

Elizabeth Pleck

Slavery in Puritan New England

New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America. By Wendy Warren (New York, Liveright Publishing, 2016) 268 pp. \$29.95 cloth \$18.95 paper

The footnotes in Warren's monograph, which won the Merle Curti Prize in U.S. Social History and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, are equally as worthwhile reading as the text. In one of them, Warren tells the story of Lorenzo Johnston Greene, the renowned African-American scholar of slavery in colonial New England. As a graduate student at Columbia, he was assigned a paper about the abolition of slavery in the region from 1775 to 1800. Greene recalled thinking at the time that "slavery never existed in New England." Intrigued by the subject, he conducted prodigious research, producing *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York, 1942), which became the definitive account for his time.

Greene was not alone in his original belief. There have been many explanations for the denial of slavery in New England. Among the most compelling are that the region is associated with abolitionism and that the story of slavery usually concerns the period immediately prior to the Civil War, after slavery in New England had been eliminated. Historians continue to follow Greene's path-breaking research, trying to pierce the public's amnesia about slavery in New England. In 1991, the discovery of an African burial ground at a Manhattan construction site led to dawning recognition of the presence of slavery in the North.

By 1998, scholars had caught up: Three important monographs about slavery in New England were published that year.¹ Leadership passed to public historians, journalists from the *Hartford*

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1 James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York, 1998); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, 1998); Robert K. Fitts,

Courant, the *Providence Journal*, academics at Brown University's Slavery and Justice Project, and local museum staff. More recently, historians, literary scholars, and journalists have written about this subject for a scholarly audience and for the general public. One significant new development is the attention to Indian slavery, showing both its extent and the ways in which Indian and African slavery were intertwined. Because of "the fragmented archive"—tiny bits of information about individual slaves buried in several archives—most historians have been drawn to the eighteenth century, when slaves were more numerous, and more information is available.

This deeply researched monograph depends on investigation of handwritten texts rather than the several new databases about slavery and the slave trade. Warren has tracked down references in the extant literature and added research in unpublished court cases, wills, probate inventories, and private papers in New England as well as in London. With her ability to convert a line or two in a court deposition or a will into an argument about the nature of New England slavery, Warren successfully circumvents the illegibility of the archive.

The subtitle *Slavery and Colonization in Early America* reveals the connections that Warren seeks to highlight. The most important population center in the British colonies of New England was Massachusetts Bay, founded by Puritans, who are best known for their religious ideals. Many historians have tried to find a middle ground that characterizes Puritans as motivated by profits and piety; Warren comes down heavily on the side of profit. She seeks to show how slavery was embedded in, and central to, the economic growth of the largely white, settler-based colonies of New England during the seventeenth century. The racial demography of the region is not conducive to such an inquiry, since only 2 percent of New England's population was black in 1700. Accordingly, Warren widens her vision to link two regions, New England and the Caribbean, especially Barbados, the first English settlement in that area almost entirely dependent on slave labor.

New England merchants shipped "refuse" fish, horses, other livestock, and lumber there, allowing Caribbean planters to put

slave labor to work in growing cash crops—first tobacco, then cotton or indigo, and finally sugar, the most desirable of products. Warren submits that Boston merchants and Salem sea captains were key players in the forging of modern capitalism based on this trade. She further portrays the West Indies as a dumping ground for Indians captured from wars with settlers, thereby opening Indian land to white colonists. She describes a simple process: “Indians and Africans had replaced each other in a way orchestrated by settler colonists, for the purposes of profit and expansion” (97).

An economic historian would certainly agree that maritime commerce contributed to New England’s growth in the seventeenth century; Boston and Salem no doubt profited from trade with the West Indies. But there is insufficient evidence to evaluate the contribution of West Indian trade to New England’s commercial growth, in comparison with, say, whaling, the fur trade, fish sold to mainland colonies, intercoastal shipping, or trade with southern Europe and the Canary Islands. Sketchy figures do not support a simple replacement of Indians with Africans. Estimates of Indians enslaved after New England’s major Indian wars show that hundreds of Indians were shipped to the West Indies and more were indentured and enslaved locally. In sum, New England replaced *and* added Indian servants and slaves, rather than simply substituting Africans for Indians.²

The second section of the book relates the life and labor of New England slaves to the theme of slavery and colonization. Without cash crops to cultivate, New England’s masters enlisted slave labor to do exactly the same kind of work as servants and family members. Warren summarizes a chapter about slave labor by writing that “slave conscripts [were] in the front line of colonization—lumbering woods, clearing land for planting, fencing enclosures” (130). She frames a chapter about sexual relations and kinship around the theme that chattel slavery separated families and “made personal relations fraught with sorrow” (159). A chapter about the legal system examines multiple forms of slave resistance and crimes committed by slaves.

2 Linford D. Fisher, “‘Why shall wee have peace to bee made slaves?’ Indian Surrenderers during and after King Philip’s War,” *Ethnohistory*, LXIV (2017), 91–114; Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, 2015), 76–77, 118–122.

In the third section of the book, Warren re-tells a familiar story, that of the dispute between two Puritan ministers about the abolition of the slave trade in New England at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Samuel Sewall, a former Salem witchcraft trial judge, penned an antislavery pamphlet, *The Selling of Joseph* in 1700. John Saffin, a slave owner and a fellow judge with Sewall on the Massachusetts Superior Court, sought to refute Sewall in *A Brief and Candid Answer*. Warren adheres to the standard interpretation of Sewall's pamphlet as an anomaly with little impact at the time. She cites an article by Mark Peterson about *The Selling of Joseph* in a footnote. Peterson agrees that Sewall's pamphlet did not lead to any major abolitionist fervor, but he insists that it contributed to general evangelical reform in Boston and throughout northern Europe.³

Warren uses the Sewall/Saffin debate as an opportunity to dissect Puritan racism among abolitionists and anti-abolitionists alike. An examination of racist beliefs suggests that racism, not simply profit, motivated the enslavement of Africans. But the enslavement of Indians reinforces Warren's view that land hunger, not simply racism, propelled enslavement. She writes, "English colonial ideology may have ranked Indians, as a group, somewhere above Africans, but that did not deter colonists from selling Indians into Caribbean slavery" (106).

Every book about New England slavery adopts the position that it was either milder than or, as Warren concludes, similar to slavery elsewhere in North America. Warren finds "almost nothing about early New England's practice of slavery [that] was unique to the region" (12). She insists that New England, like other English colonies, had "chattel slavery," which she defines as a master's ability to sell slaves, as the permanence of slave status, and as the inheritability of slave status from mother to child. These indicators suggest, however, that New England was indeed unique. New England had no statutes, or only vague and ambiguous ones, about many conditions of servitude that were clearly spelled out in many other colonies.

In 1641, Massachusetts enacted a Body of Liberties, specifying that slavery was permissible only for those captured in "just wars" or

3 Mark A. Peterson, "The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Antislavery, and the Protestant International," *Massachusetts Historical Review*, IV (2002), 1–22.

those who willingly sold themselves into it. The Body of Liberties, possibly the first explicit statute about slavery in the English New World colonies, was also imprecise. For Warren, its “ill defined” interdiction of slavery gave a green light to the development of slavery.⁴ The real test of what the Body of Liberties meant came four years later in a criminal prosecution of a Massachusetts ship captain and his mate for killing 100 Africans and absconding with a number of others (as well as breaking the Sabbath) when they torched a Guinean village on a slave-trading voyage. The authorities in Massachusetts ordered the release of the Africans that these sailors brought back with them, and the Puritans wrote a public apology to be sent to the surviving Africans near the decimated town. Warren sees the case as more of an anomaly than a fundamental debate about the morality of the slave trade. Nonetheless, she explicates it with more subtlety than previous scholars. She writes, “What was Puritan about the trial was the insistence on rigorous adherence to the law, what was English about the trial was the series of events that led to it, and what was human about it, just maybe, was that it left some people disturbed” (42).

The ill-defined nature of New England’s slavery can be seen in a more positive light. In the early days, a few New England settlers had African indentured servants—men who became free after the contract for their service ended.⁵ Moreover, Warren mentions two enslaved men—Angola (also called Angelo) in Boston and Roco in Springfield—who entered into contracts with their owners to buy their freedom, and other evidence shows that a couple of other owners made the same deal, largely as a means of freeing themselves from a rebellious male slave.⁶ The inheritance of slavery through the mother’s line was also ambiguous. Custom may have validated it, but no clear statute explicitly stated this principle. Occasionally,

4 In an unpublished paper—“‘Man Stealing, Bond Slaverie & Villinage’: Reconsidering Slavery & Slave Law in Early Massachusetts and England’s Empire” (2018)—Holly Brewer regards this case as a major debate about the legality and morality of slavery. Moreover, she argues that in comparison with other colonies, the law permitting slavery for captives in “just wars” was a much more limited rationale for slavery than those found in the statutes of other colonies.

5 George Henry Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York, 1866), 9. For Peter Swinck, see Henry M. Burt, *The First Century of the History of Springfield* (Springfield, Mass., 1898), 302.

6 Warren, *New England Bound*, 121–124, 137–139, 172–175, 235–236, 239–241. Michelle Morris, *Under Household Government: Sex and Family in Puritan Massachusetts* (New York, 2013), 20.

Indians and Africans signed contracts with their owners, consenting to their enslavement, precisely because the inheritability of slavery was not a settled legal matter.⁷ Moreover, after the General Assembly of Connecticut in 1704 overruled a decision affirming a biracial man's claim not to be a slave because his father was English, the man's fellow townsmen in Hartford refused to turn him into the authorities, allowing him to remain free.⁸ Manumission was similarly ill-defined because, as Warren points out, it might be conditional, or result in a former slave becoming an indentured servant as a more stable economic arrangement than being a free laborer.

Angola and Roco, the two slaves mentioned above who won freedom for themselves, had names related to the current nation of Angola, a gigantic swath of central west Africa that the Portuguese had colonized. Warren emphasizes New England's slave trade with Guinea and the Gold Coast, but some of the slaves in New England were originally from Angola and were bounty stolen from another empire's slave trade with Africa. The union of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns facilitated a surge in the transatlantic slave trade from Angola, mostly to Brazil. English privateers raided the human cargo of Portuguese ships in the Caribbean and brought the slaves into the ports of colonial North America to sell. Moreover, the Dutch briefly established a foothold in a small slice of Brazil, where African slaves cultivated sugar. When the Dutch power in these areas deteriorated, Dutch slave traders sold slaves brought to Brazil from Angola to the English in the Caribbean.⁹

As a result of these trade routes, a small group of Africans from Angola in New England shared work, intermarried, and supported each other in winning freedom. Warren notes the existence of such a social network from Angola in New Amsterdam; other scholars located ones in colonial Virginia and the eastern coast of Maryland.¹⁰ One clue to such a network is the presence of Spanish-Luso names among Africans in New England. Warren notes that

7 Newell, *Brethren by Nature*, 173.

8 *Ibid.*, 248.

9 April Lee Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia, 2004), 165–166.

10 Douglas Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia: Indians, Englishmen, and Africans on the Eastern Shore during the Seventh Century* (New York, 1993), 374–379; Timothy H. Breen, "Myne Owne Ground": *Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640–1676* (New York, 1980), 7–18. For the early presence of Angolans in the Spanish Caribbean, see David Wheat, *Atlantic Africa and the Spanish Caribbean, 1570–1650* (Chapel Hill, 2016), 68–103.

slaves from west-central Africa often took Portuguese names even before the Atlantic slave trade. She writes, “Manual’s name suggests non-English origins: was he linguistically skilled? Was he trained in some special way?” (296). She also refers to the Spanish-sounding name of Wonn (121).

Warren tells the story of Sebastian Kane, a free black man in Boston, who bought Angola’s remaining servant time without disclosing their friendship as fellow countrymen from Angola. Later in life, as a free man, Angola worked alongside Meneno, another man with a Portuguese name.¹¹ Angola also had a son-in-law, Philip Sabatta, with a Portuguese-sounding name. In addition to those names, sixteen other Portuguese-sounding names appear in the text and footnotes of *New England Bound*, including three men named Mingo (short for Domingo).

Portuguese-sounding names are a clue about background and identity, suggesting something about the survival and adaptation of African cultural practices in New England. Who were John and Gallio Nota? The willingness of Dudley Bradstreet, their owner, to allow them a surname other than his own implies that the Notas were able to maintain a modicum of control and personal identity. The very fact that slaves did not universally receive first names from their owners and occasionally retained surnames, sometimes taking their father’s first name as a surname, shows that all traces of their prior identity did not disappear.

Puzzling as it may seem, the same Puritans who sought to dictate the terms of a favored slave’s manumission did not insist on naming their human property. Berlin dubbed slaves with this degree of autonomy “Atlantic Creoles.” Their familiarity with Christianity and European languages and customs enabled them to establish friendly relationships with masters and former owners. Angola owned a dwelling house, land, and a cow in Boston; Roco had a house and 60 acres of land in Springfield. Not every Angolan, however, gained freedom and became a landowner. Basto, a slave in Boston, was convicted of having raped his master’s daughter.¹² Nonetheless, the undeniable success stories of some of New England’s

11 Melinde Lutz Sanborn, “Angola and Elizabeth: An African Family in the Massachusetts Bay Colony,” *New England Quarterly*, LXXII (1999), 119–129.

12 Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (New York, 1998), 17–28; Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, “‘Canniball’ Negroes, Atlantic Creoles, and the Identity of New England’s Charter Generation,” *African Diaspora*, IV (2011), 76–94.

slaves provides some balance with the equally valid stories of hunger, slave suicide, alienation, and isolation that Warren tells.¹³

New England was unique in having no laws that prohibited marriages among slaves. In 1654, a wealthy Boston merchant, who was also an assistant to the General Court of the colony, performed the marriage ceremony of Angola and Elizabeth, the first slave couple to be married in New England. The Puritans believed that legal marriage was a better option for slaves than sinful sex outside marriage, although it did not prevent the sale of married slaves' family members. Gloria McCahon Whiting's "Power, Patriarchy, and Provision," published after *New England Bound* appeared, highlights the importance of common-law and legal marriages among slaves in New England. Whiting characterizes New England slave marriages as matrifocal in structure (mothers and children often living separately from the husband), but patriarchal in practice. Warren's chapter about intimate relationships between Africans states that slave marriages were rare. Her text and footnotes refer to five slave marriages in seventeenth-century New England; additional research suggests nineteen more.¹⁴

"How could a servant be a patriarch?" writes Warren. Whiting itemized several ways. Owners allowed enslaved men hired out as laborers to keep their earnings, which slaves could use to buy their freedom. Warren reports that masters could release slaves for several days a week to plant crops to feed themselves and their families (179). Moreover, Massachusetts courts also required enslaved men who were not legally married to earn wages to pay child support—a recognition that they were providers for their children, even while they remained the property of an owner.

Warren's writing style—bracing, humorous, and occasionally cynical—is as noteworthy as her interpretations. She does not pull any punches: "There was as much cruelty to the slave trade as cupidity" (38). She belongs to the school of "artful historians"

13 For assimilation to English norms through the Anglicization of Portuguese names, see Gloria McCahon Whiting, "Power, Patriarchy, and Provision: African Families Negotiate Gender and Slavery in New England," *Journal of American History*, CIII (2016), 599, n. 30.

14 *A Report of the Record Commissioners Containing Boston Births, Baptisms, Marriages, and Deaths, 1630–1699* (Boston, 1883); William H. Whitmore and William S. Appleton, *Records of the Boston Selectmen, 1701–1715* (Boston, 1884); *Vital Records of Salem* (Salem, 1918); *Vital Records of New Haven, 1649–1850* (Hartford, 1917).

who challenge the norm of writing in an objective, neutral voice, often blurring the line between history and fiction. The book club member who expects the kind of thinking and feeling characters who populate a novel will not be disappointed. In the service of providing a full portrait of one African woman's sadness about being torn from her family, Warren writes, "We might consider what Hagar felt" (154).

Artful historians are not social historians. They prefer the techniques of the novelist, including a heavy dose of speculation, served a la carte or with dollops of context supplied from the scholarly literature. Artful historians do not use databases to piece together modal life stories or to discern general patterns based on counting up cases.¹⁵ Warren sometimes claims a phenomenon to be rare or common, but the strength of this book lies in scene setting and storytelling, not in empirical representativeness. Ultimately, the theme of this highly accessible study is how the immoral conjunction of cultivating staple crops for export and racialized slavery reshaped the entire Atlantic world, beginning with a fateful exchange of goods and people between the Caribbean and New England.

15 The methodological contribution of Marissa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives* (Philadelphia, 2016), is to write about an enslaved woman's perspective even without referring to any specific enslaved woman in a historical document. She does so by imagining how the presence of slaves influenced the lives of the white people described in court cases. This method involves an even higher level of speculation than does work that refers to a genuinely documented enslaved subject.

