

February 26, 1638

First Slaves Arrive in Massachusetts



On this day in 1638, a ship returned to Massachusetts Bay from the West Indies after a seven-month voyage. Its cargo included cotton, tobacco and, as far as we know, the first enslaved Africans to be imported into Massachusetts. When the Pequot Indians lost a war with the English in 1638, the fate of the vanquished was to be enslaved by the victors. The defiant Pequots made poor slaves, however, and many of them were shipped to Bermuda in exchange for African bondsmen. In 1641 the Massachusetts Bay Colony adopted a code of laws that made slavery legal. It would remain so for the next 140 years.

In 1752, black people made up 10% of Boston's population.

Men in Puritan-era Massachusetts bought, sold, and held enslaved Africans from the 1630s until slavery in the colony slowly dissolved in the aftermath of the American Revolution. In 1641 Massachusetts Bay Colony was the first of Britain's mainland colonies to make slavery legal.

The first mention of a black person in the colony dates from 1633. An English visitor published "a true and lively" description of New England for readers back at home. It includes an account of Indians who ". . . were worse scared than hurt" when they came upon a black man in the woods. They sought help from a local farmer who "finding him to be a poor wandering blackamore [black man], conducted him to his master." It is possible that this man was not enslaved but an indentured servant. In any case, it seems clear from the Indians' reaction that black men were a rare sight in Massachusetts during the first decade of English settlement.

Within a few years, the situation changed markedly. In 1636-1637 the Pequots fought and lost a [war with the English](#), who enslaved Native people they took captive. The Pequots resisted enslavement, however, and frustrated that the Indians would "not endure the yoke," the Puritans sent them to Bermuda in exchange for African slaves.

On February 28, 1638, the governor of the Bay Colony noted in his journal that a ship arriving from Bermuda had enslaved Africans aboard. "Mr. Pierce, in the Salem ship, the *Desire*, returned from the West Indies after seven months. He . . . brought some cotton, and tobacco, and Negroes." Earlier ships may well have carried enslaved Africans to Massachusetts, but this is the first documented case.

Charlestown, July 24th, 1769.

TO BE SOLD,

On THURSDAY the third Day
of AUGUST next,

A CARGO
OF
NINETY-FOUR
PRIME, HEALTHY



NEGROES,

CONSISTING OF
Thirty-nine MEN, Fifteen BOYS,
Twenty-four WOMEN, and
Sixteen GIRLS.

JUST ARRIVED,
In the Brigantine DEMBIA, *Francis Bare*, Master, from SIERRA-
LEON, by
DAVID & JOHN DEAS.

Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

"Mr. Pierce, in the Salem ship, the *Desire*, returned from the West Indies after seven months. He . . . brought some cotton, and tobacco, and Negroes."

The enslaved people on the *Desire* represented a public investment by the colony's leaders. In March of 1639, the General Court voted to reimburse the

man who had purchased the Africans for his expenses; he was to repay the colony from the proceeds when he sold the slaves.

The legal status of slavery in the Bay Colony was codified two years later when Massachusetts adopted the "Body of Liberties." While this document guaranteed civil rights to British colonists, paradoxically it also specified that slavery was allowed in cases where slaves were "taken in just wars, [or] as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us." A 1670 law made it legal for the children of enslaved women to be sold into bondage; beginning in 1680, the colony had laws restricting the movement of black men and women.

Because the colony was not well suited to plantation agriculture, most Massachusetts families rarely held more than one or two people in bondage. Slave-owners tended to live in coastal towns; their bondsmen were frequently used to assist in the family business. As a result, Massachusetts masters generally preferred younger enslaved men, who were less expensive than older ones but who could be easily trained for specialized tasks. It was not unheard of for a Massachusetts man to send a quantity of rum aboard a ship bound for the Indies with instructions for the captain to bring home an African child.

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The enslaved men and women brought to Massachusetts tended to be those "left over" after West Indian plantation owners had purchased the strongest or "likeliest" men and women for field work. The younger or weaker Africans were sent on to New England and sold individually or in small groups. In 1717 one New England trader advised his brother that, if he could not get a good price for all his slaves in the West Indies, to "bring some home; I believe they will sell well." Indeed, the institution of slavery played a central role in the economy of colonial New England.

Ships left Boston, Salem, and Newburyport with fish to feed the enslaved Africans laboring on the sugar plantations of the West Indies and lumber to build barrels in which to ship sugar and molasses. Vessels returned from the Indies loaded with molasses and often carrying a number of enslaved men

and women to be sold in the Bay Colony. The molasses was distilled into rum, some of which was sold locally; the rest was shipped to Africa and traded for captured men and women.

Since masters rarely held enough enslaved people to justify building a separate residence, most slaves in colonial Massachusetts shared the living quarters and domestic routine of their master's family. Later apologists claimed this arrangement created bonds of affection and familiarity that eased the plight of the slaves, and while in some cases conditions were less harsh in New England than on southern plantations, in reality slavery in the North was no less brutal. The Puritan missionary [John Eliot](#) "lamented . . . with a bleeding and burning passion, that the English used their Negroes but as their Horses or the Oxen, and that so little care was taken about their immortal Souls.

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In 1700 there were approximately 90,000 people living in New England. The black population numbered about 1,000, roughly half of whom lived in Massachusetts. Within the colony, black residents were clustered in Boston and other coastal towns. Enslaved people were a small enough minority that Massachusetts slave owners had little reason to fear an uprising. Even so, in 1723 Boston passed a law forbidding enslaved men and women to be on the streets at night or to be found "idling or lurking together."

By the mid-1700s African slavery was well established in Massachusetts. Newspapers in coastal towns regularly carried advertisements for "likely" young Africans, just arrived or, "seasoned" for several months or a year in the West Indies. Tax collectors recorded the value of slaves owned, and wills show that enslaved men and women were distributed along with other property.

In 1752, black people made up 10% of Boston's population. On the eve of the Revolution, Massachusetts had over 5,200 black residents, more than any

other New England colony but still a small number compared to colonies in other regions.

Massachusetts was among first states in the new nation to address the institution of slavery. As a result of [lawsuits](#) brought by African Americans, in 1783 Massachusetts courts declared that "the idea of slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct and [the Commonwealth's] Constitution." Although some have interpreted this statement as abolition of slavery, it is more likely that the institution simply faded away in the aftermath of the Revolution.