

"It is Not Wrong to Go Back for That Which you Have Forgotten: A History of Our Place in the Deep North"

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## READING

For the full text and to learn more, visit:

<http://www.royallhouse.org/slavery/belinda-sutton-and-her-petitions/>

*On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1783, Belinda Sutton, a woman granted emancipation from slavery through the death of her master, Isaac Royall Jr., petitioned the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for her pension from the Royall estate. Presumably written by a leader in the Black community, Prince Hall, as the "X" on the bottom of the petition suggests Sutton was illiterate, her petition, written in the third-person, tells the story of her capture in Ghana, surviving the Middle Passage, working as a slave on the Royall estate and Loyalist Isaac Royall's departure from the colonies during the American Revolution. The legal petition reads, in part:*

To the Honourable the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled....

That seventy years have rolled away, since she on the banks of the Rio de Valta received her existence... would have yielded her the most compleat felicity, had not her mind received early impressions of the cruelty of men, whose faces were like the moon, and whose Bows and Arrows were like the thunder and the lightning of the Clouds...

...before she had Twelve years enjoyed the fragrance of her native groves...an armed band of white men, driving many of her Countrymen in Chains, ran into the hallowed shade! ...in vain she lifted her supplicating voice to an insulted father, and her guiltless hands to a dishonoured Deity! She was ravished from the bosom of her Country, from the arms of her friends – while the advanced age of her Parents, rendering them unfit for servitude, cruelly separated her from them forever!

Scenes which her imagination had never conceived of... strove, but in vain to divert her melancholly attention, from three hundred Affricans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torments; and some of them rejoicing, that the pangs of death came like a balm to their wounds.

Once more her eyes were blest with a Continent – but alas! how unlike the Land where she received her being! ...she learned to catch the Ideas, marked by the sounds of language only to know that her doom was Slavery, from which death alone was to emancipate her...

Fifty years her faithful hands have been compelled to ignoble servitude for the benefit of an Isaac Royall, until... the world convulsed for the preservation of that freedom which the Almighty Father intended for all the human Race, the present war was Commenced...

The face of your Petitioner, is now marked with the furrows of time, and her frame feebly bending under the oppression of years, while she, by the Laws of the Land, is denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, apart whereof hath been accumulated by her own industry, and the whole augmented by her servitude.

WHEREFORE, casting herself at the feet of your honours, as to a body of men, formed for ...the reward of Virtue, and the just return of honest industry – she prays, that such allowance may be made her out of the estate of Colonel Royall, as will prevent her and her more infirm daughter from misery in the greatest extreme, and scatter comfort over the short and downward path of their Lives – and she will ever Pray.

the mark of Belinda

## REFLECTION

“If the British march  
By land or sea from the town to-night,  
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry-arch  
Of the North-Church-tower, as a signal-light,-  
One if by land, and two if by sea;

And I on the opposite shore will be,  
Ready to ride and spread the alarm  
Through every Middlesex village and farm,  
For the country-folk to be up and to arm.”<sup>1</sup>

This passage from Longfellow’s famous poem, “Paul Revere’s Ride,” captures the tension of the historic moment - Paul Revere warning the people of this region of a British military invasion to quell the colonists’ rebellion. As someone who grew up in New England, I have heard the story of “one if by land, two if by sea” told and retold like scripture. Now people from around the world come to Boston and the surrounding suburbs to make a pilgrimage here to celebrate the quintessential American value – freedom.

But there is another account of Revere’s heroism. In a letter to Jeremy Belknap, Revere recalls his famous ride, including:

I set off upon a very good Horse; it was then about 11 o’Clock, and very pleasant. After I had passed Charlestown Neck, and got nearly opposite where Mark was hung in chains, I saw two men on Horse back, under a Tree. When I got near them, I discovered they were British officer. One tried to git a head of Me, and the other to take me. I turned my Horse very quick, and Galloped towards Charlestown neck, and then pushed for the Medford Road.<sup>2</sup>

The place “where Mark was hung in chains” was a casual reference to the body of an enslaved man named Mark – last name unknown - who, along with two conspirators, was tried and convicted of murdering their enslaver, John Codman. A Massachusetts Historical Society account from 1883 states they, “found the rigid discipline of their master unendurable, and, after setting fire to his workshop some six years before, hoping by the destruction of this building to so embarrass him that he would be obliged to sell them, they, in the year 1755, conspired to gain their end by poisoning him to death.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/paul-reveres-ride>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.masshist.org/objects/cabinet/april2002/reveretranscription.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.celebrateboston.com/crime/puritan-mark-and-phillis-executions.htm>

One conspirator, Phoebe was nominally involved in the crime and was sent to a plantation in the West Indies. Another named Phyllis was burned at the stake on Gallows Hill, a place in Cambridge near what is now Porter Square, in a public execution, right after Mark was hanged. The September 25th, 1755 edition of the *Boston News-Letter* reports that the public executions of Mark and Phyllis were “attended by the greatest Number of Spectators ever known on such an Occasion.”<sup>4</sup> After his death, Mark’s body was tarred and hung in what was then part of Charlestown. It remained there for twenty years, becoming the horrifying public landmark Revere references in his memoir.<sup>5</sup> The site “where Mark was hung in chains” is likely the current location of a Holiday Inn on Washington Street in Somerville.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps, like me, you could tell the story of Paul Revere’s ride by heart but did not know the stories of Mark, Phyllis and Phoebe. Perhaps, like me, you are proud of the history of strident abolitionism in this area – and in this faith – but find it easy to forget New England’s intimacy with slavery, first through production of rum and then our many cotton mills.<sup>7</sup>

This is the great paradox of New England history, a history defined by the quest for liberty which, as Belinda Sutton names in her petition, “the Almighty Father intended for all the human Race,” and brutal suppression of those who seek to claim it. The story of our place in the “Deep North,” as this region is referred to in the documentary “Traces of the Trade,<sup>8</sup>” is a multiplicity of stories, just as the story of our nation writ large lives in this tension between professions of equality and realities of oppression and privilege.

In the presence of our collective statement that “black lives matter,” I invite us to consider the “black lives” lived by those in the earliest days of our nation and our region. I invite us to pay attention to what stories are told and retold, what stories lay buried beneath collective indifference or shame and what narrative we seek to create in our time for the historians who come after us.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.celebrateboston.com/crime/puritan-mark-and-phillis-executions.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <https://paulreverseriderevisited.wordpress.com/2012/06/06/the-gruesome-landmark/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somerville,\\_Massachusetts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somerville,_Massachusetts)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.lowellsun.com/rss/ci\\_18166097](http://www.lowellsun.com/rss/ci_18166097)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1157728/>

This reflection also serves as the beginning of what we are calling a “Witness Pilgrimage.” In the spirit of a prayer walk - a practice when members of a faith community meditatively walk through a place at the center of their thought and care – this afternoon some of us will walk from where we gather this morning to the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, a little over three miles away.

The estate of Isaac Royall, including the place where enslaved Africans lived so they could serve the wealthy owners and maintain their property, reveals – in the words of the museum – “intertwined stories of wealth and bondage, set against the backdrop of America’s quest for independence.” when we walk to the Royall House and Slave Quarters, it will not be a march but more a spiritual practice, public recognition that we live and work and worship in a place literally in walking distance to a site where Black people were once enslaved. The experience will remind us that the journey towards racial justice in the place we call home has been too long and requires discomfort and sacrifice.

Once the walkers arrive, we will be met by others who will join us in touring the museum, after which we will reflect on the experience and learnings of the day. I am inspired that of the almost forty people participating, the ages range from 9 to 84.

When we tour the museum, we will hear more about Belinda Sutton, an enslaved woman granted freedom through the will of Isaac Royall Jr. As court records are the primary way we learn about people from the colonial era, Belinda’s petition to the Massachusetts state legislature serves as a rare, first-person account of the experience of slavery in New England. Beyond the evocative autobiography found in the petition, little is otherwise known about her and her life.

Yet her story recently received national attention when Ta-Nahisi Coates referenced her petition in his famous essay in *The Atlantic*, “The Case for Reparations.” After acknowledging that Sutton was granted fifteen pounds and twelve shillings by the Commonwealth, Coates affirms this decision as:

one of the earliest successful attempts to petition for reparations. At the time, black people in America had endured more than 150 years of

enslavement, and the idea that they might be owed something in return was, if not the national consensus, at least not outrageous.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the more one explores the story of Belinda Sutton, the more it is clear that her petition was not a “successful attempt...for reparations.” As many of us heard at a local lecture organized by the Woburn library, “The Black Experience in Middlesex County from the 1640s to the 1870s,” Sutton petitioned the Commonwealth so she could simply receive the pension granted her in Royall’s will. And she needed to petition the Commonwealth as the Royalls were British Loyalists whose property was seized during the Revolutionary War.

Sutton was not asking to right the wrong of enslavement through compensation by the government but more that she be granted what was legally promised to her. And the financial promise by Isaac Royall was not necessarily made as an attempt at moral redemption. Colonial towns enacted laws that if one granted liberty to an enslaved person, the enslaver had to provide for them monetarily, lest the former slave become a drain on community resources. Sutton petitioned the Commonwealth as the arrangements made through Royall’s will were not honored. And even after receiving a positive response by the legislature, Sutton had to make additional petitions when money was not issued in later years. This challenge to the understanding of Sutton as a pioneering recipient of reparations is further complicated when we remember that in the wake of collective emancipation of enslaved blacks, the government provided reparations...to former slave holders.<sup>10</sup>

The historians who led the program on the Black Experience in early Middlesex County spoke of a word from the Twi language from Sutton’s native Ghana, “Sankofa.”<sup>11</sup> It means “go back and get it” and also refers to the common image of a bird with its head turned backwards, its feet facing forward. “Sankofa” is associated with the proverb, “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.” This proverb reminds me of the words of James Baldwin: “Not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/District\\_of\\_Columbia\\_Compensated\\_Emancipation\\_Act](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/District_of_Columbia_Compensated_Emancipation_Act)

<sup>11</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankofa>

As someone with white privilege, I know too well the temptation to look away from the racial realities of our world. I have become socialized through the mentality of the Royall estate itself, with the windows of the slave quarters facing the mansion, making the privileged the object of attention, and the experience of the black slaves rendered invisible through an almost windowless brick wall. As we prepare for the Witness Pilgrimage, I am inspired to “go back for what we have forgotten,” perhaps beginning with what we – all of us – have never been told.

By turning towards an often-invisible history, we are then moved to consider how this changed understanding of the past shapes life here and now. While Coates makes a cogent case for reparations in his *Atlantic* essay, he also attests that the most difficult part of a reparations process would not be the financial expense but challenging the American identity as “the land of the free.” For Coates, such a process would make real the lofty promises of our Constitution. He affirms:

An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane...More important than any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America’s maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders.<sup>12</sup>

As leaders of our racial justice work met to plan the Witness Pilgrimage, I was inspired by the questions raised by Patty Shepard. Drawing on the work of Howard Zehr, Patty spoke of the need for restorative justice, with the law serving, in Zehr’s words, as an “instrument for building Shalom, for building relationships. Its characteristic purpose [is] not to punish but to redeem, to make things right.”<sup>13</sup>

The historians at the Woburn library program named that they are often asked to not talk about slavery when they present at local museums. Beginning from a place where so many do not even wish to acknowledge what has occurred on our soil, what does “making things right” look like? Is there realistic hope for a path towards collective “maturation out of the childhood myth of [American] innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders?”

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

<sup>13</sup> *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* by Howard Zehr, 144.

This morning, the choir sang the gospel song “Keep Your Lamps,” an anthem of spiritual encouragement calling us to readiness, preparing us for what is to come:

“Children don’t get weary til your work is done.  
Christian journey soon be over  
And of course Keep your lamps.”

The song alludes to the coming day of judgment named in the Christian gospels. It implores us to be ready for the time when the reality we live in falls away for something we cannot even imagine.

As I hear this anthem, I hear its invitation to remember people like Belinda Sutton, praying and pleading in the courts for the meager pension promised her so it may “scatter comfort over the short and downward path” of her life in the “old world” she inhabited, a world not too different than our own.

We also lit a lantern with our chalice. Later today, as we bear its light on the Witness Pilgrimage, it will serve as a symbolic bridge to our wondering and worship here this morning. It will be a sign of the eternal quest for freedom, the prayers of old and the prayers of today for true Shalom. It will recall the two lights in the tower of the Old North Church, sending a brave patriot into the night so the people could rouse and rise in defense of their dignity and in pursuit of full citizenship in this corner of the Deep North.

May its light shine brightly and may our journey serve as a prayer in service to the Beloved Community, present among us and waiting to be made real. May we keep the lamp of hope alive this day and for all the days to come. Amen.