



## Duty and Love: Flora Lee’s Resistance to Slavery in Revolutionary Marblehead

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AS more than thirty thousand refugees descended on Nova Scotia between May 1783 and July 1784, nineteen-year-old exiled Massachusetts loyalist Mary Robie filled the pages of her diary with descriptions of a world in transition. Eager to exemplify the sensibility expected of upper-class women of the late eighteenth century, Robie carefully curated her reflections to capture the loyalist community’s unrelenting grief.<sup>1</sup> Given Robie’s usual attention to detail and penchant for descriptive accounts, one entry from the spring of 1784 stands out for its uncharacteristic brevity. On May 9, 1784, Robie wrote only, “A fine day. Received an addition to our family, a little black presented us by Mrs. Flora.” Robie provided few details about this child or about the woman who brought the child into her home, effectively condemning both to lives of service and silence.<sup>2</sup>

Robie’s comment provides a glimpse into the often-hidden world of northern slavery in the late eighteenth century and raises several important questions. Who was “Mrs. Flora?” Who was the child? What was their relationship to each other, and how did they come to live and labor in the Robie family’s

<sup>1</sup>I am very grateful to Ed Bell, Eliga Gould, Woody Holton, and Amani Whitfield, who provided thoughtful commentary on earlier drafts of this essay. My thanks also to the peer reviewers and editor Jonathan Chu for their time and invaluable suggestions.

On loyalist women as writers, see Kacy Dowd Tillman, *Stripped and Script: Loyalist Women Writers of the American Revolution* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 13–15.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Robie, Diary, May 9, 1784, Robie-Sewall Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter MHS), Boston, MA.

Halifax home? How (if at all) did their roles and status change over time, especially after the Robie family's repatriation to Massachusetts in the late 1780s? To answer these questions, this article reconstructs the life of the servant Robie mentioned in her diary, the enslaved woman Flora Lee, from 1744, when the wealthy Marblehead, Massachusetts, merchant Samuel Lee Jr. first advertised her sale, until she slipped out of the historical record shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century while laboring in the home of a wealthy Boston family. The story that emerges is both typical and exceptional, illuminating slavery and its resistance in Revolutionary Massachusetts and across the greater Northeast in two important ways.

First, Flora's fight to prevent the breakup of her family highlights enslaved New England women's ability to resist the terms of their enslavement during the Revolutionary era. Like others born into slavery throughout mid-century New England, Flora was forced to live with her enslavers from a young age. She labored throughout her life in the homes of a white family that controlled not only her labor but her children as well.<sup>3</sup> The Revolution upended this system, and Flora joined the thousands of enslaved people who found their families' future inexorably entwined with the fate of their enslavers.<sup>4</sup> When the loyalist Robie family fled Massachusetts for Nova Scotia in 1775, they left Flora in Marblehead but spirited her

<sup>3</sup>The most comprehensive study of slavery in New England remains Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620–1776* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942). For more recent studies see, for example, Edward L. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery and Emancipation in Historical Andover* (Boston: Shawsheen Press, 2021); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Natives Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), chapters 3–5; Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016); and Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup>On the breakup of Black families during the American Revolution, see Harvey Amani Whitfield, *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver, CAN: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), chapter 2. See also Herbert Gutman, *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Gloria McCahon Whiting, "Power, Patriarchy, and Provision, African Families Negotiate Gender and Slavery in New England," *Journal of American History* 103 (2016): 591–92.

daughter—who is never called by name in the family’s writings—away with them.<sup>5</sup> This separation greatly limited the ways Flora could pursue freedom because rebellion might mean losing her daughter forever. But Flora managed to accumulate wealth and keep contact with her daughter even while she remained enslaved. Upon her master’s death in 1781, Flora made the remarkable journey north to Nova Scotia to be reunited. In Halifax, she also adopted a Black boy named Prince, protecting him from the exploitation and poverty experienced by many other Blacks in Nova Scotia.<sup>6</sup> Flora could not partake in the ultimate act of rebellion by running away.<sup>7</sup> But she, like thousands of other enslaved mothers, found ways to work the tumult of the Revolution to her benefit. Flora manipulated a system meant to forcefully erase her power and agency, fighting back against the breakup of her biological family while also incorporating vulnerable others into her extended kinship network.

Second, Flora’s actions upon her return to New England in the late 1780s demonstrate the ways Black women were able to force emancipation—what scholars have called “abolition from below”—during the post-Revolutionary period even as they remained subjugated. Massachusetts’s protracted movement toward abolition began but did not end during the Revolution, and upon their return to Marblehead in the late 1780s, both Flora and Prince remained in a status of servitude that closely mirrored their previous enslavement in Revolutionary Halifax.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>That no one in the extended Robie family ever referred to Flora’s daughter by name in their writings underscores the kind of violence endemic to archival sources that Marisa J. Fuentes describes so eloquently in *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup>Harvey Amani Whitfield estimates that no fewer than 1,500, and as many as 2,500, enslaved people came to the region during and after the Revolution. In 1783, Black refugees made up at least 8 percent of the total migrant population to Halifax. See *North to Bondage*, 43, 58–59, 120 and *Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), xxv.

<sup>7</sup>On women and fugitivity during the Revolution, see Karen Cook Bell, *Bell, Running from Bondage: Enslaved Women and Their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>8</sup>Despite long-misunderstood notions cemented by centuries of popular history that the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in 1781 or 1783 that slavery was

The Robies even gave Prince to their eldest daughter when she married in 1787, no different from the widow Lee's gift of Flora's daughter to them before the Revolution. Flora too remained a "servant" in the family's home, a position she may have chosen to continue as preferable to poverty.<sup>9</sup> But she used her relationship with the extended Robie family to secure arrangements for Prince as a servant in the Sewall household and another son Juba as an apprentice with a Robie family connection in hopes these positions would lead to future independence. Exploring Flora's struggle to gain a greater measure of freedom for her children suggests that post-Revolutionary Black families remained largely matrifocal. Flora's story also accentuates how the American Revolution transformed Black women's day-to-day resistance in New England.<sup>10</sup>

Telling the stories of the enslaved accurately is not without significant challenges. Flora did not leave archival records of her own making. The evidence that remains is drawn from the writings of her enslavers: several generations of a white New England family. Like other slave owners, the extended Robie family had a vested interest in asserting authority over the people they held in bondage and from whom they expected obedience and deference, which they glossed as "faithfulness." Their personal writings defended this power. They promoted the self-interested ideology that they had a paternalistic and generational relationship to the people they enslaved. That they wrote

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incompatible with the state's constitution, the individual freedom suits decided by Massachusetts county courts the Supreme Judicial Court did not actually or effectively abolish slavery instantly or statewide. See Gloria McCahon Whiting, "Emancipation Without the Courts or Constitution: The Case of Revolutionary Massachusetts," *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 41 (2019): 458–78; E. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery*, 6–7, 26–27.

<sup>9</sup>As Thomas J. Davis explains, although Massachusetts state law created a path toward emancipation, free Blacks faced relatively few economic opportunities and thus "formed a disproportionately high percentage of the recipients of charity." "Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773–1777," *New England Quarterly* 62 (1989): 251.

<sup>10</sup>Whiting, "Power, Patriarchy, and Provision," 589. On women's day-to-day resistance in the Atlantic World, see Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2004); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

frequently about immorality and laziness, which they believed was innate to Black people's character, both suggests they were not entirely successful in governing the lives of the people they enslaved and exposes the entwining of racist beliefs and moral justifications for the enslavement of people of color. That they never wrote on the instances when enslaved people won their own freedoms further underscores their partiality. They meant this record to justify—for themselves, their posterity, and perhaps even for others in their community—their ownership of human chattel.<sup>11</sup>

For the historian nearly two and a half centuries later, however, these writings provide a crucial record of an otherwise undocumented people. These records enable scholars, in the words of Paul Lovejoy, to “put flesh on the bones of the past,” and enrich the history of enslaved people, the slave trade, and its opposition in New England. As Barbara McCaskill encouraged, these investigations seek “to recover the lost voices of those who were enslaved and those who bought, sold, and owned them.” Crucially, telling Flora's story provides a focused understanding of the strategies enslaved New England women used to resist the dehumanization of slavery despite an archival record that is, as Marisa J. Fuentes explains, “Partial, incomplete, and structured by privileges of class, race, and gender.”<sup>12</sup> Wading through personal correspondence, diary entries, and

<sup>11</sup>On the silence of enslaved people in the archive, see David Thomas, et al., *The Silence of the Archive* (London: First Publishing, 2017); Joseph C. Miller, “Historical Appreciation of the Biographical Turn,” in *Biography and the Black Atlantic*, ed. Lisa A. Lindsay and John Wood Sweet (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 19–47; and R.G.S. Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power Archival Silences, and Power in Silence,” *Archivaria* 61 (2006): 215–33. On the silence of enslaved women specifically, see Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 24.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Lovejoy, “Biography as Source Material: Towards a Biographical Archive of Enslaved Africans,” in *Source Material for Studying the Slave Trade and the African Diaspora: Papers from a Conference of the Centre of Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling, April 1996* (Stirling, UK: University of Stirling, 1996), 119; Barbara McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 12; and Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 6. See also Harvey Amani Whitfield, “White Archives, Black Fragments: Problems and Possibilities in Telling the Lives of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes,” *Canadian Historical Review* 101 (2020): 327.

probate records generated by the Robie family reveals the currents that defined Flora's life through the Revolutionary period. Importantly, and contrary to her enslavers' designs and interests, these documents also inadvertently disclose Flora's resistance to domination and control while also demonstrating her ability to effect change for herself and for members of her family.



Although slave owners often imagined the people they enslaved as members of their households, one of Flora's earliest appearances in the archival record as an object for sale demonstrates that patriarchy does not require benevolence. In early January 1744, the Marblehead merchant Samuel Lee Jr. placed a notice in the *Boston Gazette* advertising the sale of his property in nearby Manchester. The success of Lee's business partnership with his son Jerimiah had convinced him to relocate to Marblehead, and Lee sought a buyer for his Manchester estate, which included not only a "good Dwelling House" that sat on "nine Acres of Land with a good Barn and sixty Apple Trees," but also "three Fish-Houses" and "a Fishing Schooner of about 32 Tons."<sup>13</sup> The advertisement mentioned that Lee was also interested in selling "a likely Negro Girl about Six year old" with the estate. Lee does not use the enslaved girl's name, but his inclusion of her age reveals that she was most likely the child of another enslaved woman he owned, named Dille (or Delle), who had given birth to a daughter named Flowhear (probably Flora) in 1736.<sup>14</sup>

Lee's inclusion of Flora in the property advertisement reveals another reason for the proposed sale: the death of his wife Mary (née Tarrin or Tarring) Lee shortly before he placed the

<sup>13</sup>*Boston Gazette*, January 10, 1744.

<sup>14</sup>Town records indicate that Lee owned at least one enslaved woman named Taff, an enslaved couple, Stephan and Dille (or Delle), and their children. Dille and Stephan were married in 1734. Between 1731 and 1739, Dille gave birth to four children: two sons, Seser in late 1731 or early 1732 and Mengo in 1734, and two daughters, Flowhear on July 16, 1736, and Dille in 1739. For Dille's marriage to Stephan, see *Vital Records of Manchester, Massachusetts to the End of the Year 1849* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1903), 128, 228.

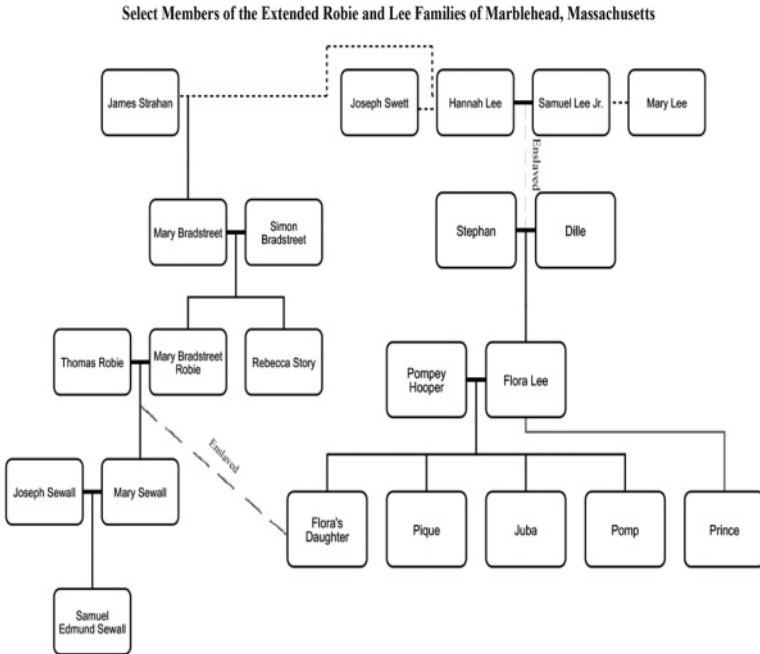


FIG. 1.—This family tree illustrates the relationship between the extended Robie family and Flora Lee's family.

advertisement.<sup>15</sup> Like other widowers, Lee had no practical use for the enslaved girl. He would have seen her as a financial burden and recognized that without a wife to direct and oversee the girl's household chores, she was of little use to him. When Lee wrote his will four years later, however, he left detailed instructions for both the dissolution of the Manchester estate and the transfer of ownership of the enslaved girl, suggesting that he had not found a buyer or had reconsidered the sale.

The cause for Lee's change of heart was his remarriage a year later to the widow Hannah Swett.<sup>16</sup> When Lee died in July 1753, his will instructed his executors to distribute his

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Amory Lee, *Colonel William Raymond Lee of the Revolution* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1917), 4.

<sup>16</sup>On Lee's marriage and the Lee family more generally, see Thomas Amory Lee, "The Lee Family of Marblehead," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 52 (1916), 149–54.

fortune equally among his children and to provide for his widow. Lee carefully protected the property his widow brought into the marriage and set aside “two Thousand Pounds old Tenor” to support her. Lee also bequeathed a life interest in his enslaved property to his widow. “I hereby give to my wife during her Life,” Lee directed, “the improvement of [the] Negro Girl called Flora, and after my wife’s Decease I give said Girl to my Daughter Abigail and her Heirs forever.”<sup>17</sup> The widow Lee was free to sell Flora, but her husband believed her labor was critical to Hannah’s independence and, after her death, anticipated that Flora would remain in the family.<sup>18</sup>

Lee’s bequest of the teenage Flora exemplifies the realities of generational slavery in eighteenth-century New England. Most enslaved people in Massachusetts lived not in separate quarters but in their enslavers’ homes. This intimacy carried an intensified degree of supervision but also allowed enslaved people opportunities to surveil the movements of other household occupants.<sup>19</sup> Lower prices for children—infants were often given for free—meant that New England enslavers could easily purchase children and train them to labor in the home or in the family business.<sup>20</sup> Flora would have been ten days shy of her seventeenth birthday at the time of Lee’s death, and Lee understood her upbringing as a domestic servant would make her useful to his widow. Other New England enslavers followed this pattern. When the widow Lee’s previous husband, Joseph Swett, died in April 1745, he left her the use of “my Negro woman” and was also careful to stipulate that if she remarried

<sup>17</sup>Last Will and Testament of Samuel Lee Jr., 1753, Essex County (Massachusetts) Probate Records: Old Series, Book 31, 418, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Archives, Boston, MA (hereafter “Essex Prob. Recs.”). The records may be accessed at FamilySearch.org: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/412735?availability=Family%20History%20Library>.

<sup>18</sup>On eighteenth-century New England wills and the reliance of widows on their children see Alexander Keyssar, “Widowhood in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts: A Problem in the History of the Family,” *Perspectives in American History* 8 (1974): 83–119.

<sup>19</sup>E. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery*, 35.

<sup>20</sup>For example, on May 11, 1773, the future Lieutenant Governor Thomas Oliver advertised, “A Very Fine Negro Child [. . .] Three Months old, to be given away, or put out with a Consideration to a good Place.” *Boston Gaz.*, May 11, 1773.



(which she did less than a year later) “the Negro, if living, [is] to be returned” to his estate.<sup>21</sup> Far less wealthy than either Swett or Lee, when Marblehead’s Robert Swan died in October 1747, he left three enslaved children—a girl, Violet, and two boys, Scipio and Cuffee—to his widow, daughter, and son, designating that his widow inherited Violet.<sup>22</sup> Lee, like other New England husbands, designed his will to relieve his widow of the burdens of domestic labor by leaving her ownership over an enslaved woman.

Lee intended Flora to assist his widow with her daily activities, but his bequest also demonstrates his understanding of what Susan E. Klepp notes in her work on slavery and fertility: “The market in human beings favored youth.”<sup>23</sup> Flora was valuable not only for her labor but also because Lee knew that as she grew, she might bear children, who would become the widow Lee’s property.<sup>24</sup> By the late 1760s, Marblehead was the sixth largest town in Britain’s thirteen mainland colonies, and as Christopher Magra describes, “The largest fishery in British North America.”<sup>25</sup> The town’s economic activities, from household production, to local and regional markets, to global trade, created demand for enslaved labor.<sup>26</sup> In 1764, Marblehead’s population was recorded as 4,954, of which 2 percent,

<sup>21</sup>Last Will and Testament of Joseph Swett, 1745, Essex Prob. Recs.: Old Series, Book 26, 260.

<sup>22</sup>Last Will and Testament of Robert Swan, 1747, Essex Prob. Recs.: Old Series, Book 27, 388–89.

<sup>23</sup>Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 28.

<sup>24</sup>No colonial legislature in New England ever passed a law enforcing *partus sequitur ventrem* as was common in southern colonies; however, the custom prevailed in common practice throughout the region. Hardesty, *Black Lives*, 16; Whiting “Power, Patriarchy, and Provision,” 588; and Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 126.

<sup>25</sup>Christopher Magra, “‘Soldiers . . . Bred to the Sea’: Maritime Marblehead, Massachusetts, and the Origins and Progress of the American Revolution,” *NEQ* 77 (2004): 533–539. See also Christopher Magra, *The Fisherman’s Cause: Atlantic Commerce and Maritime Dimensions of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7, 37; Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 70–77.

<sup>26</sup>On the critical role enslaved labor had at all levels of the New England economy see Eric Kimball, “What have we to do with slavery?” New Englanders and the Slave Economies of the West Indies,” in Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman eds.,

or roughly one hundred people, were enslaved.<sup>27</sup> The widow Lee's stepchildren from her Swett and Lee marriages were enslavers, and so too was a biological daughter from her first marriage, Mary (née Strahan) Bradstreet, who had wed the newly ordained minister of Marblehead's Second Congregational Church, Simon Bradstreet, in 1738 and moved into his lavish home where she lived alongside two enslaved people, Phillis and her son Chance.<sup>28</sup> Slavery and the slave trade were integrated into all levels of New England's economy and social structure. The widow Lee's control over Flora's future children gave her significant social power in a region dependent on slave labor.

Decades later, the widow Lee continued the pattern of generational slavery when, around 1770, she gave Flora's daughter to her granddaughter. In July 1759, the widow Lee's granddaughter, Mary Bradstreet, wed the flourishing hardware merchant, Thomas Robie. The family's fortune had risen with Marblehead's economy, and in 1772, Robie purchased a lot in the town's center and built a large brick home alongside the main street (modern Washington Street) from which he also ran his business.<sup>29</sup> As the family grew, the widow Lee became a fixture in the Robie household, helping to raise her granddaughter's four children. It seems likely that she gifted Flora's daughter to the growing Robie family to assist with household

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*Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 181–94.

<sup>27</sup>"Enslaved People in Salem, Massachusetts, December 5, 1754 as a part of the 1754 Massachusetts Slave Census," last modified 2021, accessed May 15, 2022; "MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report, Marblehead, 1985," accessed May 15, 2022. It is likely that because enslaved people were counted for tax purposes, owners intentionally underreported numbers.

<sup>28</sup>"Simon Bradstreet," in Clifford K. Shipton, Sibley's *Harvard Graduates, Vol. VIII, 1726–1730* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1951), 364–68. On Phillis and Chance, see Inventory of the Estate of the Rev. Simon Bradstreet, 1772, Essex Prob. Recs.: Old Series, Book 47, 226; Christopher Challenger Child, "Chance Bradstreet (1762–1819), Servant of Abraham Dodge of Ipswich, Massachusetts," *American Ancestors* 11, no. 4 (2010): 41–43; Katie Nodjimbadem, "Newly Uncovered Documents Address the Mystery of One Slave's Life," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 18, 2017.

<sup>29</sup>The Claim of Thomas Robie, August 23, 1786, Audit Office 12, American Loyalists Claims, Series I: Vol 10: 325, The National Archives Kew, Richmond, UK.

chores and errands.<sup>30</sup> No record remains of exactly when Flora's daughter was born or when she came to live and work in the Robie family's home; however, the 1771 tax list identifies Robie as the owner of one "Servant for Life."<sup>31</sup> Given Flora's daughter's removal to Halifax with the Robies in 1775, it is likely that she is the enslaved person listed in the census four years earlier.

A clearer picture of Flora's life and family comes through in Lee's wartime correspondence with her exiled granddaughter. In a 1779 letter to Halifax, Lee dedicated nearly a whole page to describing Flora's life in Revolutionary Marblehead. "She has become a great Madam in the Town," Lee explained of Flora, "she relishes and frolick as well as any of the Negros, who do nothing else but visit about from one house to another." The reason for this excitement, Lee noted, was prosperity brought on by wartime privateering: "Their husbands go a privateering, and hers among the rest [. . .] and bring home their black Ladies such things, as enabling them to look down, with contempt, upon many of the Whites. But this is under the Rose, for we dar[e] not say any thing."<sup>32</sup> In explaining that she kept her thoughts "under the Rose," meaning private or in secret, Lee reveals how deeply surprised Marblehead's slave owners were by the reversal of fortunes brought about by the Revolution.<sup>33</sup> But her description of Flora as "a great Madam" who "relishes and frolick as well as any of the Negros," although

<sup>30</sup>As Jennifer Morgan notes, "Slave owners simultaneously complained about and benefited from the bearing and raising of children by the enslaved" but recognized "it was advantageous to keep young children with parents to decrease the cost of caring for those children." Because Lee both lived close and spent much time with Robie, it is likely that both Lee and Robie recognized how placing Flora's daughter in the Robie household would have been mutually advantageous to both slave owners. *Reckoning with Slavery*, 194.

<sup>31</sup>Bettye Hall Pruitt ed., *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation List of 1771* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1978), accessed March 22, 2022, <https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~hsb41/masstax/masstax.cgi?state=person&person=02180909>.

<sup>32</sup>Hannah Lee to Mary Bradstreet Robie, July 26, 1779, Robie-Sewall Family Papers.

<sup>33</sup>Although coastal towns like Marblehead had grown precipitously through the 1770s, the Revolution caused a dramatic downturn in both the fishing and shipping industries, affecting both wealthy investors and working people alike. Richard Buel Jr., *In Irons: Britain's Naval Supremacy and the American Economy* (New Haven: Yale

highly racialized, suggests that Flora and other Black women openly enjoyed the new social order. The war did not give Flora her freedom; however, it had brought Black women in Marblehead wealth that elevated their social position.

Lee's focus on Flora also provides important clues to her family life. "By the way," she explained in an aside to her description of Flora's newfound social status, "I don't know that you have heard that she had consented to take Pompey Hooper again & is married to him."<sup>34</sup> Marblehead's marriage records show Rev. Isaac Story, the husband of Robie's sister Rebecca, had married the couple on July 26, 1778. Lee's emphasis that Flora had taken Hooper "again" suggests the two had previously been married and separated, or possibly married without clergy or magistrate. Further, it conveys that Robie was familiar with Hooper and the details of his relationship with Flora, underscoring the close intertwining of these two families.<sup>35</sup>

The letter also sheds light on Flora's children, explaining that she had recently lost "her two sons, Pomp & Pique," and would have "liked to have increased her flock of children but a kind Providence prevented." This note reveals that Flora had other children and also suggests that Lee felt relieved her servant would not be distracted by future pregnancy and childcare.<sup>36</sup> Although no surviving evidence clearly explains how Flora's daughter came to be in the Robies' possession, a short postscript message in the same 1779 letter to Halifax clearly reveals that the family had taken the young girl from Marblehead and her mother. At the end of her letter, Lee included

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University Press, 1998), especially chapter 2. On "under the rose," see OED Online. December 2022. Oxford University Press, accessed January 13, 2023.

<sup>34</sup>Lee to Mary Bradstreet Robie, July 26, 1779.

<sup>35</sup>*Vital Records of Marblehead, Massachusetts to the End of the Year 1849 Vol II* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1904), 471. "Negro marriages" were common between enslaved people, especially those belonging to different masters. See Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom*, 87–88 and Piersen, *Black Yankees*, 153.

<sup>36</sup>Lee to Mary Bradstreet Robie, July 26, 1779. Entries in the Beverly marriage records show the published intentions in November 1797 and their marriage the following year between "Mr. Pomp Hooper of Andover and Miss Judith Paine of Beverly" and suggest that Flora's children may have gone to live away from her. *Vital Records of Beverly, Massachusetts to the End of the Year 1849, Vol II* (Topsfield, MA: Topsfield Historical Society, 1907), 361.

a short note that captures one of the few instances of Flora's voice in the archival record. Highlighting Flora's understanding that her continued loyalty to her enslavers enabled her to maintain contact with her beloved daughter, Lee concluded the letter, "Flora sends her Duty to you, & her love to her Child."<sup>37</sup> Like other enslaved mothers, Flora was forced to intertwine her maternal message of love with reassurances of fidelity to the family that had separated them. While this note was a sign of Flora's submission to her enslavers, to her daughter who had been spirited away, it would have stood as a sign of her mother's reassurance and encouragement.

The Robie family fled Marblehead just weeks after the battles at Lexington and Concord, and amid the confusion, Flora would have had few options to prevent them from departing with her daughter. She did not, however, passively accept their separation. Instead, Flora used her position within Lee's home to push back against complete estrangement from her family. Through the widow Lee's correspondence with Robie, Flora could follow her daughter's whereabouts and convey information to her. She also planned to be reunited. Flora must have recognized the practical benefits of support provided her as a servant in the aging Lee's home and the prospect of an eventual inheritance from her estate. When Lee died in 1781, she left most of her wealth to her three granddaughters and their children. The first person mentioned in her will, however, was Flora, to whom Lee bequeathed a collection of household furniture: "in consideration of her faithful service to me, the Bed & Bedstead whereon she usually lieth with the cloaths thereof, my ruff gown, the half dozen Cane Chairs with the oval maple Table, and the small looking Glass appertaining to the Kitchen Apartment."<sup>38</sup>

Lee's description of Flora as "my Negro Woman" demonstrates that at the time of Lee's death, Flora was still her

<sup>37</sup>Lee to Mary Bradstreet Robie, July 26, 1779.

<sup>38</sup>Last Will and Testament of Hannah Lee, March 5, 1781, and Account of Administration of Estate of Mrs. Hannah Lee, September 2, 1788, Essex Prob. Recs.: Old Series, Book 54, 337, and Book 59, 501-3.

property. But the lack of instructions for Flora's future, along with the bequest, suggests that Lee was essentially manumitting her.<sup>39</sup> Together, Flora's inheritance was valued at nearly £8, a sum that could have paid for Flora's travel north to Nova Scotia.<sup>40</sup> No record remains of exactly when, or by what means, Flora left New England, but she likely left Marblehead shortly after Lee's death. The younger Mary Robie's diary reveals that Flora was living in Halifax well before June 1783.<sup>41</sup> If or by what means Flora came to be legally free is unknown.

Sailing for Halifax was not only arduous but also dangerous especially for free people of color. The threat of re-enslavement loomed large for free Blacks who came to Nova Scotia during and after the war. The illegal capture and transportation of free people of color occurred with such regularity that in 1789, the Nova Scotia legislature attempted to pass a bill curbing the practice of "carry[ing] some of them out of the Province, by force and Stratagem, for the scandalous purpose of making property out of them in the West Indies contrary to their will and consent."<sup>42</sup> Even Flora's connection to the Robie family was no promise of gaining or maintaining contingent freedom. Mertilla Dixon, for example, escaped her master's Virginia home during the Revolution and went to Nova Scotia, by way of Charleston, South Carolina, where she found work in

<sup>39</sup>Lee's will includes no specific language granting Flora's freedom but the lack of instructions on who was to inherit Flora and the bequest suggests Lee understood Flora to be free. This informal manumission by slave owners in New England was not uncommon, especially after 1775. Whiting's study of probate records from Suffolk County reveals that only four wills written after 1775 devised slaves while eighteen included stipulations that manumitted enslaved people. Other wills were simply silent on the issue. Whiting, "Emancipation Without the Courts or Constitution," 101–57. See also E. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery*, 411–24.

<sup>40</sup>Estate of Mrs. Hannah Lee, September 2, 1788.

<sup>41</sup>One alternative is that the Robie family paid to bring Flora to Halifax. The widow Mehitable Higginson, sister of Thomas Robie, also fled to Halifax with the Robies in 1775, but perhaps because of her status as a widow, she faced fewer obstacles to repatriation and returned to Salem in February of 1782. She may have brought both the funding and instructions Flora needed to sail for Halifax. On Higginson's return see "The Diary of Mrs. Mary (Vial) Holyoke," in *The Holyoke Diaries, 1709–1856*, ed. George Francis Dow (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1911), 107.

<sup>42</sup>"An Act for the Regulation and Relief of the Free Negroes within the Province of Nova Scotia, In Council 2, April 1789," quoted in Whitfield, *North to Bondage*, 15.

the home of the New York loyalist Thomas Henry Barclay. Although Dixon remained nominally free, Barclay's wife regularly threatened "to ship her to the West Indies, and there to dispose of her as a Slave."<sup>43</sup> Unlike Dixon, Flora had history with the Robie family. The diary of the younger Mary Robie suggests that after Flora's arrival in Halifax, she, like her daughter, lived in the family's home on Granville Street and worked as a household servant.<sup>44</sup> Lee's death made Flora nominally free; however, the precarious environment in Halifax required that she maintain a close association with the Robie family where her position as a "servant" would have differed little from her previous status as a slave. That Flora was willing to make this tradeoff to be unified with her daughter further illuminates her commitment to resisting the dehumanization of slavery even if it meant continued bondage.

If Flora found consolation in the reunion, it was short-lived. The increasing number of refugees in Halifax brought an unseen danger that afflicted both the free and enslaved without distinction: disease. In the spring of 1783, a measles epidemic struck Halifax, and two cases broke out in the Robie's home.<sup>45</sup> On June 1, Mary Robie recorded that her youngest brother Thomas and Flora's daughter had both come down with the measles. The next day, the children's conditions had worsened. "Flora's child was so bad it had fits," Robie described, "The child was so ill we don't expect she could live." On returning home from a walk three days later, Robie learned that while her brother continued ill, Flora's daughter had died. "Came home. Heard the little Negro was dead. Felt glad that a period is put to its misery," Robie recorded with a seemingly cold brevity. The next day, the family buried the girl. Robie made no

<sup>43</sup>"Complaint of Mertilla Dixon," quoted in Whitfield, *North to Bondage*, 14.

<sup>44</sup>Robie never explicitly outlined Flora or her daughter's household duties. Instead, both appear only in the background of a few diary entries suggesting that while the two lived within their home, they existed only in secondary and subjugated roles. Mary Robie, *Diary*, June 1–6, 1783, Robie-Sewall Family Papers.

<sup>45</sup>On disease in loyalist Nova Scotia, see Allan Everett Marble, *Surgeons, Smallpox, and the Poor: A History of Medicine and Social Conditions in Nova Scotia, 1749–1799* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 141.



mention of Flora's response to the death of her daughter, but she took care to explain why she reacted to the girl's death as she had the previous day. "Is it not natural to suppose I wished her sufferings to end and as there was no other way but by her dissolution, I earnestly desired, I may almost say pray'd for it—When it arrived, I felt a burden remov'd from my mind."<sup>46</sup>

Having lost her daughter, Flora appears to have interacted increasingly with the growing Black loyalist population that ultimately led to her adoption in May 1784 of a young child—later identified as Prince—into the Robie household. While no record detailing Flora's life outside the home survives, Mary Robie's diary holds some clues. Only one entry describes the Black population of loyalist Halifax beyond the walls of her home. "Fine weather," Robie recorded on April 20, 1784, "I have just return'd from taking a walk [. . .] We have been looking into a poor miserable looking Hovel covered with sods." Upon further inspection, she discovered "it was the abode of some Negro's." The structure and its occupants fascinated Robie. In her typical style, she ruminated on how her first impressions of the "miserable" dwelling changed when she noticed "a cheerful fire." "Even in such a wretched dwelling," Robie mused, "I think it possible to be happy with company of those who are most dear to us."<sup>47</sup> It was a little more than two weeks later when Robie reported that they had "received an addition to the family, a little black presented us by Mrs. Flora."<sup>48</sup> It is impossible to know whether Prince had lived in the sod-covered shelter Robie described or had connections to the family that lived there, but the timing suggests he might have.

Flora's relationship to Prince is also ambiguous; however, the long-lasting, familial bond that developed between the two suggests that by incorporating Prince into the Robie household, Flora was not simply aiming to reduce her workload with extra hands. Instead, she was effectively adopting the boy as her own

<sup>46</sup>Robie, *Diary*, June 1–6, 1783.

<sup>47</sup>Robie, *Diary*, April 20, 1784.

<sup>48</sup>Robie, *Diary*, May 9, 1784.



child, protecting him from exploitation in loyalist Halifax and filling the void left by the death of her daughter. Robie's choice of words, "a little black," suggests Prince was not Flora's biological child. Robie had only referred to the enslaved girl who had lived and worked in her home for more than a decade as "Flora's child." If Prince was also Flora's biological kin, it seems likely that Robie would have noted that relationship. Also, given that Flora was Black, it would be unusual for Robie to mention Prince's color if he were her biological child. Furthermore, Lee's previous mention of Flora wanting more children—"but a kind Providence prevented"—suggests that Flora, just shy of forty-eight years old in 1784, had outgrown her childbearing years. Regardless of Prince's previous circumstances and exact relationship to Flora, her watchfulness over him over the next decade reveals the maternal sensibilities she extended to him.



Prince came into the Robie's Nova Scotia household only months before the family began the long process of repatriation back to Massachusetts. Mary Bradstreet Robie had given birth to a daughter named Hannah in early March 1784, and although the baby had been born healthy, her mother worried the measles epidemic that gripped Halifax posed a significant risk to the newborn. She pleaded with her husband to let her return to Marblehead. She made her first trip back that summer, and in 1787, Robie consented to his wife's pleas for a longer stay.<sup>49</sup> Having arrived safely at Marblehead after a four-day voyage from Nova Scotia in late October 1787, the younger Mary Robie wrote back to her father. "Hannah is well," she wrote of her three-year-old sister and traveling companion, "and Mama says I must not forget to tell you that she is highly camped here." As a final note, Robie delicately alluded to their

<sup>49</sup>The repatriation of the Robie family, especially the role Mary Bradstreet Robie played, is covered in G. Patrick O'Brien, "'Gilded Misery': The Robie Women in Loyalist Exile and Repatriation, 1775–1790," *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region* 49 (2020): 39–68.

young servant. "Prince is well and seems to be pleased," she subtly added to the end of her letter. "There will be no difficulty about him they tell us," she concluded.<sup>50</sup>

Robie's short note reveals the residents of Marblehead were unconcerned by the family's enslavement of Prince, and it further underscores how little the Supreme Judicial Court's 1783 rulings against slavery affected everyday life for the subjugated people of Massachusetts. The Robies clearly had worried that their transportation of a Black servant boy from Nova Scotia to Marblehead might provoke unwanted attention in Massachusetts, which unlike Nova Scotia, had at least theoretically abolished slavery. Even if Prince were not legally enslaved, Robie's insistence that the town's people ensured her there would be "no difficulty about him" suggests that both the Robie family and the people of Marblehead had acknowledged that the young boy's dependence upon them and labor in their home was, in effect, slavery.<sup>51</sup>

The Robies did not simply worry the townspeople of Marblehead would object to their ownership of Prince, they also actively sought to thwart his attempts to locate family and achieve emancipation. In a letter back to Nova Scotia, Mary Bradstreet Robie described how shortly after arriving in Marblehead, Prince "enquired for his grandmother." Robie explained that she asked an enslaved woman named Phillis, who had worked in her childhood home and was in the household of her sister Rebecca Story, to pretend to be the boy's grandmother. "I gave great offense to Phillis," Robie explained, "in telling her I wish'd she had made him think she was his grandmother, she being a widow and upon the lookout."<sup>52</sup> Robie's attempt to coax Phillis into deceiving Prince highlights the family's interest in preserving their ownership over him. While Phillis may have made Robie feel some shame for attempting to deceive the boy,

<sup>50</sup>Mary Robie to Thomas Robie, October 29, 1787, Robie-Sewall Family Papers.

<sup>51</sup>E. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery*, 118n 3.

<sup>52</sup>Mary Bradstreet Robie to Thomas Robie, November 1, 1787, Robie-Sewall Family Papers. At the time the Robies were staying with the Storys.

her almost insouciant tone while describing the event in a letter to her husband suggests she felt little lasting remorse.<sup>53</sup>

In the summer of 1788, Mary Robie wed Joseph Sewall, an upstart merchant in post-Revolutionary Marblehead. When her mother Mary Bradstreet Robie sailed back to Nova Scotia shortly thereafter, she left Prince, giving the boy to the young couple in much the same way she had received Flora's daughter decades before. She was also again separating Flora from an affectionate, informal kin. Prince joined at least two other women working in the Sewall home and was left in the care of Becky, who appears to have replaced Flora as his supervisor. Sewall was highly critical of Becky. "I have not as much time to sew and [unintelligible] as when you was here," she wrote to her mother in Halifax, "as I am obliged to look into the kitchen, oftener than I could wish as there is little confidence to be placed in Becky who is careless and extravagant." She found Becky's presence in the household insufferable, explaining, "She is a plague, and if some people had her, they would fret themselves to death. But I am patience itself, for I know what can't be cured, must be endured." Like other New England women, Sewall found her servants' resistance frustrating.

Despite her frustration with the servants in her own home, Sewall retained a fondness for Flora that placed Prince in a higher position than other enslaved people in her home. In one letter, she inquired of her mother, "You say nothing about Flora in your letter. I hope she is well and as good a servant as ever."<sup>54</sup> This fondness appears to have transferred to Prince. In a letter written to her family in February 1789, Sewall requested that her mother send Prince's "Spelling Book" because he was showing signs of being "an apt little scholar." She was especially fond of his "mother wit," noting his propensity for sharp "*bon mots* and *reparties* [*sic.*]." She even hired a tutor,

<sup>53</sup>On enslaved people's use of shame, against both fellow slaves and masters, to achieve their own goals see Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Book, 1974), 120–23.

<sup>54</sup>Mary [née Robie] Sewall to Mary Bradstreet Robie, December 22, 1788, Robie-Sewall Family Papers.

Rebecca Porter, to come to the house to give him lessons.<sup>55</sup> Sewall also gave him many gifts setting him apart from the other servants. Shortly before Christmas 1788, Sewall surprised Prince with a new “bed-stead” and recorded that the young boy was excited to “sleep like a king.” She also had female servants sew the boy new stockings, which she gave him along with new shoes, mittens, and a coat. This clear favoritism exemplifies how the Robie family’s fondness for Flora helped to better Prince’s circumstances.<sup>56</sup>

A closer read of the family’s letters demonstrates that despite their fondness for him, the Robie’s kept Prince in a subjugated position. Shortly after arriving back in Marblehead in 1787, Mary Bradstreet Robie wrote that Hannah Robie found her new home situation less than convenient. Perhaps most bothersome for the young girl, as she explained to her mother, was how she had to interact with Prince. “I got no bell,” she was said to have complained, “I must knock with the chair to call Prince.” Being required to respond to the demands of a toddler who beckons by bell or by knocking a chair elucidates the reality of Prince’s status in the household.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, although Sewall had hired a tutor for Prince, she noted that he had quickly given up because of the young boy’s misbehavior. Rather than seek another, Sewall noted, “He has lost this opportunity and probably never will have such another.”<sup>58</sup> Prince’s relationship to Flora set him apart from other subjugated people, but it did not elevate him to equal footing with white family members.

Mary Bradstreet Robie made a brief return to Halifax after her daughter’s marriage. By May 1789, she was preparing to make one final crossing, leaving Nova Scotia forever, and she planned to bring the two youngest Robie children and Flora with her. On May 12, 1789, Mary Sewall wrote to her father

<sup>55</sup>Mary Sewall to Mary Bradstreet Robie, February 19, 1789, Robie-Sewall Family Papers.

<sup>56</sup>Mary Sewall to Mary Bradstreet Robie, December 22, 1788.

<sup>57</sup>Mary Bradstreet Robie to Thomas Robie, November 1, 1787.

<sup>58</sup>Mary Sewall to Mary Bradstreet Robie, February 19, 1789.

with enthusiasm, "I cannot help beginning now to think I shall soon see Mama." When news of a ship in the Marblehead harbor and rumors "that she was from Halifax" arrived at the Sewall home, everyone buzzed with anticipation. None, however, was more excited than Prince. After being "careless" in his morning duties, he confessed to Sewall that the news had "taken away all his senses," and with her permission, he quickly "ran up to the Garret to see the vessel in hopes of seeing ma'am upon the deck."<sup>59</sup> The boy's excitement exemplifies the close bond that had developed between Flora and her adoptive son and the pangs of loss he had felt being separated from her. In a later note from Halifax to Marblehead, Sewall's sister asked that she give her best wishes to "all friends, not forgetting Flora," confirming that Flora had returned to Massachusetts in late 1789.<sup>60</sup>

Back in Marblehead, Flora continued to experience the contradiction of remaining subjugated while working to secure greater freedoms for her family. Although the state of Massachusetts had begun to move away from slavery, free Black men and women had few opportunities for employment, forcing many into almshouses where, as Thomas Davis explains, "They formed a disproportionately high percentage of the recipients of charity."<sup>61</sup> Flora had made herself invaluable to the extended Robie family and used this connection to avoid the almshouse. She also appears to have recognized that her place within the homes of the extended Robie family allowed her to set her children up for what she believed were freer and more prosperous futures. The children Flora looked after were not all her biological kin but were instead a diverse group of children, possibly from different families, that she cared for as her own. A letter from Mary Sewall to her sister in September 1791 reveals that Flora, Prince, and a few other children continued

<sup>59</sup>Mary Sewall to Thomas Robie, May 12, 1789, Robie-Sewall Family Papers.

<sup>60</sup>Mehetabel [née Robie] Sterns to Mary Sewall, October 29, 1789, Robie-Sewall Family Papers.

<sup>61</sup>Davis, "Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England," 251.

to live in both the Robie and Sewall homes. “Flora and the rest of her tribe as Mama calls them, are well,” she relayed.<sup>62</sup> Referring to Flora’s children as “her tribe” conveys that the extended Robie family recognized—and racialized—Flora’s created family structure.

Sewall provides a detailed description of one of these children, “Flora’s son Juba.” Sewall explained that the family had committed to raising Juba in their home “till the age of 21,” perhaps assisting Flora in her household duties or possibly laboring in Joseph Sewall’s shop. But Juba proved “so obstinate, and perverse” and too much like the “lazy Boys in the street” that the Sewalls set about finding another home for him. Mary Sewall explained that despite their initial difficulties finding Juba a new home, “Mr. Fink,” a former friend from Nova Scotia, had come to town and “calling to see Papa, saw Juba there, and finding we were willing to part with him, agreed to take him to bring him up till he is one and twenty, when he is obliged to free him by a written agreement.” Sewall does not explain Flora’s opinion on the matter, or if she, as Juba’s parent, had explicitly acceded to the agreement as required by the law for the indenture of minors. Instead, the letter only reveals that the Sewalls congratulated themselves because they believed Juba “now stands the chance of becoming an honest, industrious farmer—but in this town, he would have been ruined.”<sup>63</sup>

Mary Sewall was quick to highlight her family’s role in saving Juba from “ruin,” but the extended family’s writings are noticeably silent about how Flora’s continued service had made that

<sup>62</sup>Mary Sewall to Mehetable Sterns, September 1, 1791, Robie-Sewall Family Papers.

<sup>63</sup>Mary Sewall to Mehetable Sterns, September 1, 1791. Much of the description of Juba is lost because the letter is torn. It is not entirely clear where Mr. Fink took Juba. Sewall’s letter to her sister, however, noted, “He is gone to Cape Vorehue, where his master resides.” Sewall indicates that her sister, then living in Halifax, might hear from Juba, suggesting that Sewall meant “Cape Forchu,” just outside the town of Yarmouth. On apprenticeships in post-Revolutionary New England see Hardesty, *Black Lives*, 135; Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 43; and E. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery*, 130n3.

connection possible. They are also silent on freedoms achieved by other members of the family, including by Flora herself. There is no further mention of Prince. Whether or not he too was apprenticed in town or in the countryside or found another situation on his own accord is unknown. As for Flora, the 1800 Census lists one additional “free person” living in Thomas Robie’s Salem household: while the 1810 Census lists no additional persons, it does record one additional “free person” living in Joseph Sewall’s home on Adams Lane in Boston. A biography of Samuel Edmund Sewall, Joseph’s youngest son, notes that an old Black nurse named Flora played a significant role raising the youngest Sewall child making it likely that Flora left the Robie household in Salem sometime in the early 1800s to work in the Sewall household in Boston. The 1820 Census does not list additional persons in the Sewall household, suggesting Flora had died, or like other elderly Black servants went to live in the poor house, sometime in the 1810s.<sup>64</sup> The silence surrounding Flora’s final years demonstrates that while the extended Robie family was eager to highlight what they perceived as their own benevolence, they were less inclined to document the ways Flora found her own freedom.



Phillis Bradstreet, the enslaved woman Flora worked alongside in Marblehead, was heralded in New England newspapers upon her death in 1815 as “a very respectable lady,” and was also rumored to have been “once a Princess in Africa.” Flora never received such widespread recognition.<sup>65</sup> Instead, she slowly disappeared from the historical record, and her story with her. At the same time, the Robie-Sewall family distanced

<sup>64</sup>United States Census, Population Schedules of the Second Census of the United States 1800, Roll 14, Essex County, 187A. For the Sewall household in 1810 see United States Census, Population Schedules of the Third Census of the United States 1810, Roll 21, Vol. 5, Suffolk County, 345.

<sup>65</sup>E. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery*, 129; Catherine Adams and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 225n 38.

itself from its past as slave owners. In the early 1830s, Mary Sewall's youngest son, Samuel Edmund Sewall, made a name for himself as an antislavery attorney in Boston. Sewall was a direct descendent of—and conveniently bore the same name as—the revered Colonial-era judge Samuel Sewall. As early nineteenth-century New Englanders became increasingly hostile to the spread of slavery in the United States, antislavery advocates highlighted Judge Sewall's legacy as the author of one of the earliest antislavery publications in the English language, *The Selling of Joseph*.<sup>66</sup> To accompany a statue of Samuel Edmund Sewall placed in Lexington's Memorial Hall shortly after the nation's centennial celebration, John Greenleaf Whittier, Sewall's friend and fellow abolitionist, composed a poem to highlight the seemingly providential connection between the distant ancestors. In the poem's opening stanza, Whittier outlined Sewall's importance to the grander New England abolitionist mythos: "Like the ancestral judge who bore his name/ Faithful to freedom and to truth, he gave/ When all the air was hot with wrath and blame/ His youth and manhood to the fettered slave."<sup>67</sup>

Those closer to Sewall gave less grandiose explanations for his abolitionist tenacity. Louisa Winslow Cabot, Sewall's second daughter, wrote a short note to his biographer explaining that her father's determination to see slavery abolished arose not from his ancestral legacy, as Whittier's poem suggested but rather from a fervent commitment to progressivism. "It was in part from a hopefulness for the future, and in part from a short memory of incidents," Cabot explained, "that he lived so little in the past, almost entirely in the present or future."<sup>68</sup> She also referenced the family lore that she believed helped explain her father's dedication to the abolitionist cause. In childhood, she

<sup>66</sup>Mark A. Peterson, "The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Antislavery, and the Protestant International, 1689–1733," *Massachusetts Historical Review* 4 (2002): 1–22.

<sup>67</sup>John Greenleaf Whittier, "Samuel Edmund Sewall," in *The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier*, ed. Horace E. Scudder (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1894), 512.

<sup>68</sup>Louisa Winslow Cabot, "Beauty of My Father's Character," n.d., Robie-Sewall Family Papers.



explained in a letter, an elderly Black servant woman played an important role raising Sewall. “In his baby-hood he showed his anti-slavery tendencies, he was very fond of an old colored woman named Flora who had formerly been a slave.” According to Cabot, a friend made the young Sewall “very indignant” when he called Sewall’s nurse “Black.” “Flora isn’t black,” an angry Sewall was rumored to have retorted, “she’s browne.”<sup>69</sup>

A century after her journey from Marblehead to Halifax and back, Flora appears again in the family’s writings. As a servant in the Sewall’s early nineteenth-century Boston home, she played an important role raising and, as the story suggests, influencing a leading nineteenth-century New England abolitionist. Although nominally free, she was still living and working in the home of the extended Robie family that had enslaved her. As before, she remains little more than a footnote in the larger story meant to emphasize her enslavers’ heroism. Her only purpose in the narrative of Sewall’s upbringing is to demonstrate that as an impressionable child, Sewall had direct experience with someone who had been enslaved, entirely omitting that it had been his own family that had enslaved her. But fleshing out Flora’s story from the shreds of surviving evidence and the enduring archival silences reveals that Flora was not a background player. Although she remained subjugated throughout her life, she pushed back against the most dehumanizing aspects of chattel slavery and fought to secure her children freer futures.

<sup>69</sup>Cabot, “Beauty of My Father’s Character.”

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