New England's hidden history

More than we like to think, the North was built on slavery.

By Francie Latour | September 26, 2010

In the year 1755, a black slave named Mark Codman plotted to kill his abusive master. A God-fearing man, Codman had resolved to use poison, reasoning that if he could kill without shedding blood, it would be no sin. Arsenic in hand, he and two female slaves poisoned the tea and porridge of John Codman repeatedly. The plan worked — but like so many stories of slave rebellion, this one ended in brutal death for the slaves as well. After a trial by jury, Mark Codman was hanged, tarred, and then suspended in a metal gibbet on the main road to town, where his body remained for more than 20 years.

It sounds like a classic account of Southern slavery. But Codman's body didn't hang in Savannah, Ga.; it hung in present-day Somerville, Mass. And the reason we know just how long Mark the slave was left on view is that Paul Revere passed it on his midnight ride. In a fleeting mention from Revere's account, the horseman described galloping past "Charlestown Neck, and got nearly opposite where Mark was hung in chains."

When it comes to slavery, the story that New England has long told itself goes like this: Slavery happened in the South, and it ended thanks to the North. Maybe

we had a little slavery, early on. But it wasn't *real* slavery. We never had many slaves, and the ones we did have were practically family. We let them marry, we taught them to read, and soon enough, we freed them. New England is the home of abolitionists and underground railroads. In the story of slavery — and by extension, the story of race and racism in modern-day America — we're the heroes. Aren't we?

As the nation prepares to mark the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War in 2011, with commemorations that reinforce the North/South divide, researchers are offering uncomfortable answers to that question, unearthing more and more of the hidden stories of New England slavery — its brutality, its staying power, and its silent presence in the very places that have become synonymous with freedom. With the markers of slavery forgotten even as they lurk beneath our feet — from graveyards to historic homes, from Lexington and Concord to the halls of Harvard University — historians say it is time to radically rewrite America's slavery story to include its buried history in New England.

"The story of slavery in New England is like a landscape that you learn to see," said Anne Farrow, who co-wrote "Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited From Slavery" and who is researching a new book about slavery and memory. "Once you begin to see these great seaports and these great historic houses, everywhere you look, you can follow it back to the agricultural trade of the West Indies, to the trade of bodies in Africa, to the unpaid labor of black people."

It was the 1991 discovery of an African burial ground in New York City that first revived the study of Northern slavery. Since then, fueled by educators, preservationists, and others, momentum has been building to recognize histories hidden in plain sight. Last year, Connecticut became the first New England state to formally apologize for slavery. In classrooms across the country, popularity has soared for educational programs on New England slavery designed at Brown University. In February, Emory University will hold a major conference on the role slavery's profits played in establishing American colleges and universities, including in New England. And in Brookline, Mass., a program called Hidden Brookline is designing a virtual walking tour to

illuminate its little-known slavery history: At one time, nearly half the town's land was held by slave owners.

"What people need to understand is that, here in the North, while there were not the large plantations of the South or the Caribbean islands, there were families who owned slaves," said Stephen Bressler, director of Brookline's Human Relations-Youth Resources Commission. "There were businesses actively involved in the slave trade, either directly in the importation or selling of slaves on our shores, or in the shipbuilding, insurance, manufacturing of shackles, processing of sugar into rum, and so on. Slavery was a major stimulus to the Northern economy."

Turning over the stones to find those histories isn't just a matter of correcting the record, he and others say. It's crucial to our understanding of the New England we live in now.

"The absolute amnesia about slavery here on the one hand, and the gradualness of slavery ending on the other, work together to make race a very distinctive thing in New England," said Joanne Pope Melish, who teaches history at the University of Kentucky and wrote the book "Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and 'Race' in New England, 1780-1860." "If you have obliterated the historical memory of actual slavery — because we're the free states, right? — that makes it possible to turn around and look at a population that is disproportionately poor and say, it must be their own inferiority. That is where New England's particular brand of racism comes from."

Dismantling the myths of slavery doesn't mean ignoring New England's role in ending it. In the 1830s and '40s, an entire network of white Connecticut abolitionists emerged to house, feed, clothe, and aid in the legal defense of Africans from the slave ship Amistad, a legendary case that went all the way to the US Supreme Court and helped mobilize the fight against slavery. Perhaps nowhere were abolition leaders more diehard than in Massachusetts: Pacifist William Lloyd Garrison and writer Henry David Thoreau were engines of the antislavery movement. Thoreau famously refused to pay his taxes in protest of slavery, part of a philosophy of civil disobedience that would later influence Martin Luther King Jr. But Thoreau was tame compared to Garrison, a flame-thrower known for shocking audiences. Founder of the New England Anti-Slavery Society and the newspaper The Liberator, Garrison once burned a copy of the US Constitution at a July Fourth rally, calling it "a covenant with death." His cry for total, immediate emancipation made him a target of death threats and kept the slavery question at a perpetual boil, fueling the moral argument that, in time, would come to frame the Civil War.

But to focus on crusaders like Garrison is to ignore ugly truths about how unwillingly New England as a whole turned the page on slavery. Across the region, scholars have found, slavery here died a painfully gradual death, with emancipation laws and judicial rulings that either were unclear, poorly enforced, or written with provisions that kept slaves and the children born to them in bondage for years.

Meanwhile, whites who had trained slaves to do skilled work refused to hire the same blacks who were now free, driving an emerging class of skilled workers back to the lowest rungs of unskilled labor. Many whites, driven by reward money and racial hatred, continued to capture and return runaway Southern slaves; some even sent free New England blacks south, knowing no questions about identity would be asked at the other end. And as surely as there was abolition, there was "bobalition" — the mocking name given to graphic, racist broadsides printed through the 1830s, ridiculing free blacks with characters like Cezar Blubberlip and Mungo Mufflechops. Plastered around Boston, the posters had a subtext that seemed to boil down to this: Who do these people think they are? Citizens?

"Is Garrison important? Yes. Is it dangerous to be an abolitionist at that time? Absolutely," said Melish. "What is conveniently forgotten is the number of people making a living snagging free black people in a dark alley and shipping them south."

Growing up in Lincoln, Mass., historian Elise Lemire vividly remembers learning of the horrors of a slaveocracy far, far away. “You knew, for example, that families were split up, that people were broken psychologically and kept compliant by the fear of your husband or wife being sold away, or your children being sold away,” said Lemire, author of the 2009 book “Black Walden,” who became fascinated with former slaves banished to squatter communities in Walden Woods.

As she peeled back the layers, Lemire discovered a history rarely seen by the generations of tourists and schoolchildren who have learned to see Concord as a hotbed of antislavery activism. “Slaves [here] were split up in the same way,” she said. “You didn’t have any rights over your children. Slave children were given away all the time, sometimes when they were very young.”

In Lemire’s Concord, slave owners once filled half of town government seats, and in one episode town residents rose up to chase down a runaway slave. Some women remained enslaved into the 1820s, more than 30 years after census figures recorded no existing slaves in Massachusetts. According to one account, a former slave named Brister Freeman, for whom Brister’s Hill in Walden Woods is named, was locked inside a slaughterhouse shed with an enraged bull as his white tormentors laughed outside the door. And in Concord, Lemire argues, black families were not so much liberated as they were abandoned to their freedom, released by masters increasingly fearful their slaves would side with the British enemy. With freedom, she said, came immediate poverty: Blacks were forced to squat on small plots of the town’s least arable land, and eventually pushed out of Concord altogether — a precursor to the geographic segregation that continues to divide black and white in New England.

“This may be the birthplace of a certain kind of liberty,” Lemire said, “but Concord was a slave town. That’s what it was.”

If Concord was a slave town, historians say, Connecticut was a slave state. It didn’t abolish slavery until 1848, a little more than a decade before the Civil War. (A judge’s ruling ended legal slavery in Massachusetts in 1783, though the date is still hotly debated by historians.) It’s a history Connecticut author and former Hartford Courant journalist Anne Farrow knew nothing about — until she got drawn into an assignment to find the untold story of one local slave.

Once she started pulling the thread, Farrow said, countless histories unfurled: accounts of thousand-acre slave plantations and a livestock industry that bred the horses that turned the giant turnstiles of West Indian sugar mills. Each discovery punctured another slavery myth. “A mentor of mine has said New England really democratized slavery,” said Farrow. “Where in the South a few people owned so many slaves, here in the North, many people owned a few. There was a widespread ownership of black people.”

Perhaps no New England colony or state profited more from the unpaid labor of blacks than Rhode Island: Following the Revolution, scholars estimate, slave traders in the tiny Ocean State controlled between two-thirds and 90 percent of America’s trade in enslaved Africans. On the rolling farms of Narragansett, nearly one-third of the population was black — a proportion not much different from Southern plantations. In 2003, the push to reckon with that legacy hit a turning point when Brown University, led by its first African-American president, launched a highly controversial effort to account for its ties to Rhode Island’s slave trade. Today, that ongoing effort includes the CHOICES program, an education initiative whose curriculum on New England slavery is now taught in over 2,000 classrooms.

As Brown’s decision made national headlines, Katrina Browne, a Boston filmmaker, was on a more private journey through New England slavery, tracing her bloodlines back to her Rhode Island forebears, the DeWolf family. As it turned out, the DeWolfs were the biggest slave-trading family in the nation’s biggest slave-trading state. Browne’s journey, which she chronicled in the acclaimed documentary “Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North,” led her to a trove of records of the family’s business at every point in slavery’s triangle

trade. Interspersed among the canceled checks and ship logs, Browne said, she caught glimpses into everyday life under slavery, like the diary entry by an overseer in Cuba that began, “I hit my first Negro today for laughing at prayers.” Today, Browne runs the Tracing Center, a nonprofit to foster education about the North’s complicity in slavery.

“I recently picked up a middle school textbook at an independent school in Philadelphia, and it had sub-chapter headings for the Colonial period that said ‘New England,’ and then ‘The South and Slavery,’ ” said Browne, who has trained park rangers to talk about Northern complicity in tours of sites like Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell. “Since learning about my family and the whole North’s role in slavery, I now consider these things to be my problem in a way that I didn’t before.”

If New England’s amnesia has been pervasive, it has also been willful, argues C.S. Manegold, author of the new book “Ten Hills Farm: The Forgotten History of Slavery in the North.” That’s because many of slavery’s markers aren’t hidden or buried. In New England, one need look no further than a symbol that graces welcome mats, door knockers, bedposts, and all manner of household decor: the pineapple. That exotic fruit, said Manegold, is as intertwined with slavery as the Confederate flag: When New England ships came to port, captains would impale pineapples on a fence post, a sign to everyone that they were home and open for business, bearing the bounty of slave labor and sometimes slaves themselves.

“It’s a symbol everyone knows the benign version of — the happy story that pineapples signify hospitality and welcome,” said Manegold, whose book centers on five generations of slaveholders tied to one Colonial era estate, the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, Mass., now a museum. The house features two carved pineapples at its gateposts.

By Manegold’s account, pineapples were just the beginning at this particular Massachusetts farm: Generation after generation, history at the Royall House collides with myths of freedom in New England — starting with one of the most mythical figures of all, John Winthrop. Author of the celebrated “City Upon a Hill” sermon and first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Winthrop not only owned slaves at Ten Hills Farm, but in 1641, he helped pass one of the first laws making chattel slavery legal in North America.

When the house passed to the Royalls, Manegold said, it entered a family line whose massive fortune came from slave plantations in Antigua. Members of the Royall family would eventually give land and money that helped establish Harvard Law School. To this day, the law school bears a seal borrowed from the Royall family crest, and for years the Royall Professorship of Law remained the school’s most prestigious faculty post, almost always occupied by the law school dean. It wasn’t until 2003 that an incoming dean — now Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan — quietly turned the title down.

Kagan didn’t publicly explain her decision. But her actions speak to something Manegold and others say could happen more broadly: not just inserting footnotes to New England heritage tours and history books, but truly recasting that heritage in all its painful complexity.

“In Concord,” Lemire said, “the Minutemen clashed with the British at the Old North Bridge within sight of a man enslaved in the local minister’s house. The fact that there was slavery in the town that helped birth American liberty doesn’t mean we shouldn’t celebrate the sacrifices made by the Minutemen. But it does mean New England has to catch up with the rest of the country, in much of which residents have already wrestled with their dual legacies of freedom and slavery.”

Francie Latour is an associate editor at Wellesley magazine and a former Globe reporter. ■