



# COMING TO THE TABLE

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## A Case Study in Researching Northern Slaveholding Ancestry

*by Rev. David Pettee*

Although I have been a 'keeper' of the family history since my grandfather died in 1985, I am an amateur genealogist. Over the years, I have utilized the services of professional genealogists with excellent results. After my grandfather died, I inherited all of the records and genealogy charts that he had inherited from his father and his grandfather before him. In 1997, I purchased genealogical software and spent many hours typing in every bit of information I could extract, as well as the fruits of my own genealogical labors borne of the emergence of the Internet.

Most of my ancestry is deeply rooted in New England and I grew up learning about Pilgrims, Puritans and minutemen. Not slavery. The possibility that I could have ancestors who held enslaved Africans never even occurred to me because I was taught that slavery was a Southern institution. The only time I ever recall hearing mention about my ancestors and race was in the recounting of our Quaker forebears from Pennsylvania, who were bitterly opposed to slavery.

In February 2006, I upgraded my Ancestry.com subscription. Checking the searchable Rhode Island 1774 Census records, I typed in the name of a maternal ancestor who lived in Newport, RI around the time of the Revolutionary War. I found Edward Simmons where I expected he

would be, but was surprised to read that the census enumerator had reported that four black people were in his home.

Still not appreciating what I was reading, I made a trip to the Newport Historical Society to examine a copy of the original handwritten census record. Two of the black people in his home were boys, under the age of ten. I innocently asked the historian what was the likely reason that there were black people in my ancestor's home. He gave me a puzzled look. "Slaves, of course. If you had the means, you held one or two." I was shocked. I asked him to assist me in locating a researcher I might hire to help me uncover more of this particular history. I was unable to find anyone who felt proficient enough to assist me. Others warned me that I wouldn't find much, claiming that this embarrassing story had been intentionally lost or removed from history.

So, my search to recover the history of slaves in my family began in earnest. I spoke with every person I could find who worked at a historical society, archive, or clerk's office, asking for suggestions about primary sources that might have the information I was seeking. I was fortunate. All the records were in Rhode Island. I could research on day trips from my home in Massachusetts.

Over time, I pursued every primary source I could find from 1765 to 1803, when Edward Simmons died. One of the very first suggestions I received was to consider researching Early American Newspapers, Series I, 1690-1876, available through my membership with the New England Historic and Genealogical Society. In just a few minutes of research, I found that Edward Simmons had placed a descriptive ad for a runaway slave in the Newport *Mercury* in June 1768.

I spent time at the Rhode Island Archives reviewing the slaves recorded in his home in the 1782 Rhode Island Census and the 1790 and 1800 Federal Censuses. I found further record of his involvement with slavery at the Rhode Island Historical Society in *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, and in an obscure physician record in the “Guide to Manuscripts at the Rhode Island Historical Society Relating to People of Color.”

All told, I came to learn that Edward Simmons enslaved people for more than thirty years.

Further research of my collateral lines revealed that Edward Simmons was not unique among my Rhode Island ancestors. In time, through the review of wills, personal inventories and Rhode Island court records, I was able to recover 11 other family members who, combined, enslaved 27 Africans and Native Americans. I would later find, through their wills, three Massachusetts ancestors who were slaveholders.

As I learned about the involvement of New England in the slave trade, I began to suspect that another Newport ancestor, John Robinson (the father-in-law of Edward Simmons) had sailed in the transatlantic slave trade. The gravestone of his daughter Mary (wife of Edward Simmons) in the Newport Burial Ground indicated she was “daughter of Capt. John Robinson” suggesting he was a person of some prominence. I wasn’t surprised when I

found his name in the manifest of the slave ship *Greyhound* in the collections of the Newport Historical Society, having sold 99 barrels of molasses to a Newport rum distillery.

I found Robinson’s name in the “shipping news” of pre-colonial newspapers, as he left and arrived at the ports of Newport, Providence, Boston and Charleston. Most unexpectedly, in Boston Commissioners Reports, I found a horrific reference to his arrival in Boston Harbor in 1739 aboard the schooner *Mermaid*, the ship full of sick Africans.

John Robinson was referenced several times in the book *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade in America, Volume III, New England and the Middle Colonies*. A review of a Rhode Island Vice-Admiralty court case at the Rhode Island Archives matched a 1745 voyage recorded in the Transatlantic Slave Trade database, confirming that he made several voyages to Africa.

Initially, I found the confirmation of his role in the slave trade very difficult to accept emotionally. I began to seek out support of others engaged in this same journey of reckoning. My good fortune continued when, searching online, I found Katrina Browne. Katrina was finishing a film, *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, which follows nine descendants of the DeWolf family of Bristol, Rhode Island on a trip from Bristol, to Ghana and then to Cuba, learning about the transatlantic slave trade and the depth and complicity of their family’s role in it. Katrina helped me keep pushing forward, and urged me to share with others on similar journeys how hard all this information was to digest and accept. Through Katrina, I met other DeWolf family members who pointed me towards *Coming to the Table*. I sought guidance there for the next project I had in mind.

I had decided to accept the challenge from an African American historian to seek accountability by using the same genealogical tools to try to locate a living descendant of one of the Africans enslaved by Edward Simmons. For me, accountability meant being willing to represent my family by being honest about our shared history, sharing everything I found, and expecting nothing in return.

Despite being told again by several well-meaning historians that this search was essentially impossible, I pushed ahead. By following a trail of land deeds, using probate records and researching local newspapers, in less than six months I was successful in locating a living descendant of someone enslaved by my family two hundred years before. An article detailing my research was published in *New England Ancestors*, a magazine of the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

In closing, now almost four years removed from when I first recovered the forgotten history of enslaved Africans in my family, I have released the irrational fear of African Americans I once held. Growing up in the Boston area in the 1970's during the era of forced busing, the African American community was portrayed by the media as negative, threatening and dangerous. My emotional discomfort had significantly prevented me from being able to deeply engage with others around addressing the living aftermath of slavery. Learning about the real history of slavery, particularly the complicity of the North, further served to root out much of the misinformation that came through my public school education. To keep

moving forward in my genealogical pilgrimage, it was evident that I had to deeply challenge many long held assumptions that were a direct consequence of the segregation in the Northern community in which I was raised. In addition, I came to realize that until I was willing to reckon with the destructive role that my family had played, my ability to be an ally in racial justice work was impaired. Coming to the Table has afforded me the incredible privilege to meet so many other people who have also dared to 'cross the bridge' and work together in community to build a new and life affirming legacy.

*Postscript: Since first writing this article I have conducted further research, resulting in the documentation of 33 New England slaveholding ancestors. My research had not been particularly systematic, so I set out to visit archives in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island to view every will, inventory and probate of my New England ancestors from 1638 to 1800. What struck me most about my New England slaveholding ancestors was how ordinary so many were. Most were yeoman who managed small farms. In conversation with local historians and genealogists, the large number of slaveholding ancestors at first glance seems exceptional. I'm not sure this is true. I was simply willing to look, no longer willing to remain in denial that slavery played such a critical role in the establishment of colonial New England.*

## Mission

Seeking to acknowledge, understand and heal the persistent wounds of the U.S. institution of race-based slavery and its legacies.

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