School Committee Ad Hoc Task Force on School Names
Monday, March 25, 2019
5:30 PM – 7:00 PM
Walsh School Committee Room, 5th Floor, Brookline Town Hall

Agenda

1) Approval of Minutes of the September 17, 2018 Meeting

2) Update/Discussion on Heath School Name Research
   a. Ad Hoc Task Force Discussion
   b. Public Comment

3) Discussion of Report/Recommendations to School Committee
   a. Ad Hoc Task Force Discussion
   b. Public Comment

4) Next Steps
   a. Ad Hoc Task Force Discussion
   b. Public Comment

5) Update on Coolidge Corner School Renaming Process/Timeline
   a. Ad Hoc Task Force Discussion
   b. Public Comment

6) Old and New Business

The Slave Holding History of Brookline and Implications for the Heath School

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ABSTRACT: The Heath School, presently located on Eliot Street in Brookline's Chestnut Hill, opened on Reservoir Lane in 1904. The Heath Family's ancestors lived in Muddy River (the area that became Brookline) as early as the 1670s. The Heath family gave their name to Heath Street, and the Heath School was named after the Street; hence, it is reasonable to assume that the school is named for the Heath Family. While the historical record is unclear as to whether the founding Heath family owned enslaved people when their first descendant (Isaac Heath Sr.) was listed as a village resident in 1679, it is clear that Heath descendants intermarried with various families – particularly the Whites and the Crafts – who owned slaves. In fact, John Heath, who purchased property from Samuel Sewall in 1782, married Susannah Craft, whose father, Ebenezer Craft (1705 – 1791) was known for slaveholding in Roxbury and Brookline; Craft's wife (Susannah Heath's mother), was Susannah White (b. 1713), whose family also owned slaves in Roxbury and Brookline. Given the history of the Heath family's relationship with slaveholding families in Brookline – which contributed to their substantial wealth and, therefore, to their significant contributions to Muddy River and Brookline – the Brookline School Committee must decide how to share this historical information with the community, and whether renaming of the Heath School is a priority.

Slaveholding in Brookline:

Brookline was founded as an independent village in 1705, prior to which it was known as "Muddy River," a section of Boston where European settlers kept their livestock during the summer. The area that is now Eliot Street (where the Heath School is presently located) was allotted to Deacon Jacob Eliot, minister at the First Church in Roxbury, and brother of the Reverend John Eliot. John Eliot ministered to Indians in the area, and he helped Massachusetts Bay found "praying towns" for Native people. A further area of research, then, for Brookline historians is the displacement of these Indians who lived on Muddy River, and whose homelands were violently seized during the 1630s, in order to "grant" land to missionaries like Eliot. Historian Jean M. O'Brien, whose work dissects the ways in which New Englanders have "replaced Indians" with stories of European missionaries and benevolent settlement, specifically references Brookline's role in erasing Indians from "official" New England town histories.[1] The fact that Eliot Street, where the Heath School is located, is named for a minister who facilitated and benefited from the settler colonial project that displaced Native people should be considered by the School Committee alongside their decision about the Heath family's ties to Atlantic slavery.

The first member of the Heath family, William Heath, settled in Roxbury in 1636 with his wife and seven children. One of these children, William Heath (1663 – 1738), paid taxes in Roxbury from 1697 – 1705; he married Hannah Weld (1666 – 1697). Similar to the ties between founding Brookline families and the systematic displacement of Native Americans that characterized the founding of Eliot Street, the ties between the Weld family, settler-colonialism, and Boston slavery indicates the significance of racialized "unfreedom" in Brookline. Hannah Weld's father, John Weld, descended from Thomas Weld, pastor at

[1] Jean M. O'Brien *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 104 - 105

Roxbury's First Church. John Weld was one of many Weld sons and brothers who earned money and land through Indian displacement and Atlantic Slavery – for his leadership in King Philip's War (1675), John Weld received extensive landholdings in Roxbury. Although it is unclear whether John Weld specifically owned slaves, his family did. In fact, the Welds had enough of an interest in slaveholding that one of Hannah Weld's nephews, Ebenezer Weld, signed his name to a 1739 petition prohibiting "negro servants" from walking around Roxbury at night, unaccompanied by their "masters."[2] The fact that William Heath's (1686 – 1792) mother was Hannah Weld, whose family owned slaves in Roxbury, establishes a connection between Heath family wealth and their ownership of extensive property and lands in Brookline. William Heath's son, John Heath (1732 – 1804) is the Revolutionary War hero so revered in Brookline histories, who purchased Samuel Sewall's home in 1782.

The Heaths' ties to the Craft and White families, in addition to their familial and economic ties to the slaveholding Welds in Roxbury, also indicate ties between the Heath name and Brookline slavery. John Heath, son of William Heath (1686 – 1792) and Hannah Weld (1666 – 1697), married Susannah Crafts (1738 – 1806) in 1758. At the time, Susannah Crafts' father, Deacon Ebenezer Crafts (1705 – 1791) was a well-known slaveholder, both in Roxbury, where he lived, and in Brookline, where he owned substantial property. Although Deacon Craft "always lived at Roxbury," he earned his fortune through land investments in Brookline, Newton, Brimfield, Monson, and Northfield, among other towns. In Brookline, he owned a large estate on Newton Street – this property is less than two miles from Heath Street, where the Heath estate(s) were located, and which was named for the Heath family. Deacon Ebenezer Crafts, John Heath's father in law, was such a well-known slaveowner that it is mentioned in both the official Heath family genealogical chart in the Massachusetts Historical Society, and Harriet Woods' 1874 *Historical Sketches of Brookline*.[3] Ebenezer Crafts was born in Roxbury, to a family with a long record of slave-holding, and he married Susannah White (1713 – 1759) in 1735. Together, the Crafts and White families owned and sold multiple slaves in Brookline. In 1739, for instance, Susannah White's father, Deacon White, purchased an eleven year old "negro girl named Dina" from Richard Champion in Boston.[4] Susannah White, Deacon White's wife, was Samuel Sewall's Aunt – Samuel Sewall owned the house that John Heath purchased after the Revolution in 1782.[5]

Although slaveholding in Brookline did not look like slavery in Narragansett or Providence, Rhode Island, it was no less cruel and dehumanizing. Additionally, slaveholding provided middle and upper middle class white families in Brookline and Roxbury a source of disposable income that they traded with one another to support their investments in land.[6] Although the scope of this report cannot accommodate a longer thesis about the nature of slavery and its significance in greater Boston's economic history, it would be useful for members of the Brookline Historical Society to refer to current scholarship on New England slavery that definitively proves this point – historians have long disposed of the idea that slavery was, as Henry David Thoreau intimated, "marginal" to New England's Brahmin

[2] Frances Samuel Drake *The Town of Roxbury: Its Memorable Persons and Places* (Roxbury, MA: 1878), 60 - 61
[3] See: "Heath Family Genealogy" by Kathleen M. Fox 2015 *Heath Family Papers Massachusetts Historical Society*. Also, Harriet Woods Historical Sketches of Brookline (Boston, MA: Robert S. Davis and Company, 1874) 379 – 381
[4] Woods, 90 – 91. Also: "Bill of Sale 1739" Box 28 *Heath Family Papers* Massachusetts Historical Society
[5] "Heath Family Genealogy" by Kathleen M. Fox 2015
[6] Wendy Warren *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (WW Norton, 2017)

elite.[7] Jared Hardesty describes the social and economic system of Boston slaveholding as a hierarchy of racialized "unfreedom" – Africans were commodities to be sold through the Atlantic Slave Trade (of which Boston was a leading participant by the 1740s), and laborers whose work as artisans, housekeepers, nurses, and farmers supported and sustained white wealth.[8] Wendy Warren, too, places Indian displacement and African enslavement at the center of New England's economic and cultural history, borrowing from the work of previous historians like Lorenzo Johnston Greene, Wiliam Cottrol, Elizabeth Pleck, William D. Piersen, and others. Again, the bibliography at the end of this report should be consulted for broader historical context about the centrality of slaveholding in the development of towns like Brookline, and in the fortunes of "foundation families" across greater Boston.

The dehumanizing and ubiquitous nature of Brookline slavery can be gleaned from the vital records and town histories. Although historians of African American New England have always pointed to the inability of vital records to accurately reflect the numbers of African people, enslaved and free, in the region, the vital records of Brookline indicate that at least nineteen "negroes" were born in the town between 1717 and 1768, and that at least thirty-four died in the same town between 1761 and 1806. The names of these "negroes" indicates the white households to which they were enslaved – the Whites, the Boystons, the Sewalls, the Gardners are particularly ubiquitous.[9] Yet, given the way that slavery functioned across Massachusetts – again, the notion of "unfreedom" as a particularly cruel consequence of legalized slavery – historians should not assume that all of these people were "slaves." After all, by the 1760s over 15% of all Africans in Boston were free, although they could not vote, they were "warn'd out" of towns by white residents, and they were denied the economic rights that white Brookline residents took for granted.[10]

While these vital records provide a partial list of the African descended people of early Brookline, town histories add to a general picture of the dehumanizing treatment, and economic deprivation, that "negroes" encountered at the hands of their white neighbors. For instance, Dinah, the eleven year old black child sold to Deacon Ebenezer Crafts (John Heath's father in law) in 1739, died in 1803 of dropsy at the age of 75 after years of unpaid labor in the Crafts household.[11] Although slavery was legally prohibited in Massachusetts by 1783, Dinah met the fate of many former slaves in the region – purchased as children, forced to work for multiple generations of middle and upper class white families, they were often elderly and broke by the time slavery ended. While some towns, including Brookline, required former slave holders to pay money to the town poor house for "maintenance" of the

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[7] In Walden, Thoreau famously compared the horrors of southern slavery to the horrors of northern slavery, an idea that black abolitionists insisted was insufficient. Sandra Harbert Petrulions discusses Thoreau's early ambivalence about slavery, and New England's role in it, in her discussion of anti-slavery Concord. See: Sarah H. Petrulionis To Set This World Right: The Anti-Slavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord (Cornell University Press, 2006), 60 - 65

[8] Jared Hardesty Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth Century Boston (NYU Press, 2016), 43 - 70

[9] Vital Records of Brookline, Massachusetts, to the end of the year 1849 (Salem, MA: The Essex Institute, 1929), 81 – 82; 242 – 244

[10] "Warning out" was the process by which whites expelled formerly enslaved people and Native Americans from their towns. In her study of New England's use of town histories to write African Americans and slavery from the historical record, historian Joanne Pope Melish sees "warning out" as a way that wealthy whites denied slavery's significance in their economic, political, and social lives. See: Joanne Pope Melish Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England 1780 – 1860 (Cornell University Press, 1998)

[11] *Vital Records of Brookline*, 243

formerly enslaved, many, like Dinah, lacked the money and the health to start lives of their own. It is telling, then, that a "Mrs. White" wrote a self-indulgent, self-righteous poem following Dinah's death in 1803, while never offering some of her family's substantial fortune to Dinah's two daughters, Violet and Venus, or helping Dinah find any surviving family members still living in Boston.[12]

Dinah's dehumanization was not unique. In records written by town selectmen, African Americans are referred to as "ye negro" or "wench," and "gifted" to heirs and in-laws alongside silver and farm tools.[13] The story of Susy Backus, a woman of African descent enslaved to the Crafts (often called Crofts) family indicates the brutal, dehumanizing labor that ran Brookline's households. Susy was the daughter of Backus, "an African who served as blacksmith in Dorchester," and a local Indian woman in Brookline named Molly Hill. Although Backus insisted that his name was Mr. Cleveland – an indication that he demanded an identity independent of his slave status – townspeople refused to refer to him as anything except "Backus." Harriet Woods recalled that Susy Backus was overworked and brutalized, although in Woods' telling the Backus story is reduced to funny anecdote – the black woman, Woods states, "was cook, chambermaid, milkmaid, hostler, and gardener for the Croft family. In fact her service was only limited by the fact that there are but twenty-four hours in the day, and that poor humanity must sleep sometime. She shoveled snow in winter and gathered vegetables in summer which her own hands had planted in spring." When Captain Croft purchased "a new and most respectable vehicle," he sent Susy out after a heavy ran to wade through the mud on Cypress Street (then called "the new lane") to see "if the mud was deep enough to imperil the respectability of the new chaise." Despite her labor, Susy was relegated to the "negro pew" when she attended the town's meeting house, a seat she was forced to inhabit even after slavery ended.[14]

Conclusions

Although it is unclear whether the Heath family owned slaves, the historical record indicates that they intermarried, over multiple generations, with families like the Welds, the Crafts, and the Whites who did. Heath Street, which was named for the Heath family, is named, therefore, for a white Brookline family that was complicit in Massachusetts slavery. The Heath School, named for Heath Street, is therefore named for a white Brookline family that was complicit in Massachusetts slavery. Furthermore, the narrow focus on the Heath family's ownership of slaves distracts from what is arguably a more complicated history – the role of slavery in the wealth of Brookline's leading families, and the complicity of white Brookline in both the displacement of Native Americans and the economic marginalization, and dehumanization, of African descended people. The decision by the Brookline school committee on whether to rename the Heath School hinges, then, upon the question of how Brookline's citizens plan to reckon with their racist founding. This is not merely a question for Brookline – every town in Massachusetts (indeed, in the country) has a similar history. The uses of this history should be decided by those in the community who have least benefited from the racialized system upon which their town's were founded.

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[12] Woods, 315 - 316

[13] In 1769, Robert Sharpe's Brookline estate was worth over 1,764 pounds, including "one negro wench, 20.00 pounds." Six years before, in 1763, Robert Sharp deeded "my negro woman Jane and my Silver tankard" to his wife, Susannah. Sharp Papers in the Brookline Public Library, 10 - 11. See also: *Muddy River and Brookline Records 1634 – 1838, By the Inhabitants of Brookline, in Town Meeting* (J.E. Farwell and Co., Printers, 1875), 124

[14] Woods, 154 - 155

Bibliography:

Note that slavery ended, at least in the eyes of Massachusetts law, with the Quock Walker and Mumbet cases in 1783. By 1790, Massachusetts was the only State whose Federal Census listed no slaves. This means that further research on slavery in Brookline, and the Heath family's slave ownership, must account for the fact that slavery was illegal by the 1780s, and that many town records referred to slaves as servants in an effort, as historians like Joanne Pope Melish have shown, to disavow their participation in slavery. Again, any future research needs to take this historical context into account in order to accurately read the record.

Catherine Adams and Elizabeth Pleck *Love of Freedom: Black Women in Colonial and Revolutionary New England* (Oxford University Press 2010)

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