



Charles Sumner, US Senate 1854. S.W. Chandler and Bro. Lithographer, Boston. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.



## American Political Cultures Forum II

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### CHARLES SUMNER'S POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE FOUNDATION OF CIVIL RIGHTS; OR, THE EDUCATION OF CHARLES SUMNER

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CHARLES Sumner was born on the North Slope of Beacon Hill in Boston on January 6, 1811, the eve of the largest slave rebellion in North America. He and his twin sister Matilda were the first two of nine children of Charles Pinckney and Relief Jacob Sumner. They each weighed three and a half pounds and gave “little promise of living many hours.” A neighbor was shocked when she saw them, calling them “the smallest infants she had ever seen.”<sup>1</sup>

Two days later at a plantation near New Orleans, Charles Deslonde, an enslaved person from Saint-Domingue, and twenty-five comrades entered the mansion of Manuel Andry, the parish's largest slaveowner. They wounded Andry, killed his son, donned military uniforms, seized guns and horses, and marched south toward New Orleans, hoping to sail to Haiti. The rebel army grew to a force ranging from 150 to 500, based on eyewitness accounts. They were inspired by slave rebels in Saint-Domingue who had fought the colonial armies of France, England, and Spain and established the Black republic of Haiti in 1804. But their hopes for freedom were stillborn. William Claiborne, the Louisiana territorial governor, called out militia and federal troops led by Wade Hampton, whose grandson

<sup>1</sup>Edward L. Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, 4 vols. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1878–1894), vol. 1, 35; Jeremiah Chaplin and J.D. Chaplin, *Life of Charles Sumner* (Boston: D. Lothrop & Company, 1874), 18, 18n.

and namesake would become a Confederate general and Reconstruction-era terrorist. In less than a week the rebellion was crushed. Only two white people died in the affair. Yet over 100 enslaved people were killed and dismembered, their heads put on poles that dotted the roadside for forty miles as a warning to others.<sup>2</sup>

A month later, when news of the revolt reached Boston, Charles and Matilda were healthy and growing. Their parents could have read a letter from Wade Hampton, published in the *New England Palladium*, gloating that “the chiefs” of the rebellion “are taken,” and vowing “to crush any [future] disturbances.”<sup>3</sup>

Fifty-seven years later, Senator Sumner gave a campaign speech on the North Slope for Grant and Schuyler Colfax called “The Rebel Party.” He exposed Wade Hampton’s grandson as a traitor to democracy and “Equal Rights for All,” following in the footsteps of his Louisiana grandfather. “Shall the national flag wave gloriously over a united people in the peaceful enjoyment of Equal Rights for All, or shall it be dishonored by traitors? This is the question,” Sumner said.

Charles Pinckney and Relief Sumner knew that slavery’s pervasiveness was not limited to the southern states; there had been slaves in their families. Charles Sumner’s politics would be indelibly shaped by his understanding of history, by slavery,

<sup>2</sup>Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011); John Stauffer, “Briefly Out of Bondage,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2011; Robert L. Paquette, “A Horde of Brigands?: The Great Louisiana Slave Revolt of 1811 Reconsidered,” *Historical Reflections* 35 (2009): 72–96; and Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 106–17.

<sup>3</sup>“Insurrection!,” *New-England Palladium*, February 19, 1811, 2; Pierce, *Sumner*, vol. 1, 35; and Thomas Marshall Thompson, “National Newspaper and Legislative Reactions to Louisiana’s Deslondes Slave Revolt of 1811,” *Louisiana History* 33 (1992): 5–29. On the profound influence of slavery, a good place to start is Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018); and David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

and by his family, friends, and neighbors in Ward 6 on the North Slope of Beacon Hill.<sup>4</sup>



Relief Sumner's grandfather, David Jacob Sr., owned numerous properties in and around Hanover, Massachusetts, including a mill and popular tavern (now a gallery). During the Revolution, he served on the committees of Safety and Correspondence for the patriot cause. He enslaved at least two people: Phoebe, who died in 1769; and Jane, who died in 1775.<sup>5</sup>

None of David Sr.'s wealth would descend to Relief's father, David Jacob Jr., the oldest of five children. David Sr.'s first wife, Hannah Richmond, died in March 1776. Three years later he married a cousin, Relief Jacobs. They had no children. Perhaps his second wife convinced him not to give money to children that weren't hers. The other, more likely, reason is that David Jr. married Hannah Hersey in a shotgun wedding on July 23, 1782. He was nineteen; she was eighteen and "teemed" or showed. Two months later Hannah Jacob (Relief's older sister) was born. The young couple had violated an eighteenth-century social code, no longer rigid but not yet abandoned: sex was "sanctioned only in marriage."<sup>6</sup>

In 1799, Hannah and Relief, ages seventeen and fifteen, suddenly found themselves orphans. Their parents died from "autumnal fever" that caused typhus-like symptoms. Their grandfather, David Sr., still owned "ample estates" and was still

<sup>4</sup>Charles Sumner, "The Rebel Party. Speech at the Flag-Raising of the Grant and Colfax Club, in Ward Six, Boston," *The Works of Charles Sumner*, 15 vols., 1870–1883 (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1870–1883), vol. 12 (1877), 510–14, quotation from 510.

<sup>5</sup>John Stetson Barry, *A Historical Sketch of the Town of Hanover, Mass., with Family Genealogies* (Boston: Samuel G. Drake and Bazin and Chandler, 1853), 107–127, 175–76, 323–25.

<sup>6</sup>Barry, *Historical Sketch*, 328–29; Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3; and Ruth H. Bloch, "Changing Conceptions of Sexuality and Romance in Eighteenth-Century America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003), 13–42, quotation on 13.

healthy. Though he could have supported his grandchildren, he would not provide for children of parents who had embarrassed him.<sup>7</sup> Relief and Hannah moved to Boston with virtually no money. They found a room in a cheap boardinghouse on South Russell Street on the North Slope. Hannah worked as a teacher, Relief as a seamstress. They were among the few respectable professions open to women.<sup>8</sup>



Charles Sumner's father, Charles Pinckney Sumner, was the bastard son of a Revolutionary War hero. The Sumner family came from English farming stock and arrived at Dorchester in 1635. They would have remained farmers had it not been for the adventuring Job Sumner, Charles's grandfather. Job's father died in 1771. A year later, at the age of eighteen, he threw down his hoe and determined to go to Harvard, which cost about £30 per year. After failing Harvard's entrance exam, he passed in his second attempt, paid a reduced admission fee of £6, and joined the freshman class in November 1774, the same month that the first Continental Congress convened at Philadelphia.<sup>9</sup>

Job didn't last six months at Harvard. He joined a blue-coated student militia and went with the Minutemen to Lexington

<sup>7</sup>Noah Webster, *A Brief History of Epidemic and Pestilential Diseases*, vol. 2 (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1799), 344. David Jacob Sr. may not have provided for his grandchildren (Hannah Jacob, Relief, and possibly their surviving siblings) because of his son and daughter-in-law's shotgun marriage.

<sup>8</sup>Pierce, *Sumner*, vol. 1, 3, 20; Ellis Ames, "November Meeting," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1873-1875, vol. 13, 372, 374; and Anne-Marie Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner and the Legacy of the American Enlightenment, 1811-1851* (Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 12-13.

<sup>9</sup>Pierce, *Sumner*, vol. 1, 3-5; George H. Haynes, *Charles Sumner* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1909), 16; Elias Nason, *The Life and Times of Charles Sumner* (Boston: B.B. Russell, 1874), 14; Sheldon S. Cohen, "Harvard College on the Eve of the American Revolution," *Sibley's Heir: A Volume in Memory of Clifford Kenyon*, vol. 59 (Boston: Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1982), 172-74. On Charles being a "bastard" son, see William Sumner Appleton, "FAMILY OF 'SHERIFF' SUMNER," *William Sumner, of Dorchester, Mass., 1636* (Boston: David Clapp & Son, Printers, 1879), 176.

with a handful of other students. He served under Lieutenant-Colonel John Robinson at the Battle of Concord on April 19, 1775. A month later he enlisted as an ensign in Moses Draper's Minuteman company.<sup>10</sup>

Amid all this he impregnated a Milton farm girl named Esther Holmes but refused to marry her. The subject became a source of hushed embarrassment for his descendants. "The least said or thought about it, the better," his grandson Charles would later write.<sup>11</sup>

Job fought at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill alongside some 150 African Americans, who "waged their own battle for emancipation." He was awarded a commendation by General Henry Knox, the future Secretary of War. He became head of

<sup>10</sup>Quincy, *History of Harvard University*, vol. 2, quotation on 163; Samuel F. Batchelder, "The Student in Arms – Old Style," *The Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, vol. 29, no. 116 (1921), 564; David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press), 246. According to Batchelder, Job joined "Bradley's company, Robinson's regiment," for four days in April 1775. Lt. Col. John Robinson was a high-ranking officer at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775. [Pierce says that Job "did not follow his teachers to Concord," but does not provide a source, whereas Batchelder gives a detailed list of Job's military service. See Pierce, *Sumner*, vol. 1, on 4.] Job then became an ensign in "Draper's company, Gardner's Regiment." This was Moses Draper's Minuteman company of Thomas Gardner's 37th Regiment, which Gardner had organized partly through his own expense. Known as "Gardner and Bond's Regiment," it became the 25th Continental. On Thomas Gardner, see S. Swett, *History of Bunker Hill Battle*, 2nd Ed. (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1826), 5. On Draper, see Charles Fanning, *Mapping Norwood: An Irish American Memoir* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 41; Francis S. Drake, *Records Relating to the Early History of Boston: The Town of Roxbury, Its Memorable Persons and Places* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1905), 31–32.

<sup>11</sup>On Job Sumner not marrying Esther Holmes, see William Appleton Sumner, *Record of the Descendants of William Sumner, of Dorchester, Mass.*, 1636 (Boston: David Clapp & Son, 1879), 176. On Charles Sumner's embarrassment over the circumstances of his father's birth, see "Letter from Sumner to George Sumner," July 6–8, 1842, Sumner Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard (microfilm reel 62, frame 550). Also see Charles Sumner's "Autobiographical Notes," Palfrey Family Papers, Series II: Papers of John Gorham Palfrey, Miscellaneous Documents, MS Am1704.15 (74), Houghton Library, Harvard. "It seems to me better to leave it all unsaid," Sumner reiterates his embarrassment in these notes. His self-consciousness was enough that he discouraged his brother George from investigating whether the Sumner family was entitled to a coat of arms. Virtually nothing is known of Esther Holmes, Charles's grandmother. Also see Anne Marie Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner and the Legacy of the American Enlightenment, 1811–1851* (Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 13.

his own company and received a series of rapid promotions to Major, unusual for a plebeian farm boy.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of the war, Job was second-in-command of the regiment in New York that guarded the evacuation of British troops under Lieutenant-Colonel William Hull. After the evacuation he escorted George Washington into New York. He was at Fraunces Tavern in 1783 when Washington toasted his officers and said farewell to the Army. Job's infantry troops delivered the final salute, a scene he would apparently describe with pride to his son, who had been born January 20, 1776, almost exactly nine months after Lexington and Concord.<sup>13</sup>

The war was the peak of Job's career. The rest was unsuccessful adventuring. He left the Army in 1784, hoping to parlay his officer's epaulettes and Harvard connections into a gentleman's status. He was awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree from Harvard for having served his country "as a man and as an officer." He was appointed by Congress as a federal commissioner to Georgia to settle the state's war debt.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>William Cooper Nell, *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* . . . (Boston: Robert F. Walcutt, 1855), 18–22, 161–75, 198–99; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 48–52, quotation on 48; Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 43–44, 49–67; Richard D. Brown, "Not Only Extreme Poverty, but the Worst Kind of Orphanage": Lemuel Haynes and the Boundaries of Racial Tolerance on the Yankee Frontier, 1770–1820," *The New England Quarterly* 61 (1988): 502–18; William Heath, Henry Lee, James Wilkinson and Henry Dearborn, *History of the Battle of Breed's Hill*, compiled by Charles Coffin, (Portland: D.C. Colesworthy, Printer, 1835), 7–15; Thomas J. Fleming, *Now We Are Enemies: The Story of Bunker Hill* (Franklin, Tn.: American History Press, 2010), 246–47, 300–301; George F. Quintal, Jr., *Patriots of Color; A Peculiar Beauty and Merit*, (Boston: Division of Cultural Resources, Boston National Historical Park, 2004), 218; Richard Frothingham, *The Battle of Bunker Hill*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1890), 54–62; and Nathaniel Philbrick, *Bunker Hill, A City, A Siege, A Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 2013), 228.

<sup>13</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. I, 5–7, quotation on 5, 7n2; Samuel C. Clarke, *Memoir of Gen. William Hull* (Boston: David Clapp & Sons, 1893), 11–12; and Charles Pinckney Sumner, *Eulogy on the Illustrious George Washington, Pronounced at Milton, Twenty-Second February 1800* (Debham: Printed by H. Mann, 1800), 11. In this address, Charles Pinckney Sumner describes a Revolutionary veteran relating his eyewitness memory of Washington's farewell to a rapt son.

<sup>14</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, quotation on 8; Kenneth Coleman, *The American Revolution in Georgia, 1763–1789* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1958), 256–57.

Job lived high in Savannah, enjoying “the best and most fashionable company” and owning at least one slave. He was “a friend of the master, not of the slave,” wrote Archibald Grimké, African American biographer, lawyer, and diplomat. Job was so well liked by southern slaveholders that he became a contender for the Georgia governorship. But he lost most of his money and much of his reputation as a leader after speculating in Georgia land. By 1788, he was desperate.<sup>15</sup>

Job’s pro-southern inclinations are reflected in the name he chose for his son. Initially the boy was named Job, likely by his mother since his father was fighting when he was born. But when he returned from the war, Job renamed him Charles Pinckney, after the South Carolina statesman and owner of over 200 slaves and staunch advocate of slavery. As a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, he argued for slaves to be counted equally with free persons (5/5ths rather than 3/5ths of a person) in apportioning representation in the House of Representatives, which would have given southern slaveholders even greater national power. And he was among the few who opposed restrictions on the Atlantic slave trade, famously declaring, “If slavery be wrong, it is justified by the example of the whole world. . . . In all ages, one half of mankind have been slaves.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Archibald Henry Grimké, *The Life of Charles Sumner: The Scholar in Politics* (London, New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1892), 10–11; Charles Sumner, “Autobiographical Notes,” *Palfrey Papers*, Houghton Library, Harvard University; and Samuel F. Batchelder, “The Students in Arms’—Old Style,” *The Harvard Graduates’ Magazine*, June 1921, 564.

Job got caught up in Georgia’s massive land speculation and corruption in the 1780s and 1790s that culminated in the Yazoo Land Fraud of the early 1790s. John Wreath, Georgia’s Commissioner of Public Trade, noted that “nothing but land speculation interested Georgians.” Corruption was rampant. During the war, land records and titles were destroyed, further contributing to speculation after the war. Speculators illegally moved or destroyed land-markers to increase the size of their holdings, while veterans found it “almost impossible to get their own bounties surveyed.” Charles Pinckney Sumner went to Georgia to try to recover some of his father’s money but was unsuccessful. See Kenneth Coleman, *The American Revolution in Georgia, 1763–1789* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1958), 217–20; Charles Pinckney Sumner, *A Letter on Speculative Free Masonry* (Boston: John Marsh, 1829), 6.

<sup>16</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, 11; Charles Pinckney, quoted in Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation’s Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 63, 83. Charles Pinckney Sumner’s namesake should not be



Despite his straitened circumstances, Job enrolled his son at Phillips Andover Academy, where he hoped he would be trained as a gentleman. But his inability to pay for his son's upkeep frequently interrupted his education. General Henry Jackson, a friend, agreed to cover any shortage in Pinckney Sumner's tuition and board so that he would no longer have to be withdrawn from classes.<sup>17</sup>

Job died in 1789 at age thirty-three after contracting a fever on a sea voyage from Savannah to New York City. His funeral was attended by Vice President John Adams, some members of Congress, and Generals Knox and Jackson. He left behind little save a bit of money tied up in southern real estate. Charles Pinckney Sumner inherited his father's small estate, which was just enough for him to go to Harvard, where he was admitted in 1792.<sup>18</sup>

At Harvard, Pinckney Sumner came under the influence of Eliphalet Pearson, the Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages and a staunch abolitionist. In debates with Harvard colleagues, Pearson emphasized "natural equality." Unlike Jefferson and many others, he acted on this principle, declaring that one individual "could not exercise any authority over another without his [or her] consent." Pearson declared that Africa's sons were "of the same common parents with you and me, and between whom and us nature has made no distinction."<sup>19</sup>

By the time Pinckney Sumner left Harvard, he, too, held deep antislavery beliefs, in stark contrast to his father. Much like Pearson, he was not afraid to express his views publicly, becoming known as "a strong antislavery man."<sup>20</sup>

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confused with Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Charles Pinckney's older cousin and fellow proslavery delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

<sup>17</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, 13.

<sup>18</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, 7–9.

<sup>19</sup>Theodore Parsons and Eliphalet Pearson, "A Forensic Dispute . . .," in Werner Sollors, Caldwell Titcomb, and Thomas A. Underwood, eds., *Blacks at Harvard, A Documentary History of African American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe* (New York, London: New York University Press), 12; Fuess, *An Old New England School* (repr., University of Michigan Library, 1917), 87–88.

<sup>20</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, 14–15, 24–25; Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner*, 15, 41.

Pinckney Sumner would teach his son Charles to regard African Americans as complete social equals and slavery as un-sanctioned warfare. Over the coming years he voiced a range of forward-leaning views on race: he was in favor of legalizing interracial marriage, of integrating Boston's public schools, and he pronounced himself "entirely willing" to see a Negro judge sit on the bench.<sup>21</sup>

After graduating from Harvard in 1796, Pinckney Sumner sailed for Port Au Prince in Saint-Domingue, amid the revolution led by Toussaint Louverture. Most white Americans were horrified by the uprising, but Pinckney Sumner wanted to witness the revolution, which his son would later call "a remarkable independence" of mind and character.<sup>22</sup>

He arrived in Port Au Prince in February 1798, in time to participate in a celebration of Washington's Birthday by the Haitian rebels. At a banquet, Pinckney Sumner rose and gave a toast to "Liberty, Equality, and Happiness to all men." Jean-Pierre Boyer, a military hero of the uprising who would become President of Haiti, was so appreciative that he sent an aide-de-camp to invite the young man to sit by his side.<sup>23</sup>

Pinckney Sumner's trip may have been inspired by Prince Hall, Boston's Black abolitionist leader, founder of the first African Masonic Lodge in the US, and a neighbor in Ward 6. Shortly before Pinckney Sumner sailed for Port au Prince, Prince Hall published a speech calling Saint-Domingue an inspiration against prejudice and hostility. It seemed designed to inspire socially conscious young men to visit Saint Domingue.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, 24–25.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Sumner's Autobiographical notes, *Palfrey Papers*, Houghton Library; Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner*, 16–17; Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, 16. On most Americans being horrified by the Saint-Domingue uprising, see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 157–74; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 45–52, 74–82; and Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 1–29.

<sup>23</sup>James Spear Loring, *The Hundred Boston Orators*, 325–33; Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner*, 17.

<sup>24</sup>Prince Hall, "A Charge, Delivered to the African Lodge, June 24, 1797, at Menotomy [now Arlington, MA]," *Face Zion Forward: First Writers of the Black Atlantic*,

After returning to Boston, Pinckney Sumner struggled to establish himself as a lawyer, just as his son Charles would for several years after graduating from Harvard. He joined the office of Josiah Quincy, the future mayor of Boston, but failed to win any distinction in law and barely made a living at it, unlike his closest friend from Harvard, Joseph Story, who would become, at age thirty-two, the youngest justice appointed to the Supreme Court.<sup>25</sup>

Pinckney Sumner and Relief were married in 1810. They rented a small wood-frame home at the corner of May and Buttolph Streets in Boston. Charles and Matilda arrived exactly nine months later. Relief's sister Hannah was their first teacher. She ran a boarding school on the top floor of their rented home. One of Charles's favorite early books was *The Columbian Orator*, the popular elocution manual, which would have an even greater influence on Frederick Douglass, a future friend and abolitionist ally. He loved reading, especially history, both oral and written. The stories his father told him about the people in Haiti were "among my first memories," he said, as were the vibrant parades in the neighborhood every year to celebrate Haiti's 1804 independence, which began at the African Meeting House and snaked through the streets to the African Lodge in Cambridge. In 1862, Sumner would wage a political fight to win Haiti (and Liberia) full diplomatic recognition. In promoting the bill, he described Haiti in terms he had probably heard from his father, "the looming mountains as the mariner approaches the beautiful island, rising higher and higher, while the head of the last purple peak is lost in the clouds." He understood, like very few other white Americans, just how much Black Americans viewed the self-liberation of Haiti as a personal victory. His neighbor, the Reverend Thomas Paul, likened Haitians to "the Israelites of old" in breaking their servitude. Haiti was proof of an entire caste's capacity for self-rule and

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1785–1798, eds. Joanna Brooks and John Saillant (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 199–208, quotation on 204; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 43–44.

<sup>25</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, 19–21; Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner*, 19; and James Spear Loring, *Hundred Boston Orators*, 325–33.

willingness to freedom-fight. John Rock, a future neighbor and friend, bragged that Black people had “whipped the French and the English.”<sup>26</sup>

By 1819, with a growing family, Pinckney Sumner would accept an appointment as deputy sheriff of Suffolk County for the small but reliable salary of just under \$1,000 a year. Six years later, Governor Levi Lincoln Jr. promoted him to high Sheriff of Suffolk County, which tripled his salary, paying \$2,000 to \$3,000 annually. It was barely enough for Pinckney Sumner to send Charles to Harvard—he was the only sibling to attend college. The job included overseeing the Boston jail on Leverett Street. Ten years later Pinckney Sumner would utilize his authority over the jail to protect William Lloyd Garrison from a mob of anti-abolitionists, who attacked him, dragged him through the street, and planned to tar and feather and possibly lynch him. In an era of mob violence, the jail could serve as a sanctuary.<sup>27</sup> The attack on Garrison prompted Charles to purchase his first newspaper subscription, to *The Liberator*.<sup>28</sup>



The North Slope of Beacon Hill arguably gave Charles a better education on race, equal rights, and slavery than *The Liberator*, and a far richer understanding of these issues than Harvard (he graduated in 1830 and from their law school in 1834). The neighborhood housed the largest population of

<sup>26</sup>Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, vol. 4, 68–69; “The United States and the Haitian Revolution, 1791–1804,” *Office of the Historian*, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1784-1800/haitian-rev>; Gerald Horne, “The Haitian Revolution and the Central Question of African American History,” *The Journal of African American History* 100 (2015): 26–58. On Sumner’s speech on Haiti, see Sumner, “Independence of Hayti and Liberia,” April 23, 1862, in *The Works of Charles Sumner, Vol. 6* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1874), 450; Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 74; Benjamin Quarles, “Black History’s Antebellum Origins,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. 89, Part 1, April 1879, 89–122.

<sup>27</sup>Wendell Philips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805–1879: The Story of His Life, Told by His Children*, vol. 2, 1835–1840 (New York: The Century Co., 1885), 1–35, quotation on 29. Garrison thanked Sheriff Sumner “for various acts of politeness and kindness.”

<sup>28</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 1, 19–21; *ibid.*, vol. 2, 196; Taylor, *Young Charles Sumner*, 24–25; and Garrison, *Story of His Life*, vol. 2, 35.

Black people in the city. Prince Hall died before Sumner was born, but the Vassall family, one of the oldest African American families in Boston, lived for years almost next door to the Sumner family. Their four children were roughly Charles's age.<sup>29</sup>

The Reverend Thomas Paul preached on Sundays at the First African Baptist Church, a short walk from the Sumner home. Paul founded the church in 1806 and through his tireless organizing had turned it into a spiritual-social-political headquarters. The building was a gathering place for militant meetings and lectures; it housed the school where Paul taught and from which he would send a son to become the first Black graduate of Dartmouth.<sup>30</sup> When Sherriff Sumner tipped his hat and chatted with the Reverend Paul, as was his custom with neighbors, they may have shared their mutual reminiscences of Haiti. Paul had spent several months working there as a missionary, where he, like Pinckney Sumner, became acquainted with Jean Pierre Boyer.<sup>31</sup>

Many of the most recognizable leaders of Boston's Black community were near neighbors of the Sumners, living and moving in the same lanes on May, or Joy, or Belknap Streets. James and Maria Stewart lived just down the street from the Sumner home. James was a veteran of the War of 1812,

<sup>29</sup>United States Census 1810, Suffolk County, Boston Ward 7; *Publications of the Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society, X, January 26, 1915–October 1915* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1917), 75–77; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 2; Kathryn Grover and Janine Da Silva, *Historic Resource Study of Boston African American National Historic Sites*, December 31, 2002, 30–33, 70.

<sup>30</sup>Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 74–78; Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 42–43; and James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 44–45. An oil portrait of Rev. Thomas Paul circa 1825 by Thomas Badger hangs in the Smithsonian Museum's National Portrait Gallery and is available for viewing digitally: [http://npg.si.edu/object/npg\\_NPG.70.45](http://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.70.45). Paul was also instrumental in founding New York City's Abyssinian Church, which would become the pulpit of Adam Clayton Powell.

<sup>31</sup>For Sumner's memories, see Letter from Charles Sumner to Samuel Gridley Howe, August 3, 1871, Sumner Correspondence, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Paul was also instrumental in founding New York City's Abyssinian Church, which would become the pulpit of Adam Clayton Powell.

who had served as a seaman on the *Guerriere* under Stephen Decatur. Maria was a religious student who became one of the most blistering abolitionist speakers in Boston, and the first American-born woman to give a public lecture on a political theme. Maria Stewart said she would rather die than spend her life shaking carpets as a domestic and “be confined by the chains of ignorance and poverty.” She too had inalienable rights: “I can but die for expressing my sentiments: and I am as willing to die by the sword as the pestilence; for I am a true born American; your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit fires my breast.”<sup>32</sup>

David Walker, a North Carolina-born abolitionist, moved to Boston in 1826 and rented a room next door to Maria Stewart. A clothier who used his means to help fugitive slaves, Walker was a frequent contributor to *Freedoms Journal*, the nation's first Black newspaper launched in 1827 out of New York City. Walker published the most explosive pamphlet of the antebellum period, his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, which appeared in three editions in 1829 and 1830. He sent boxes of his pamphlet into the slave states through a network of sailors and activists. When white Southerners discovered them, they were beside themselves. The governors of Georgia and Virginia wrote Boston mayor Harrison Gray Otis, demanding that Walker be silenced. His pamphlet threatened “the peace and even the lives of the [white] people of the South,” they cried. Otis hated Walker's pamphlet but refused to arrest him, since his actions were lawful in Massachusetts. Sumner did not know Walker well, for he died from consumption in 1830. But he was impossible for Charles to miss: six-feet tall, with “an unconquerable disposition in the breast,” to borrow a phrase from his own *Appeal*.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 24; Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 85–86, 254; and Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Political Writer, Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3–4.

<sup>33</sup>Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 67, 78, 92–110, quotations on 98, 99; Horton, *Black Bostonians*, 30; Kendrick, *Sarah's Long Walk*, 118–119;

John Rock moved to the North Slope in 1853, after receiving his MD degree in Philadelphia. He became the second African American member of the Massachusetts Medical Society, after John de Grasse, another North Slope resident. Rock was also a lawyer, and in August 1864 he asked Sumner for help to practice before the United States Supreme Court. His timing was significant. Two months earlier, Congress granted equal pay to U.S. Colored Troops and made the action retroactive to the date of enlistment. Until then colored troops had been receiving less than half of what white soldiers received. Sumner told Rock that nothing could be done so long as Roger Taney was Chief Justice. Taney died in October and was replaced by Salmon Chase, a longstanding friend and ally of Sumner. Sumner prodded Chase to act; he did, and on February 1, 1865, the day after Congress passed the 13th Amendment, Rock became the first African American to plead a case before the Supreme Court.<sup>34</sup>

Sumner collaborated with William Cooper Nell, a writer, historian, and abolitionist, and with Robert Morris, the nation's second African American attorney (after Ohio's John Mercer Langston), in their quest to desegregate public schools in Massachusetts. Morris and Sumner represented the Roberts family, whose daughter Sarah had been prohibited from attending a neighborhood school for white people. They lost their 1849 legal case, *Roberts v. City of Boston*, but in arguing the case they injected the phrase, "equal before the law," possibly

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Donald M. Jacobs, ed., *Courage and Conscience, Black & White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 14; Marc Arkin, "A Convenient Seat In God's Temple: The Massachusetts General Colored Association And the Park Street Church Pew Controversy of 1830," *New England Quarterly* 89 (2016): 6–53; and "George M. Horton," *Freedom's Journal*, October 3, 1828, 2.

<sup>34</sup>Christopher Brooks, "John Stewart Rock: A Trailblazed Path to the Supreme Court Bar," Supreme Court Historical Society, January 31, 2022, online at: <https://supremecourthistory.org/supreme-court-historical-society-events/2022-0131-john-stewart-rock/>; J. Harlan Buzby, *John Stewart Rock: Teacher, Healer, Counselor* (Salem, NJ: Salem County Historical Society, 2002); and Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 227–29, 240–41, 281–82.



for the first time in legal discourse. Nell gathered some 2,000 signatures on a petition to the state legislature, which voted to end school segregation in Massachusetts 1855, the first state to do so. In 1855, Nell published the first detailed history of African Americans, *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*. His book, with Sumner's assistance, helped prompt Lincoln to arm blacks as soldiers.<sup>35</sup>

Leonard Grimes was another friend and ally on the North Slope. He moved to Massachusetts in 1846 and became pastor of the Twelfth Baptist Church. After Sumner's brutal caning, North Slope's Black community organized a large public meeting in Grimes's church to voice their support for Sumner.<sup>36</sup>

Dr. Charles-Edouard Brown-Sequard, who treated Sumner's injuries from the caning, was also a Black man. Born in Mauritius, Brown-Sequard trained in Paris, taught briefly at Harvard, and practiced in London, New York, and France. He was a pioneering neurophysiologist and is still well known in medicine for having discovered hemisection of the spinal cord, also known as the "Brown-Sequard syndrome." He cauterized Sumner's cervical vertebrae by applying fire to his skin with red-hot coals, which enabled him to walk again, though with a cane.<sup>37</sup>

Many years later Charles would apply a strangely scientific word to his abolitionism: it was "autochthonous" in him,

<sup>35</sup>Kendrick and Kendrick, *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); John Stauffer, "The Union of Abolitionists and Emancipationists in Civil War-Era Massachusetts," *Massachusetts and the Civil War: The Commonwealth and National Disunion*, eds. Matthew Mason, Kathryn P. Viens, and Conrad Edick Wright (Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 29–34.

<sup>36</sup>Manisha Sinha, "The Caning of Charles Sumner: Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (2003): 233–362, quotation on 255.

<sup>37</sup>Pierce, *Memoir*, vol. 3, 563–67, 596; Michael J. Aminoff, "Brown Séquard: Selected Contributions of a Nineteenth-Century Neuroscientist," *The Neuroscientist* 6 (2000): 60–65; and Sushil Dawka, "Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard: A Bicentennial Tribute," *Internet Journal of Medical Update*, 12 (2017), online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijmu.v12i1.1>.



he said. It meant indigenous, direct from the soil, organic, formed in the place it was found. He told Wendell Phillips, "I think you can attest to my early—almost autochthonous—hostility to Slavery, & to its constancy at all times." He was referring to the influence of living on the North Slope and his numerous friendships, both professional and personal, with African Americans.<sup>38</sup>

"Equal rights for all" became a mantra for Sumner. It runs through all aspects of his adult life: in his relationships; as editor of two law journals, *Law Reporter* and *American Jurist*; as a public speaker; and especially as senator. His fullest articulation of the concept is in his 1868 speech, "The Equal Rights of All," a speech that W.E.B. Du Bois said, "laid down a Magna Charta of democracy in America." Sumner's understanding of democracy hinged on this concept. He would always refer to the North Slope as home, even after purchasing a townhouse in Lafayette Square in Washington, DC.<sup>39</sup>

For Sumner, "equal rights for all" meant *all* people, not just Black people. In his very first court case, in 1833, he "ably" defended William Apess, the Pequot leader trying to protect Indigenous land in Barnstable, Massachusetts. Sumner advocated equal rights for all immigrants, especially the Irish. During his life, African Americans never constituted more than 2 percent of Boston's or the state's population, and from 1830 through the Civil War, Black men enjoyed unrestricted suffrage. Irish immigrants constituted some 20 percent of the population by 1860 and were seen by some as a greater threat. In 1857, after the Nativist Know-Nothing Party swept the state, the legislature inaugurated a literacy test for Irish men as a precondition for voting. Two years later it imposed a two-year waiting period before new immigrants could vote. Several close abolition

<sup>38</sup>Sumner to Wendell Phillips, January 30, 1853, Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., *The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*, vol. 1 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 383–84, quotation on 383.

<sup>39</sup>W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1992), 193.

friends of Sumner were openly bigoted against Irish, including Longfellow and Theodore Parker.<sup>40</sup>

Sumner introduced his civil rights bill, a blueprint for equal rights for all, in every session of Congress from 1870 until his death, and in every session, it was rejected. In 1875, a year after he died, Congress passed a watered-down version of his Civil Rights bill, partly to honor him. But it lacked punitive teeth and omitted school desegregation. Eight years later the Supreme Court repealed it on grounds that it violated states' rights. A century later, Sumner's bill inspired the "public accommodations provision" of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. President Kennedy's lawyers borrowed Sumner's phrases wholesale but applied them narrowly.

His death in 1874 touched the popular Northern heart more than any other American, save Lincoln. "No affliction has oppressed me so heavily as the death of Charles Sumner," wrote Lydia Maria Child. "I loved and revered him beyond any other man in public life. He was my ideal of a hero, more than any of the great men in our national history." Her sentiment was not uncommon among Northerners. One of the many eulogists at Faneuil Hall, the Black caterer Joshua B. Smith, another friend from the North Slope, declared that with Sumner's death the nation was now adrift: "We are standing out now in the open sea, with a great storm, and in behalf of those five millions of [African Americans] of the United States, I beg of you to give us a good man to take hold where he left off." It would be many years before another "good man" replaced him.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup>John Stauffer, "Union of Abolitionists and Emancipationists," 16–17; Philip F. Guru, *The Life of William Apess, Pequot* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 89; Barry O'Connell, ed., *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot* (Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 201; and James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 169.

<sup>41</sup>Pierce, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner*, vol. 4, 600; Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Shaw, March 1874, Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817–1880 (Boston and Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 519; and Joshua B. Smith, "Mr. Mayor and Gentlemen," C. Edwards Lester, *Life and Public Services of Charles Sumner* (New York: United States Publishing Company, 1874), 528.

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