Despite the various ways in which creative engagement with the MAVR can help genealogists reconstruct family trees and/or gain more contextual information about the broader lived experiences that might have shaped an enslaved ancestor's life in one place, they remain incomplete and, in a word, violent. The inhumanity of enslavement in New England and the legal status of enslaved persons as property has ensured that even in this most highly (white) literate time and place, where record keeping and family lines were fervently recorded and kept by and for white families and white-led institutions, the same care was not taken for the enslaved Black residents who kept the lives of these white colonizers going. Key elements of the institution of slavery ensures some of the silence and violence that remain.

First, because surnames did not exist for most enslaved persons and names taken after freedom was secured may have been symbolic, newly fashioned, or derived from a former enslaver's name, tracing individuals over time is harder for enslaved residents than for white residents. Moreover, since spouses were often not residing in the same households or owned by the same enslavers and children could be sold away, tracing families over time is incredibly challenging, if possible at all.

Second, these records are incomplete. Genealogists must not assume that the MAVR lists all the births, deaths, and marriages in any given place. Absences or gaps in a record (e.g., finding a marriage record but not births assigned to a couple, or finding a death record but nothing earlier) are frequent and do not rule out the presence of births or earlier marriages for example. Additionally, given the organization by town and county, and the various levels of record-keeping therein, it is very easy to "lose" an ancestor in these records. If an enslaved person moved out of one town during their lifetime—either because they were sold to another enslaver or because an enslaver moved and took them along—it becomes incredibly difficult and time consuming to try to track them across all towns in the MAVR. At times, checking the listings for surrounding towns can assist, but often the trail goes cold.

Third, although the MAVR can at time allow genealogists the opportunity to make informed guesses about whether an individual listed is the mother, father, or child of an ancestor, when using "birth" records to do so, we must remember that they are not necessarily (or regularly) recording dates of biological births. Those notations that indicate a baptismal date may be an infant baptism and, thus, help identify ages of children, mothers, and space between siblings, but they may just as likely indicate a much later date, reflecting when either parents or an enslaver chose to have children or enslaved persons baptized.

Two examples will suffice to help think through possible interpretations and uses of MAVR data. Among the church-recorded "birth" records from Salem listed earlier are entries for two girls: Esther and Frances. However, these "birth" records do not name the children's parents; they are identified only in relation to those who own them, suggesting that these enslaved children were not infants. In this case, genealogists will be unable to ascertain these children's parentage or date of birth with certainty. In a separate case, we note that among the 11 children recorded as having been born to Jethro and Juno in Beverly, many appear in the "birth" records in groups of two and three, their supposed "births" recorded on the same days. In fact, what is being recorded are the group baptisms of more

than one non-infant child in the family. Trying to ascertain the precise ages of these children from the MAVR is impossible.²⁹

Ironically, in a pattern quite different from other 17th and 18th century types of records, tracing the lives of enslaved men over time in the MAVR can be even more challenging than tracing women. Whereas male enslaved persons in New England regularly appear in various notations in the business records or crew lists of the white men who enslaved them, and it is enslaved women (who labored primarily in private homes doing domestic service) who are hardly mentioned, this pattern is reversed in the MAVR. Women's childbearing role means that at least some subset of enslaved women appears more than once, and their children (who took on the status of their mother) are linked to her. Genealogists can often trace two generations through one matrilineal line. Not so for men.

A further complication in these records is the ethno-racial terms used to identify and categorize enslaved persons. As a result, the MAVR is a challenging tool for any genealogist whose family line may include Afro-indigenous ancestors during the era of slavery. In Massachusetts at this time, both indigenous and Black residents were enslaved and Afro-indigenous residents (enslaved or free) were present in the colony.³⁰ However, record keeping and categorizations of the type that the MAVR is designed around were, at times, imprecise and inconsistent in the colonial period, making identifying or tracing an Afro-indigenous ancestor tricky.³¹ Moreover, at the turn of the 20th century, compilers reinscribed and developed additional problematic categorizations. Much like the "Negroes" section, The MAVR includes an "Indians" section of each town entry. Here, those persons identified as "Indian" (ostensibly by the original record-keeper, not the individual being so identified) are recorded (births, deaths, marriages). However, the complex ethno-racial ancestry of enslaved persons means that at times Afro-indigenous enslaved persons may appear in the "Indians" section rather than the "Negros" section and vice versa.

Additionally, over time and from generation to generation, these identifiers may change. One example of this is the case of Juno Larcom, whose history has been well recorded elsewhere but whose identity as defined by the MAVR would make her hard to trace for a novice genealogist. Her marriage to Jethro is listed under "Negroes", as are the births of their children. However, anyone wishing to trace her life and find her death date would be halted if they searched for it under "Negroes" because Juno's death is recorded in the "Indians" section, where she is categorized as "half negro and half Indian", and the entry (from the records of the First Parish Unitarian Church) details her maternal parentage, identifying her mother as an indigenous woman kidnapped in North Carolina and sold into slavery in New Hampshire³² (see Figure 2). It is worth remembering that Juno's children's births appear in the "Negro" section, which serves to erase any trace of *their* indigeneity in these records, making it incredibly difficult for a descendent to trace or construct a complete and more fully accurate ethno-racial family lineage.

622 BEVERLY DEATHS

YOUNG, John W., "he ruptured a blood vessel, survived 15 minutes," Dec. 31, 1841.

Mary Ann [w. Philip S. G. R. 8.], d. Joseph and Elisabeth Williams, consumption, Dec. 15, 1847, a. 26 y. 1 m. 20 d.

Mary L. Faulkner, d. twin, William and Nabby, Sept. 5, 1829.

Mary Thorndike, d. Abraham and Mary, Mar. 13, 1833, a. 3 y 6 m. G. R. 4.

Nabby, w. William, decline, bur. Jan. 11, 1818, a. 28 y. C. R. 1.

Rebecca C., d. William and Nabby, Oct. 5, 1829.

Samuel, bur. June 19, 1774, a. 4 y. C. R. 1.

Samuel, s. William [worms. C. R. 1.], Aug. 10, 1798, a. 1 y. 1 m.

Sarah A[ugusta. P. R. 263.], d. Abraham K. and Mary T., Feb. 19, 1837. G. R. 4.

William, —, 1786. P. R. 208.

William, July —, 1815. P. R. 208.

—, s. William, Mar. 15, 1801, a. 1 y. 1 m.

—, w. Joshua, bur. Apr. 9, 1803. C. R. 1.

—, ch. William, jr., bur. Oct. 8, 1828, a. 2 y. C. R. 1.

SURNAMES MISSING

—, Agnes, w. —, d. late Capt. Hugh Hill, Jan. —, 1838. C. R. 2.

—, Maria, d. "of unknown parents, lived in Isaac Crampsey's family," Oct. 12, 1800, a. 12 w.

—, —, ch. Antony, Sept. 29, 1711. C. R. 1.

—, —, "a stranger, bursting of a blood vessel while lifting a cask," bur. July 24, 1807, a. supposed 26 y. C. R. 1.

—, —, young man from Gloucester, drowned at the wharf, bur. June 22, 1810, a. 16 y. C. R. 1.

INDIANS

Larcom, Juno, "she was half Indian and half negro. Her mother was stolen away with other friendly Indians from North Carolina and sold a slave in Portsmouth & bo't by a Mr. Herrick of this town," decline, bur. Jan. 26, 1816. a. 92 y. C. R. 1.

Nathan, foundered, —, 1764. P. R. 1.

Pitor, servant, —, 1748. C. R. 2.

Quando, a woman, —, 1751. C. R. 2.

Reuben, coming from West Indies, —, 1765. P. R. 1.

—, woman belonging to Capt. Herrick, —, about 1745. P. R. 1.

Figure 2. Scan from *Massachusetts Vital Records*, Beverly, Negro Deaths to 1849, of Juno Larcom's death record, p. 622.

The record reads: Larcom, Juno, "she was half Indian and half negro. Her mother was stolen away with other friendly Indians from North Carolina and sold a slave in Portsmouth & bo't by a Mr. Herrick of this town, decline, bur. 26 January 1816. A. 92 y., C. R. 1."

Finding the identifier "mulatto" after an MAVR entry can be equally challenging for genealogists tracing family lineage through enslaved ancestors. There are two key reasons for this: first, because the term might have been used to refer to individuals with Black and white European ancestry or to refer to other combination of groups such as indigenous and Black³³; second, because children in Massachusetts took the condition of servitude of their mother. If a "mulatto" individual is identified in the Negroes' section as enslaved, it can be assumed that the mother was enslaved and likely Black. At the same time, if not otherwise noted in the MAVR, the father's condition and racial identity are impossible to trace.

The Salem MAVR records explored above lists two mulatto girls. Their entries illustrate these points and also suggest new lines of inquiry:

Esther, mulatto servant child of David and Sarah Glover, bp. 14 September 1735. CR1

Frances, mulatto girl belonging to Mrs. Delany of St. Kitts, bp. 18 November 1774. CR11

Because these girls are listed under the Negroes' section, we can assume that one parent is Black. But we cannot be sure of the background of the other. This stated, because children took on the condition of the mother, we might begin to piece together that they are

likely the daughters of enslaved Black women and non-Black men (perhaps an enslaver himself). Finding more details about the father is hard.

However, there may be more a family member can learn from entries like Frances'. Here, we learn that she is enslaved by a woman from St. Kitts, thereby drawing a clear line between the economies (slave and otherwise) of New England and the Caribbean's British colonies. If she is the daughter of an enslaved Black woman and a non-Black man, perhaps this man lived in St. Kitts. A genealogist who finds Frances' record—or who traces their own ancestry to St. Kitts—might be able to use the MAVR to connect the dots.

4. Conclusions: How to Proceed

Having spent many months making my way through the MAVR to reconstruct a more complete history of enslaved Black residents, I have come to both better appreciate and better understand the specific possibilities and challenges facing any genealogist using the MAVR to seek information about enslaved ancestors. Those embarking on such a search must remember that there are more lives and more life stories than just those recorded in and by white people and white institutions, whether in wills, probate inventories, business ledgers, or the MAVR. There is, no doubt, violence in the very existence of these records and no matter how helpful this tool—or others like it—may be, it remains a tool framed by and preserved because of settler colonial and white supremacist goals.³⁴ It is imperfect, at best. Yet, the MAVR is a rare and unexpected source of personal and intimate information about enslaved Black ancestors, both individual and collective. Even in its imperfection it can serve aims it was never meant to serve. By applying particular critical lenses to the often-cryptic data it contains, both the outlines and flesh of lives emerge. Building blocks of family trees can be identified and glimpses of the human joys, suffering, and strategies for survival are possible. In this way, genealogists might claim the tools of the enslaver to reclaim ancestors

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Notes

¹ For a particularly important articulation of this see (Warren 2016). Especially p. 35.

² I refer to this collection of documents by their official name but note that there is an online, digital version of nearly all the hard copy versions. This digital presentation is known as the *The Massachusetts Vital Records Project* and can be found at <https://ma-vitalrecords.org>, accessed on 9 August 2021.

³ On 8 July 1783 the Massachusetts Supreme Court abolished slavery in the state with a ruling in *Commonwealth v Jennison*. See (Baumgartner and Duclos-Orsello 2021).

⁴ (Hartman 2008). In Hartman's words, enslaved Black women's lives were rendered mostly as "[l]ives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemn them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features" (3).

⁵ As Leslie Harris explained in her research on the long history of African Americans in New York, "Positing the archive as silent in terms of African American voices often extends into the idea that there is nothing to be said about African Americans". (Harris 2014, p. 78; Farmer 2018). Farmer advocates returning to popular repositories and revisiting well-worn collections because "there is as much knowledge embedded in the lack of evidence as there is in existing documents about Black . . . lives".

⁶ For more on the Massachusetts Vital Records Project see the Early Vital Records of Massachusetts <https://ma-vitalrecords.org>, accessed on 2 August 2021. The goal of the website is to make easily searchable, and in one place, the vital records that were gathered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by towns and agencies from church records, gravestones, private records, town

records, and newspapers and published. This publication is generally accepted to contain all the known records up to 1850. According to the website “The Massachusetts Vital Records Project, in an ongoing effort, presents here the transcriptions of over 1,500,000 records from over 150 of those towns. Indexed by town and by surname, the transcriptions provide genealogists with an easy to use interface to search for their roots in Massachusetts. For proper documentation the project also provides the images of the books from which the transcriptions are done”.

7 Gloria McCahon Whiting has made a similar claim of the value of another set of state-level records in her more quantitatively focused study of probate records in Suffolk county, Massachusetts (Whiting 2020). For a recent, very readable history of slavery in New England, likely of much contextual use to genealogists see (Hardesty 2019).

8 See <https://ma-vitalrecords.org> (accessed on 4 November 2021).

9 For more on the Congregational church records see Congregational Library and Archives, “New England’s Hidden Histories: Colonial-Era Church Records”, <https://www.congregationallibrary.org/neh/main.1> (accessed on 20 July 2021). For more on the history and import of early colonial church records especially regarding health, see (Cassedy 1980) special issue, *Publications of The Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 57: 248–62.

10 Bailey (2011), *Race and Redemption*, 18. In 1701 Cotton Mather proposed a law that ensured that no baptized enslaved person would become free as a result (Blanck 2015); Spraker, “The Lost History of Slaves and Slave Owners in Billerica”, 120 makes clear that the vast majority of white citizens “believed in the inherent inferiority, and the ‘enslavability; of darker-skinned races” (Spraker 2014).

11 It is worth noting that tracking enslaved individuals through the records is incredibly difficult. Because enslaved persons are more likely than not to be listed by first (rather than last) name in the MAVR, the indexing search option on the digital platform (organized by last name) does not work well. Additionally, given that enslaved persons were bought, sold, and moved at the whim of the enslaving family, tracing an individual over time in these records is often impossible. Genealogists must be committed to searching town by town in the “Negroes” sections to see if a first name similar to that of their ancestor’s appears again. In the case of those who are listed without names, it is a particular challenge to trace; researchers must look for dates and identifying data that might align with information gathered by other sources.

12 For more on how African Americans in New England understood and lived their religious lives, especially the ways in which they carried on and integrated African traditions, see (Piersen 1988). For a more recent look at the ways in which New England protestants used religion to both justify and oppose slavery see (Reed 2013).

13 Abbreviations (for Newburyport), <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Newburyport/Abbreviations.shtml>, accessed on 2 August 2021. Each set of town records has its own unique “abbreviations” link, which will identify the specific houses of worship and therein.

14 For example, from the Newburyport Births entry, we see the following reference to a non-infant baptism: “Jack, servant of William Lander”.

15 Abbreviations (for Salem), <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Salem/Abbreviations.shtml>, accessed on 2 August 2021.

16 In the words of Ira Berlin, the white push to baptize was “a holocaust that destroyed collective African religious practice in Colonial America”, quoted in Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 157. (Piersen 1988), asserts that African spiritual practices were not erased completely.

17 Newburyport, Marriages, Negroes, <https://mavitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Newburyport/aMarriagesOt.shtml#Negroes>, accessed on 10 August 2021.

18 Sirus, servant of Rev. Samuel Fisk, and Nancy, servant of Osmon Trask of Beverly, int. 9 July 1763. See Marriages, Negroes, Salem, <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Salem/aMarriagesOt.shtml#Negroes>, accessed on 2 August 2021.

19 Blanck, “Massachusetts’ ‘Family Slavery’”; (Greene 1968); (Piersen 1988, p. 19).

20 Newburyport, Deaths, Negroes, <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Newburyport/aDeathsOt.shtml>, accessed on 2 August 2021.

21 The 1749 and 1755 intentions are both listed in the Salem records. See Salem, Marriages, Negroes, <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Salem/aMarriagesOt.shtml#Negroes>, accessed on 5 August 2021. The complexity of tracing enslaved persons without last names emerges in the case of Violet and Fortune because, while it seems very likely that these 1749 and 1755 entries refer to the same people, we can not be certain. The abbreviation “int” means “intent” to marry and, if recorded, means it was made publicly.

22 See Danvers, Marriages, Negroes, <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Danvers/aMarriagesOt.shtml#Negroes>, accessed on 5 August 2021.

23 The inconsistency makes tracing families in various towns radically different. For a flavor of this, note that in some cases, such as in the city of Lynn, only the father’s name is listed. In others, like Gloucester, sometimes both parents’ names are listed and sometimes only one or the other.

24 A search of all surrounding towns might yield some possible clues about her own ancestry, but an initial search for this article revealed that while there are a number of servants with a variation of “Violet” listed, there is no clear entry with a birth date that would be a likely match. We cannot know for sure whether children named “Violett” or “Violet” appearing earlier in the records

might have been *this* Violet. Additionally, a search of the MAVR for the towns around Danvers does not reveal any record that suggests her birth (and, thus, no indication of the name of her mother). The lack of surnames makes such tracking a challenge.

- 25 See (Greene 1968, pp. 110–19). From a study of Vital Records in a sampling of Massachusetts towns, he found that a full 25% of married enslaved persons were married to someone in a different town.
- 26 The impact on parental separation can be seen in the birthrate for Black New Englander over time. It was only 2.0 (well below that for whites) pre-1783. After 1783, it increased to 3.45 (Piersen 1988, p. 19; Greene 1968, p. 217).
- 27 Juno and Jethro Larcom’s story and that of their family is, in fact, quite well known because Juno fought for and gained her freedom through the Massachusetts courts. For more on her life see *Set At Liberty*, an online exhibit of Historic Beverly. <https://spark.adobe.com/page/a4DHDs0LcwyfQ/>, accessed on 12 August 2021.
- 28 Beverly, Births, Negroes, <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Beverly/aBirthsOt.shtml#Negroes>, accessed on 12 August 2021.
- 29 See Beverly, Births, Negroes, <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Beverly/aBirthsOt.shtml#Negroes>, accessed on 9 August 2021.
- 30 The presence of North American indigenous tribes in Massachusetts, along with the Atlantic trading and maritime world in which New England was central, informed the presence of afro-indigenous persons from the colonial period on. See (Diverseeducation 2014).
- 31 See (Whiting 2020, pp. 411–20) for a very detailed explanation of the range of ways that Black, Indian, “mulatto”, and other racial/racialized terms and identifiers were used and changed in the colonial era. In this, she draws upon many other scholars’ work and challenges others to suggest that, despite arguments to the contrary, when looking at the colonial era, there was a more fixed set of racial identifiers than would be the case in the early federal era and, thus, identifications of “Indian”, “Negro”, or “Black” can be reasonably assumed to be accurate. She does note that more research needs to be done. Among the many works she cites is Bailey’s *Race and Redemption*. Bailey argues that in the majority of official colonial-era documents created in New England, “such as legal inquisitions, censuses, church records, and bills of sale, Africans were generally labeled ‘negroes’”, 42. He also notes that there was flexibility in those articulations.
- 32 Beverly, Deaths, Indians, <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Beverly/aDeathsOt.shtml#Indians>, accessed on 9 August 2021.
- 33 See Whiting, “Race, Slavery, and the Problem of Numbers”, fn 18, which asserts, “As there was no common label specific to those of Indian-European or African-Indian origin in eastern Massachusetts during the seventeenth century or the first half of the eighteenth, record keepers appear to have used *mulatto* to describe a wide array of people”.
- 34 A forum on slavery and the archive also suggests this view: (Connolly and Fuentes 2016).

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