

BLACK HISTORY

SEIZING AGENCY:

Black Nantucket and the Abolitionist Press, 1832-48

by Justin Parisau

Justin A. Parisau, a 2003 graduate of Boston College and recipient of an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship in Humanistic Studies, completed a research thesis in his senior year called, "A Separate World: Black Nantucket and the Fight for Equality, 1769 - 1858" which is on file at the Nantucket Historical Association library. Last year Parisau was awarded a Paul Cuffe Memorial Fellowship through Mystic Seaport's Munson Institute of American Maritime Studies. He is currently at The College of William and Mary completing his dissertation entitled, "Abolitionist Whalemens: Race, Class and Antislavery Activism in the New England Whalefishery, 1775 - 1877." The document explores the treatment of African American whalemens aboard ship and whether the whaling fleet's mixed race crews put abolitionist rhetoric into practice at sea.

Editor's Note: This article is excerpted from chapters three and four of Justin Parisau's Advanced Independent Research Project written in his senior year at Boston College: "A Separate World: Black Nantucket and the Fight for Equality, 1769-1858," a copy of which can be found at the NHA Research Library. Expanding on earlier research by Nantucket scholars Barbara Linebaugh White, Isabel Kaldenbach, Frances Karttunen, and others, Parisau's research in off-island newspapers sheds new light on Nantucket's New Guinea community.

As black Nantucketers continued to reach beyond the confines of New Guinea and the shores of Nantucket in order to unite with their black counterparts in other communities in the cause against slavery and for equality, the abolitionist movement at home was growing stronger and more affluent. The focus for abolition-minded Nantucketers was by 1840 shifting to their home island.

The abolitionist press provided a voice for those oppressed by slavery and inequality. *The Liberator* and the *Colored American* became engines for social change that were embraced by black elites, even those blacks who resided thirty miles off shore on Nantucket Island. The weddings of Caroline Boston and Randolph Cooper were also representative of

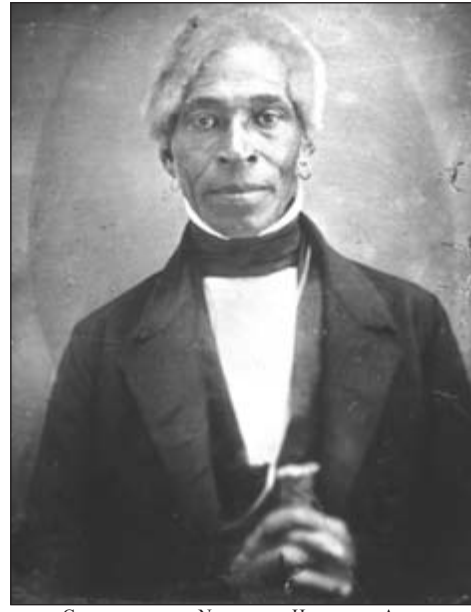
the New Guinea community's attempt to break out of the roles defined by race relations on Nantucket. Declaring marriage intentions and publishing news of the ceremonies, though seemingly a simple act, carried a deeper meaning that resonated within the social structure of New Guinea. Whether the affirmation of a captain's standing in society, as in the case of Absalom Boston, or of the triumphant victory of Arthur Cooper and his family over slavery, the messages were declarations of pride to a wide audience of readers. They were also declarations of independence from the oppressive forces that debased blacks and painted them as criminal and irredeemable. By 1839, New Guinea residents were consistently reaching beyond the confines of the small neighborhood that comprised their home. It was only a matter of time before pride and honor began to chafe against traditional social norms. The 1840s would be a major watershed in Nantucket history for all island residents, but not before there were major clashes over the issues of slavery and social equality for blacks.

Captain Edward J. Pompey, the man who took up the mantle of leadership during the 1830s in concert with Absalom Boston, would not make it beyond the 1840s, dying of "consumption" on Oct. 6, 1848, at roughly the age of forty-eight. He succumbed to the disease known today as tuberculosis and one common and well known to Nantucket's blacks. Among the final records associated with Pompey's life, the inventory of Pompey's estate compiled in November of that same year stands out and reveals much about New Guinea's involvement in the abolitionist movement. When executors of Pompey's estate compiled this record, they found several books of note owned either as personal property or in the inventory of his New Guinea store. Along with such titles as "Hist. of Nantucket," a "History of the late war," and "Prayers and devotions," were books related to the antislavery movement that was so much a part of Pompey's life. The appraisers noted a "Lecture on Slavery," as well as a "life of Danl. Webster." Most telling, however, were the discoveries of the "Narrative of Wm Brown," undoubtedly the "Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive

developers.

"I think that it's really important that the board pay attention to the neighbors," said island attorney Rhoda Weinman, representing the 300 members of the Madaket Conservation Association. "I have never in my time here seen 48 letters in opposition to something. You've got the entire Madaket neighborhood in opposition here."

Madaket residents are nervous about the amount of traffic and parking problems the club could generate. There are only 36 proposed parking spaces, which could be especially troublesome during the summer when beachgoers jam the area with vehicles. Residents are also



COURTESY OF THE NANTUCKET HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

A fugitive from slavery, Reverend Arthur Cooper arrived on Nantucket with his family in 1820. Two years later when an agent for his former owner came to the island to claim him, Nantucket Quakers assisted their escape.

Slave," published a year before in 1847 out of Boston, and three copies of the "Life of Douglass," the famous "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," published for the first time in 1845. Both works recalled the horrors of slavery, with the Douglass narrative dramatically recounting the proud moment for himself and black Nantucket when, in August 1841, he had addressed the antislavery convention gathered on the island and began his career as an abolitionist.

Of the books associated with Pompey that survive in the historical record, the edition with the most copies, the "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," emerges as the book most important to him and his customers. The single entry "3 Life of Douglass" speaks volumes about the conviction of New Guinea residents in the fight to end slavery, and to their hopes and dreams for a promising future and equality as the community ventured onward without one of its leading advocates. Their collective memory was of Douglass in 1841, delivering a powerful rendition of his escape from slavery, not of the riots and civil unrest of 1842.

Nantucket in the 1840s was the scene of a concerted effort in favor of abolition, the beginning of Frederick Douglass's career, and terrible mob violence that recalled the slaveholding past of some of Nantucket's first Quakers. A minority of Nantucketers engaged in an open discourse that ran

counter to popular opinion. While some northerners were rabid supporters of slavery, far more were, at the very least, indifferent to the degradation of an entire race of people who suffered, forced to "wear the painful yoke" in the words of one Nantucket newspaper. Nantucket's abolitionist movement survived the 1840s, with New Guinea continuing to prosper and grow during this period. *The Nantucket Inquirer*, however, saw in August 1845 clear portents of terrible hardship:

"Upon the political horizon of our country, at the present time, there are to be seen clouds of darkness gathering. What it imports none can tell, save those who are well versed in political knowledge. We should, however, be upon the look-out, and watch with eagerness the changes in the position, and the general direction of these clouds, many of which are evidently charged with influences which, like the lightning, may be needed to purify the moral atmosphere. Our land is covered with churches, but we doubt whether all these, even if thrown into one, would be sufficient to save her from wrath which her sons and daughters have provoked, and which may yet burst upon us for our misdeeds, as a nation nominally Christian. Let us be wise, and repent of our GREAT OFFENSE."

For Nantucket's Quakers, and black residents especially, who were deeply invested in the plight of southern slaves, the clouds of darkness remained over a land whose basic freedoms were rooted in slavery. As long as the country's greatest sin remained a part of the political landscape, the stability of American society remained in question. Set against the backdrop of the abolitionist press and black activism, developments in New Guinea from 1832 to 1848 provided hope for Nantucket as a local community, in spite of the darkness that pervaded national affairs. Nantucket's black elite subscribed to abolitionist newspapers, read the fugitive-slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, and connected themselves to a larger black community. Those efforts helped facilitate their fight for dignity and social justice in the face of oppression, and allowed some light to shine through the ominous clouds forming on the horizon. ■

OPPOSITION

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Cottage & Castle, Inc., and Greg Cohen, came to the Planning Board meeting with changes they hoped would allay some of the concerns the board and Madaket residents had about the club. The Nantucket Sporting Club is planned to accommodate up to 300 members, a 60-seat restaurant and a three-lane bowling alley, and also to store ammunition and provide areas for gutting deer, fish and other game.

But neighbors of the project and other Madaket residents, armed with quality-of-life concerns, aimed criticism at the

anxious about perceived noise levels they believe will increase due to traffic, early morning hunting and fishing excursions embarking from the property, along with restaurant use and other functions at the club.

Additionally, when summer comes, some residents lamented, the need for restrooms and a small general store — a store like the now-closed West End Market slated for demolition as part of the project — has almost become a necessity for beachgoers. The Nantucket Sporting Club, Madaket residents said, is not offering any help for this situation.

"I really feel that this would be a public benefit if this were open to the public,"

said Leslie Johnson, of 51 Washington Ave. "I don't think anybody is against a facility for the restaurant and a place to gather, [but] this inhibits this by having it be privatized — the privatization scares people away."

Sylvie O'Donnell of 259 Madaket Road agreed, spelling out Madaket's need for summertime amenities.

"People do come to Madaket to enjoy the beach, and in the past there's been a place to get some drinking water or something to eat, and now that facility will not be available to beachgoers anymore," she said.

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