

“Saved but Enslaved: Hannah Hovey, Briton Hammon, and the Earliest Black and Indigenous Members of Plymouth’s First Church, 1708-1783”

Rationale

I seek support from the Research Council’s Social and Racial Justice Award Program for my project, “Saved but Enslaved: Hannah Hovey, Briton Hammon, and the Earliest Black and Indigenous Members of Plymouth’s First Church, 1708-1783.” It delivers the first history of black and indigenous participation in First Church of Christ of Plymouth (FCCP). Dating back to 1622, FCCP served as the spiritual ground zero for the Pilgrims who made the perilous voyage across the Atlantic on the Mayflower. As such, it is an enduring symbol of the promise of religious freedom and unfettered self-making that defines America’s origin narrative. On June 3, 1762, Hannah Hovey, a black bondswoman living in Plymouth, MA, and Briton Hammon, an enslaved sailor at the center of the first African American slave narrative, were married in FCCP (*PCR* 493). I use their marriage in and relationship to First Church to frame an exploration of the history of people of color in this institution. My project follows these parishioners through church archives, the records of white members with whom they were affiliated, and the expanding literature on black and indigenous life in colonial New England in order to understand the affordances and limitations of church affiliation for people of color. This line of inquiry has direct implications for better understanding Briton Hammon, a foundational figure in African American literary studies; the ways race, law, and religion textured black and indigenous life in colonial America; and African American and Native claims to sacraments, spaces, and affective bonds that were vital to their sense of themselves as complex human beings.

Significance

Within African American literary studies, Briton Hammon is best known for his highly mediated *Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760). It is widely regarded as the first slave narrative in the African American literary tradition and recounts the enslaved sailor’s departure from Plymouth, MA, in December of 1747, as well as the series of spectacular events that led to his unlikely return to New England over a decade later in 1760. Unfortunately, the primary source of information we have about Hammon comes from this brief, 14-page account, a document that bears the mark of significant white editorial control. Previous Hammon scholarship has focused on the dubious content of the tale, the narrative’s veiling of his enslaved status, his relationship to Natives he encounters in Florida, and Hammon’s framing of himself as a vigorous actor on the global stage (Foster; Sekora; Desrochers; Zafar; Gagnon; Hutchins). My own work has explored the diversity of captive experiences his narrative illuminates and its implications for later stories of black bondage (Green). Conference papers I have delivered and work still in progress illuminate Hammon’s forced participation in the Catholic church’s first census of Cuba in the mid 1750s, and my investigation here provides yet another historically profound way in which organized religion shaped his world. But privileging Hammon’s marriage in and connections to FCCP allows us to finally imagine a life for him beyond the timeline of his account. Hammon married Hovey in 1762, two years after he returned to Massachusetts and his narrative was published. Though it is still unclear if he knew Hovey before he left Plymouth in 1747, his marriage to her and implicit ties to FCCP give us a way to articulate a religious and secular life for him that both complicates and postdates his pioneering tale. While his account presents him as a lone figure, his church wedding foregrounds his links to family, faith, and other neglected networks of support.

Building on its significance for Hammon scholarship, this project is an important contribution to understanding black and indigenous subjects in colonial New England. It complements older and more recent work by scholars such as Lorenzo Johnston Greene, William D. Piersen, Joanne Pope Melish, James Oliver and Lois E. Horton, Jared Hardesty, and Wendy Warren that have deconstructed the myth of the always and already “free North.” Slavery had deep purchase in New England and profoundly shaped the lives of people of color. In terms of

understanding the unique position of black women like Hannah Hovey in this conversation, the research of Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck has been indispensable. It illuminates the legal and social contexts for enslaved marriage in Massachusetts as well as African American women's unique experience of matrimony in light of patriarchal and racial imperatives. But even Adams and Pleck do not discuss Hovey or other FCCP women of color, nor does any other academic study. Their stories are worth examining because they point us to the everyday experiences that attended New England slavery, which have connections to but are still very different from those of more well-known colonial black women like Phillis Wheatley.

Innovation

This project is especially noteworthy for the unprecedented way it sheds light on the lives of the invisible subjects who interfaced with the Pilgrim's founding American church. It is deeply indebted to Richard J. Boles's research, which provides the only comprehensive picture of people of color's involvement in colonial America's northern churches. Boles argues that New England whites were torn by their simultaneous investments in racial hierarchy and in the mandate to spread the gospel. Consequently, blacks and Natives were regular, if embattled, participants in eighteenth-century white spaces of worship. Forced to sit in "Negro pews" and receive communion last, they nonetheless had authentic relationships to the Holy that should not be dismissed as brainwashing or naivete. But Boles's is a macro history and does not tell a continuous story about one community of believers. The research I have done thus far reveals that the first person of color to have a recorded relationship to FCCP was a "negro man" by the name of Richard, likely free at the time, who was baptized and admitted as a member on April 18, 1708 (*PCR* 207). Richard was married to a Native woman, Mingo, and their four Afro-Native daughters were also baptized in FCCP (Price 21-22; *PCR* 207, 212). In the ensuing years, there would be isolated references to other black and indigenous participants, free and unfree, but then between 1741 and 1742, a total of 10 enslaved black people were baptized: Scipio, Janne, Dolphin, Hannah, Nanne, Nero, Boston, Centrie, Ginne, and Jack (*PCR* 511). This was a significant number when we consider that around this same time the church had approximately 180 members (521). Undoubtedly drawn to the faith by the religious fervor and egalitarian spirit fomented by the First Great Awakening, these believers repeatedly appear in church records and apparently formed the core of black and indigenous membership at FCCP until the end of constitutional slavery in Massachusetts in 1783. When Hannah became a member in "full communion" on March 27, 1748, she became a part of this cohort (528). Thus, Hannah's beginnings in and relationship to FCCP appear to be emblematic of an entire generation of invisible parishioners. This will be the first scholarly attempt to account for their history.

Methodology

My chief source of direct information about black and indigenous participants comes from a widely available but much neglected primary source: the *Plymouth Church Records, 1620-1859* (*PCR*). It is a multivolume 700+ page record of events related to the church from its founding. Inscribed in the hand of the white men who pastored the church during its early years, it provides no explicit information about the interior lives of African American and indigenous church goers, but people of color indefatigably appear in the record with such markers as "Negro," "Indian," "mulatto," and sometimes as "Ethiopian" and "colored." This has made the task of identifying participants of color relatively straightforward, even if it renders the appreciation of the nuances of Afro-Native identity and other types of difference more difficult.

I flesh out people of color's experiences by tracking their relationships to white subjects' oversized archival presence. Given the inherent limitations of this method, I recognize that many questions related to Hannah Hovey and other neglected FCCP participants can never be addressed satisfactorily by reverse engineering deeds and wills that were never meant to honor

marginalized people as complex beings. Following the lead of Saidiya Hartman, Marisa Fuentes, and others, I use my historical imagination, particularly where the archive allows, leaves off, or frustrates, to express possibilities and provocations that honor their full humanity.

I hope to complete much of the research and writing for this project within a year and will be employing two student researchers to facilitate this work. During the summer of 2023, this team and I will be returning to the *PCR* and assembling an organized grid of FCCP's people of color between 1708-1783, complete with cross references to each other, their available vital statistics, and the white congregants to whom they were connected. My team and I will then be visiting FCCP (now First Parish Plymouth, Unitarian Universalist) and other sites in Plymouth to share our initial observations, seek advice about ways to advance the project, and have conversations about how the legacy of these early congregants might be honored. In the fall, we will be researching the lives of white FCCP parishioners, as they are key to learning more about many black and indigenous FCCP participants. During the spring and early summer of 2024, I will be interpreting this data and drafting sections of the article that will showcase the project's findings.

Dissemination

I plan to disseminate this research in the form of an essay of roughly 8,500 words that I will submit to *African American Review* or another top-tier, peer-reviewed journal. I hope that this research will reframe the discussion of Hammon's life and work to include questions of religious and secular community but also introduce Hannah Hovey and other neglected FCCP members to the wider scholarly audience that they deserve. I believe my project's illumination of understudied primary sources, such as the *PCR*, will benefit other investigations of colonial people of color well into the future. Near the end of my grant period in the summer of 2024, my team and I plan to return to Plymouth and share our findings with congregants, community members, and other stakeholders in a formal presentation. I hope that this presentation will make the project's findings accessible and help the current members of First Parish Plymouth to eventually memorialize their early members of color more effectively. Whether this memorial is a page on their website or a physical marker on church grounds, it will have the potential to impact generations of believers, visitors, and historical interpreters for years to come.

Sustainability

I have already submitted a version of this proposal for this year's NEH Summer Stipends competition. The NEH is honoring the 250th year anniversary of the Declaration of Independence with its "A More Perfect Union" initiative, a venture focused on retrieving stories of "underrepresented communities." I believe my project's focus on Plymouth's First Church and its neglected parishioners of color puts it in a strong position to receive support. At a later stage of the project, I would like to apply with the leadership of First Parish and other Plymouth historical societies for a sizable grant from the Mellon Foundation to help fund a lasting and dynamic memorial to the people discussed here. With backing counted in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, Mellon's Humanities in Place initiative aims to support projects with "a place-based focus that promote greater access, interaction, and exchange" of "underacknowledged or marginalized stories." I believe such a collaborative project centered on FCCP's first people of color will be attractive to Mellon and other established sponsors.

As I hope the present proposal makes clear, the stories of disappeared people like Briton Hammon and Hannah Hovey have the potential to radically reimagine America's most cherished places and puts us in conversation with aspects of the American past that are still poorly understood. With support from the Research Council, my goal is to complete the groundwork that will eventually make me competitive for future funding, but also to mature this project in a way that befits the complex lives of FCCP's earliest congregants of color.

Works Cited

- Adams, Catherine and Elizabeth H. Pleck. *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England*. Oxford UP, 2010.
- Boles, Richard J. *Dividing the Faith: The Rise of Segregated Churches in the Early American North*. New York UP, 2020.
- Bowman, George Ernest, ed. "Plymouth Mass., Vital Records." *Mayflower Descendant: A Quarterly Magazine of Pilgrim Genealogy and History*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1924, pp. 39-44.
- Desrochers, Robert, Jr. "'Surprizing Deliverance'?: Slavery, Freedom, Language and Identity in The Narrative of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man." *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*. Ed. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould. UP of Kentucky, 2001. 153-74.
- Foster, Frances Smith. "Briton Hammon's Narrative: Some Insights into Beginnings." *CLA Journal*, vol. 21, 1977, pp. 179-86.
- Gagnon, Jeffrey. "'They Us'd Me Pretty Well': Briton Hammon and Cross-Cultural Alliances in The Maritime Borderlands of the Florida Coast." *Journeys of the Slave Narrative in the Early Americas*. Ed. Nicole N. Aljoe and Ian Finseth. U of Virginia P, 2014. 74-100.
- Green, Keith. *Bound to Respect: Antebellum Narratives of Black Imprisonment, Bondage, and Servitude, 1816-1861*. U of Alabama P, 2015.
- . "Uncommon Sufferings: Rethinking Bondage in *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man*." *Journeys in the Early American Slave Narrative*. Ed. Nicole Aljoe and Ian Finseth. U of Virginia P, 2014. 101-26.
- Greene, Lorenzo Johnston. *The Negro in Colonial New England*. Atheneum, [1942] 1968.
- Hammon, Briton. "Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man." *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*. Ed. Vincent Carretta. UP of Kentucky, 1996. 20-25.
- Hardesty, Jared Ross. *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England*. U of Massachusetts P, 2019.
- Horton, James Oliver, and Lois E. Horton. *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*. Oxford UP, 1998.
- Hutchins, Zachary. *Before Equiano: A Prehistory of the North American Slave Narrative*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2022.
- Melish, Joanne Pope. *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860*. Cornell UP, 1998.
- Piersen, W. D. *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*. U of Massachusetts P, 1988.
- Plymouth Church Records, 1620-1859*, 2 vols. Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1920.
- Plymouth County, Probate Records, 1633-1967*. Genealogical Society of Utah, 1968. *Family Search*. <http://FamilySearch.org>.
- Price, George. *The Eastons: Five Generations of Human Rights Activism, 1748-1935*. George Price, 2020.
- Sekora, John. "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative." *Callaloo*, vol. 32, 1987, pp. 482-515.
- Warren, Wendy. *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America*. Liveright, 2016.
- Zafar, Rafia. "Capturing the Captivity: African Americans among the Puritans." *MELUS*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1991, pp. 19-35.