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A Line in the Sand

The Battle to Integrate Nantucket Public Schools 1825–1847

Barbara Ann White

Spinner Publications, Inc.

New Bedford, Massachusetts

Contents

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Foreword

Barbara White does justice to an important part of Nantucket's most challenging and enlightening history. She goes well beyond what is available about black Nantucketers in our history books to write this powerful story of the equal education movement. By providing an overview of the struggles to establish public schools for white children, she places the equal education movement for black students in bold relief.

A Line in the Sand reveals Nantucket as a microcosm of this nation's conflicted campaign to end slavery and to provide education in schools open to all children. In so doing, the author details the opposition of powerful people to any semblance of equality—an enlightening journey that helps the reader understand how important newspaper owners, school committee elections, and anti-slavery societies were to the advancement of this movement.

Barbara White delineates a difficult history where the not-so-subtle distinction between anti-slavery and abolition are explored. She documents the independent spirit of blacks as they gain their freedom by degrees through their social and economic accomplishments as well as through their organized resistance. She describes the black community's legal cases on behalf of their daughters; and reveals the natural progression of the activism of the Nantucket black community that forms the first anti-slavery organization, the African Society and the first public school of any kind on Nantucket.

These hard-won victories are made ever better by Barbara White's new scholarship and the images of portraits and primary source documents. She painstakingly details whites and blacks individually and collectively, across a color divide, working towards integrated schools. Ultimately, the reader learns about a painful movement, yet one of uplift, triumph, and justice.

The Museum of African American History is so very grateful to her, one of the original "Friends of the African Meeting House," for the many years of groundbreaking and innovative teaching, researching, writing, and now editing and encourages her continued dedicated work. Write On!

Beverly A. Morgan-Welch, Executive Director
Museum of African American History

Preface

The attempt at integration of the public schools on Nantucket Island stirred up an eight-year controversy during the 1840s. The uproar included a boycott of the school system, petitions to the Massachusetts State House, long and bitter debates at the annual town meetings, and episodes of violence. An important result of the battle to admit blacks to the schools on the island was the passage of the first law in the United States to guarantee equal education, regardless of race.

This case study about the struggle to integrate the island's school system foreshadows the struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. The arguments of the 19th century reverberate and repeat themselves throughout American history. Racism was, and continues to be, rationalized by pseudo-science, false intentions, scare tactics, and the use of districting lines—all with the intent of keeping black children out of white schools. Eunice Ross, the young black woman who first applied for admission to the high school on Nantucket, and those who worked for so long to achieve integration, thought that the time was imminent when segregation would be abolished forever. The 1843 School Committee optimistically predicted that one day such ideas would be "swept away into the great sea of bygone follies." However, the "folly" of racism is an ever-present specter, and Eunice Ross was a victim of it.

After years of neglect, the historic African Meeting House on Nantucket was purchased in 1989 by the Museum of African American History in Boston. With funding from the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the help of interested persons on Nantucket and elsewhere, the building has been restored. Thus, the town records will not stand alone as a "memorial of the truth" (as they were referred to in an anonymous letter of the 1840s); rather, the African Meeting House stands as a memorial commemorating the children who studied there, the teachers who taught there, and the leaders in the community whose endeavors eventually ended school segregation on the island.

It is my hope that this publication will serve also as a memorial to the blacks and whites who fought against racism and inferior education. Of the many heroes in this book, first and foremost are the students themselves, especially Eunice Ross and Phebe Ann Boston, who diligently studied in order to qualify to attend the upper-level schools. The heroes include teachers such as Frederick Baylies, Jacob Perry, Priscilla Thompson, Eliza Bailey, Cyrus Peirce, and, Anna Gardner. Other heroes are the abolitionists who

The Struggle to Establish Public Schools

The committee recommended that the town procure properties so that four schools, each serving 50 children under the direction of a schoolmistress, and a fifth headed by a schoolmaster for the more advanced students, could be established. They recommended seeking teachers of "good moral character."

The town did not follow up on the recommendations of the committee, however, significantly *cutting* its support for public education the following year. The School Committee itself was reduced from seven to five members, and the school budget was cut in half! The committee reported that it had organized two schools for boys during the year, each accommodating about 90 scholars and placed another 100 students, "principally boys" in privately supported schools.

The bulk of the money that had been appropriated went to the Fragment Society, a Quaker charitable group that had provided some education for the poor since 1814. The school accommodated only 50 pupils, though, and the school year was limited to the warm months because the building was not heated. The committee reported the willingness of the Fragment Society to expand its support for indigent children to two schools, so that female students could also be accommodated.[3]

This situation continued to deteriorate with ever-weakening town support for public education. In 1821, for example, the Town Report stated that the education of only 125 children was supported by town funds.[4] The number fell to 116 the following year.[5] And, in 1824, the School Committee was cut to just three members.[6]

It was not until the newspaper took up the cause that public opinion began to shift. Samuel Haynes Jenks moved to Nantucket and became editor of Nantucket's only newspaper, the *Inquirer,* in 1822, one year after it began publication. The columns of this "off-islander" became a forum in support of public education.

It took considerable agitation, led mainly by Jenks and his brother-in-law, Cyrus Peirce, who had been teaching privately for a number of years, before the issue gained enough support to reestablish public schools on Nantucket. The school question came to the floor of the annual town meeting in 1825.[7] A committee appointed the previous year once again reported that there was a great need for public education on the island. One of the men on the committee was Nathaniel Barney, a man who became a tireless abolitionist and supporter of integrated public schools over the next two decades.

The committee stressed the importance of education to the community. It stopped short of recommending a truly public school system, though, presuming that parents who could afford a private education for their children would continue to do so, rather than embarrass themselves by looking to town-supported schools. A budget of $1,500 was approved to aid the poor in the education of their children, but, once again, the frugal Nantucket Yankees spent only about half of the sum. Some progress was made, however, as five public schools were established with 180 pupils in attendance,[8] and some students were placed in private schools at town expense.

One of the schools established was for black children.

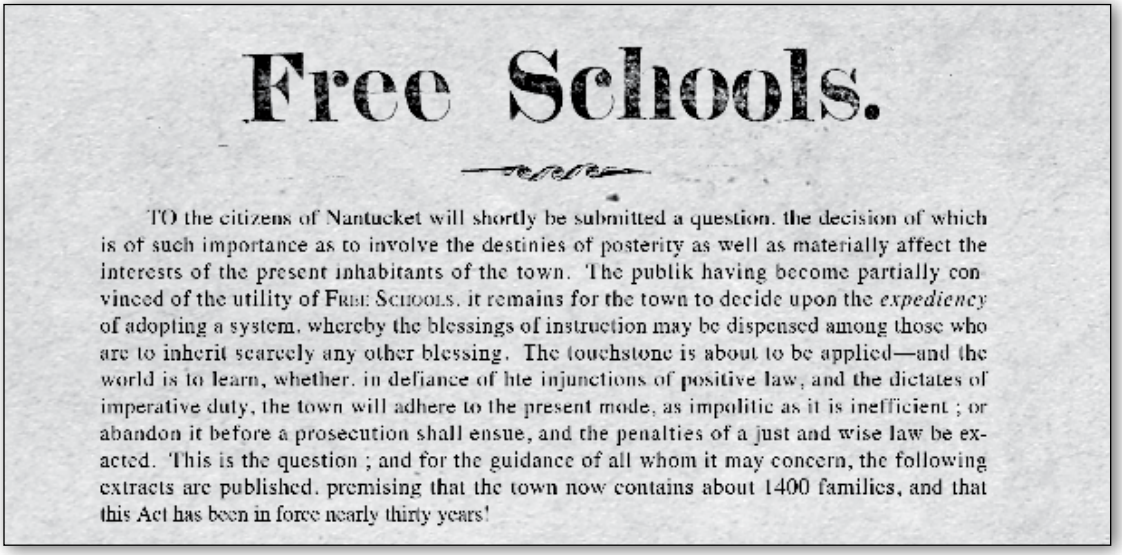
> *One of the said female schools is composed of colored children, whose advancement in education has afforded satisfaction to the committee when they have visited the school . . . .*[9]

In 1826, the town voted to maintain the status quo, but proponents of public education kept up the pressure to create a genuine public school system. Jenks pointed out in an editorial that many Quakers were opposed to public education, as they had provided good private schools for their own children. He also alleged that Quakers feared the influence of non-Quaker children on their own children. Furthermore, he criticized their unwillingness to have their taxes support the education of others. However, he did not single out the Quakers in their opposition to public schools. He also blamed leaders of the whaling industry, who, he claimed, worried that educated young men might turn away from whaling to become "full-grown physicians and lawyers." Jenks said it was an absurd argument since the basic public education he proposed could not bring about such a result.[10]

Jenks complained that the town was in violation of state law, and in July 1826 a case was brought before the Supreme Judicial Court on Nantucket. The town was accused of neglecting "the procuring and supporting" of a school for students who had attained grammar school qualifications. The jury found the town guilty of negligence. A letter to the editor reported the town's indictment with glee and the hope that obstructions to "actual Free Schools" would be removed.[11]

Things did begin to change in Nantucket, but this would not be the last time that the town was forced to change because of legal pressure at the state level

Portion of a broadside in favor of establishing public schools on Nantucket, 1818.



Free Schools.

TO the citizens of Nantucket will shortly be submitted a question, the decision of which is of such importance as to involve the destinies of posterity as well as materially affect the interests of the present inhabitants of the town. The publik having become partially convinced of the utility of FREE SCHOOLS, it remains for the town to decide upon the *expediency* of adopting a system, whereby the blessings of instruction may be dispensed among those who are to inherit scarcely any other blessing. The touchstone is about to be applied—and the world is to learn, whether, in defiance of hte injunctions of positive law, and the dictates of imperative duty, the town will adhere to the present mode, as impolitic as it is inefficient; or abandon it before a prosecution shall ensue, and the penalties of a just and wise law be exacted. This is the question; and for the guidance of all whom it may concern, the following extracts are published, premising that the town now contains about 1400 families, and that this Act has been in force nearly thirty years!

Nantucket Historical Association

The Coffin School had a great influence on the local public schools; its administrators, teachers, and trustees served both the Coffin School and the local public schools. Jenks enrolled his own children in the Coffin School.[13] Thus "graded" schools came to Nantucket. The old model of the one-room schoolhouse was replaced.

Schoolrooms of the era were remarkably similar in design. They usually included built-in desks around three walls, with benches on which the older children faced either their desks or the center of the room. In the middle of the room were benches for the younger children, generally close to the stove or fireplace. The teacher's desk, on a low platform, was positioned in front of the fourth wall or in the center, depending on the location of the stove.[15] Lancasterian schoolrooms also included as many visual aids, such as maps and pictures, as the school could afford.

Despite the success in 1827 of setting up a public school system, for the first three levels of schools—introductory, primary, and grammar—Nantucket continued to violate state law, which mandated that towns also fund high schools. It took 11 more years of steady pressure and agitation before it established a public high school. Much of that pressure came from Jenks and his newspaper. In 1838 the School Committee recommended establishing a high school, and money was appropriated for it. The high school opened its doors in April of that year under the leadership of Cyrus Peirce, Jenks' brother-in-law, who gave up a lucrative private school position in order to take on the task.

Partly responsible for the growing interest in public education was the "Nantucket County Association of the Promotion of Education and the Improvement of Schools." Commonly called the Education Society, its membership comprised staunch advocates of public education, many of them abolitionists who would later be involved in the integration controversy. The secretary of the group was Cyrus Peirce, who would soon be on the other side of the integration issue than his brother-in-law, Jenks.

A Community of Learned Societies

Nantucket was a community whose prosperity was based on the whaling industry, and the wealthy merchants who made up the backbone of the society were well educated. The isolation of the island prevented them from attending lectures at universities and lyceums, so local societies and clubs of all sorts were organized to fill the void. Some were strictly charitable organizations, such as the Quaker Fragment Society; some were all male and some were all female. Many organizations were formed to satisfy intellectual curiosity, such as the Philosophical Institute, and some, such as the several temperance societies, were organized to champion reform. People were often members of multiple societies.

The island women were an independent lot, many of them carrying on businesses and caring for their families while their men were at sea, often for months and even years at a time. In addition, the Quaker faith provided more gender equality than other denominations of the time, accepting

sympathetic to the activities of the New Guinea community than was his predecessor. He wrote:

> *The school is at present, and has been for some time past, under the instruction of Mr. Perry, an intelligent and worthy man of colour, who also officiates as minister to the coloured people of this town. The present number of scholars in the African School in this town, is 47; of whom 34 write, 30 read in the Testament, 2 in Spelling books and 5 in the alphabet-their writing would do credit to scholars whose opportunities would have been greater than those children have had, and their reading, spelling, exercises in arithmetic etc., etc., were very creditable both to their instructor and themselves.*

The article encouraged local philanthropists to support the African School. It expressed the belief that education was the best way for blacks to achieve equality and that it was "the surest passport to honour and happiness" as well as the "best guarantee of our civil and religious liberties." Praise went to Perry for the deportment of his students. "We have seldom enjoyed an entertainment more pleasing and rational."

This was certainly high praise for the school; it is, furthermore, the *only* detailed picture of the pupils, the curriculum, the teachers, and the quality of instruction during the more than two decades of the school's operation. Editor Thornton also commented that a respectable number of "high standing" ladies and gentlemen had attended the school's examination, but noted with disapproval that not a single member of the 12-member School Committee was to be seen.[71]

In a letter to the editor two weeks later an anonymous writer voiced concern that Perry's salary was so small that he was about to be "forced to leave this island."[72] It is not clear when Perry left the island, but it was certainly by 1834, when he was living in New Bedford as president of the Union Society and pastor of the African Christian Church there. In New Bedford, he was active in the black abolitionist movement and attended the fourth Colored People's Convention.[73]

In March 1834, a notice appeared in the *Inquirer* advertising for a female teacher for the African School, and within a week it was reported that Eliza Bailey was appointed.[74] Miss Bailey, a young white woman, taught at the school for two years when epilepsy made it impossible for her to continue. She died in 1841 at age 29, and her headstone in Prospect Hill Cemetery identifies her as "formerly a

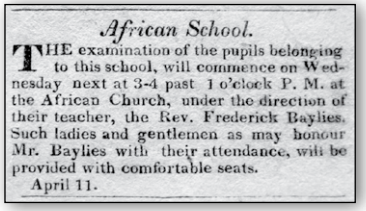
Restored interior of the African Meeting House, 2009.

Barbara A. White photograph

Notes

1. The levels of schooling at the time were introductory, primary, grammar, high school. Entry to the two upper levels was based on an examination.
2. Nantucket Town Records, May 7, 1818. (Original spelling and punctuation in quoted materials have been retained throughout.)
3. Nantucket Town Records, May 1819.
4. Nantucket Town Records, April 1821.
5. Nantucket Town Records, May 1822.
6. Nantucket Town Records, April 1824.
7. Nantucket's town government still is based on annual town meetings.
8. Nantucket Town Records, April 1825.
9. Nantucket Town Records, May 4, 1826.
10. The *Inquirer,* May 20, 1826.
11. The *Inquirer,* October 14, 1826.
12. Margaret Moore Booker, *The Admiral's Academy: Nantucket Island's Historic Coffin School,* Nantucket: Mill Hill Press, 1998.
13. Jenks's wife was a Coffin.
14. Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860,* New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, pp.14–15.
15. He often lectured on topics such as meteorology.
16. The *Inquirer,* December 9, 1831. Other members who were ardent abolitionists were David Joy, Isaac Austin, Cyrus Peirce, William Mitchell, Dr. Charles Winslow, and Nathaniel Barney.
17. The *Inquirer,* July 1840.
18. The *Telegraph,* December 3, 1844.
19. The Normal School for training teachers opened under the direction of Peirce. It eventually became Framingham State University.
20. The *Inquirer,* August 22, 1840, and October 18, 1845.
21. The *Inquirer,* January 18, 1833.
22. The *Inquirer,* October 6, 1832. At that time Peirce was the proprietor of a private school.
23. The *Inquirer,* November 3, 1832.
24. The *Inquirer,* June 25, 1842.
25. The *Daily Telegraph,* October 6, 1843.
26. *Weekly Mirror,* October 4, 1845.
27. The *Inquirer*, July 30, 1834. Abolitionists included Obed Barney, Edward R. Folger, Dr. Charles Winslow, Henry A. Kelley and Edward M. Gardner.
28. The *Islander,* December 3, 1842.
29. The *Inquirer,* April 2, 1830.
30. Frances Ruley Karttunen, *The Other Islanders,* (New Bedford: Spinner Publications, 2005) 61.
31. Karttunen, 62.
32. James Monaghan, "Anti-Slavery on Nantucket," *Proceedings of the Nantucket Historical Association,* 1938, 23.
33. The first was written by Daniel Pastorius.
34. For more about the Rotch family and abolitionism, see Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar.* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).
35. The *Inquirer,* February 14, 1822.
36. For a more complete description of slave ownership, manumissions, and the composition of Nantucket's black community, see Karttunen, *The Other Islanders.*
37. Anna Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings in Prose and Verse. (*New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881) pp.13–15.
38. The *Islander,* January 30, 1841.
39. The *Inquirer,* August 3, 1833.
40. The *Inquirer,* June 22, 1836.
41. The *Inquirer,* July 30, 1836. Notice of a camp meeting in Mashpee to "all sects . . . without distinction of age or color."
42. The *Inquirer,* October 26, 1833.
43. The *Inquirer,* February 1, 1834.
44. The African Meeting House was purchased by the African-American Museum of History in Boston in 1989 and has been restored.
45. The *Inquirer,* July 19, 1829.
46. "Blacks on Nantucket," Nantucket Historical Association Research Library, Ms 222, Folder 9. In the Record of the Nantucket Anti-Slavery Society, Edward J. Pompey is listed as a member of the board of directors for the otherwise all-white Nantucket County Anti-Slavery Society.
47. The *Inquirer,* July 2, 1834.
48. The *Inquirer,* September 5, 1834.
49. Other officers were Charles Godfrey, Nathaniel A. Borden, William Harris, John Barbour, and John W. Banks.
50. The *Inquirer,* July 11, 1838.
51. The *Inquirer,* July 15, 1838.
52. The *Inquirer,* July 15, 1838. There is evidence that "B" was Nathaniel Barney based on letters in 1842 concerning the fugitive slave, George Latimer. Nathaniel Barney spoke about having met Latimer in Boston at a public rally and, later that week, a letter signed "B" appeared, which claimed the same thing.
53. Anna Gardner, *Harvest Gleanings in Prose and Verse,* New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881, 17.
54. The *Inquirer,* August 16, 1821.
55. The *Inquirer,* January 3, 1825.
56. The *Inquirer,* April 11, 1825.
57. Registry of Deeds, Volume 28, 207, 208.
58. Registry of Deeds, Volume 28, 438.
59. The *Inquirer,* December 9, 1826
60. The *Inquirer,* June 21, 1834.
61. The *Inquirer,* June 17, 1837.
62. The *Inquirer,* January 17, 1853.
63. Registry of Deeds, Volume 28, 438. He died in 1832, long before the controversy over school integration. For more about Jeffrey Summons and his family, see Karttunen, 81
64. The *Inquirer,* April 18, 1829.
65. Nantucket Town Records,1827.
66. The *Inquirer,* May 2, 1829.
67. Priscilla Thompson was Absalom F. Boston's first cousin (the daughter of Peter Boston, youngest son of Boston and Maria).
68. Nantucket Town Records, School Committee Report, April 1826.
69. The *Inquirer,* May 2, 1828.
70. Priscilla Thompson was a widow who remarried in 1832 and died of tuberculosis in 1834 at the age of 32.
71. The *Inquirer,* April 18, 1829.
72. *The Inquirer,* May 2, 1829.
73. Grover, 122,133.
74. The *Inquirer,* March 7, 1834.
75. The *Inquirer,* April 21, 1841.
76. The *Inquirer,* May 11, 1836.
77. The *Inquirer,* April 9, 1831.
78. For more information about Gardner's teaching in the South, see Barbara White's unpublished manuscript, *Anna Gardner: Teacher of Freedmen*, 2005, for the James Bradford Ames Fellowship at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and at the Nantucket Historical Association Research Library and the Nantucket Atheneum.
79. Philena Carkin. *Reminiscences of Philena Carkin, 1866–1875.* University of Virginia Library, Special Collections Department. Accession Number 11, 123.
80. Nantucket Town Records,1838.
81. Town Records, School Committee Report, February 2, 1838.
82. Town Records, School Committee Report, February 1839.
83. The *Inquirer,* July 13, 1839.
84. The *Inquirer*, February 29 and November 25, 1840.
85. The *Inquirer,* March 17, 1841.

The first mention of the African School, in the Inquirer, *April 11, 1825.*



African School.

THE examination of the pupils belonging to this school, will commence on Wednesday next at 3-4 past 1 o'clock P. M. at the African Church, under the direction of their teacher, the Rev. Frederick Baylies. Such ladies and gentlemen as may honour Mr. Baylies with their attendance, will be provided with comfortable seats.

April 11.

Nantucket Atheneum

Chapter III

An Island Divided

Hepsibeth Hussey's private school at the corner of Fair and Charter Streets in the 1880s. The school building was later moved to Quince Street. — Nantucket Historical Association

Nantucket's community was awash with controversy as Eunice Ross prepared to take her examination. The Atheneum had closed its doors to blacks and to abolitionists, and some churches had also barred their doors to abolitionist speakers. A segregated school for black children had been built on York Street.[1] Off-island, the abolitionist movement had suffered a divisive schism that had local repercussions. The newpapers were full of partisan politics. All that was needed was a catalyst to bring the issues together. So, when Eunice Ross passed the examination to enter the high school, she provided the spark that inflamed island politics for years.

For No Other Reason But Color

For eight years, 1840–47, the issue of school integration would dominate Nantucket's annual town meetings. The bitterness of the debate can be discerned by careful reading of the hundreds of motions made by the advocates of school integration and those who opposed it. Acrimonious battles took place on the floor of the meetings and argument over a single motion could extend for several days of debate.

The issue had been simmering just below the surface for some time. An indication of the coming controversy was the interest in running for local political offices. In early 1839, 30 candidates ran for the five positions on the Nantucket Board of Selectmen! One of the candidates was the wealthiest member of the New Guinea community, Captain Absalom F. Boston, who garnered only one vote. Eighteen people ran for the 13-member School Committee, including some well-known abolitionists such as Andrew M. Macy and Obed Barney.

The first indication that Eunice Ross's application was either pending or planned was the appearance of a public notice in the newspaper on May 4, 1839, concerning a discussion by the Nantucket Education Society. The question for discussion that week was whether "the present public provision for popular Education be enlarged as to furnish what is commonly called "liberal education" to all qualified applicants.[2] It is not hard to read between the lines that this was to be a discussion about whether Eunice Ross should be admitted to the high school as one of those "qualified applicants."

No further specific references to the explosive question appeared during the following year, but forces on both sides of the issue were consolidating their power bases. The Anti-Slavery Society met frequently and kept questions about slavery and race in the public eye. The Boston newspaper, *The Liberator,* and the *Inquirer* on Nantucket exchanged ugly correspondence. The *Inquirer* came out against the Garrisonian abolitionists, favoring the more conservative abolitionists who had abandoned the Anti-Slavery Association because of the inclusion of women delegates.[3] The *Inquirer* called Garrison's wing the "old woman's party." The first opposition paper on Nantucket, the *Islander,* appeared in March. The two papers immediately clashed and called each other names.

It was at a June town meeting, however, that the issue of Eunice Ross and her successful examination came into the open,

when the first formal move was made toward integration of Nantucket's schools. At that momentous meeting, Edward M. Gardner moved to "see if the Town will instruct the School Committee to permit coloured children to enter all or any public schools of this Town."[4] His motion was voted down, despite arguments put forth by abolitionists such as John H. Shaw and Isaac Austin.

Seventeen-year-old Eunice Ross had outgrown the curriculum of the ungraded York Street School. She was the youngest of African-born James Ross's children, with three older sisters and an older brother. With 17 other students, she had qualified for admission to the high school that year, but, unique among them, she was turned down. Five years later, she submitted a petition to the state legislature describing the town's refusal to admit her. In the petition, she said that she had taken the examination and had been found "amply qualified," yet the town had denied her admission when it voted down Edward M. Gardner's motion.[5]

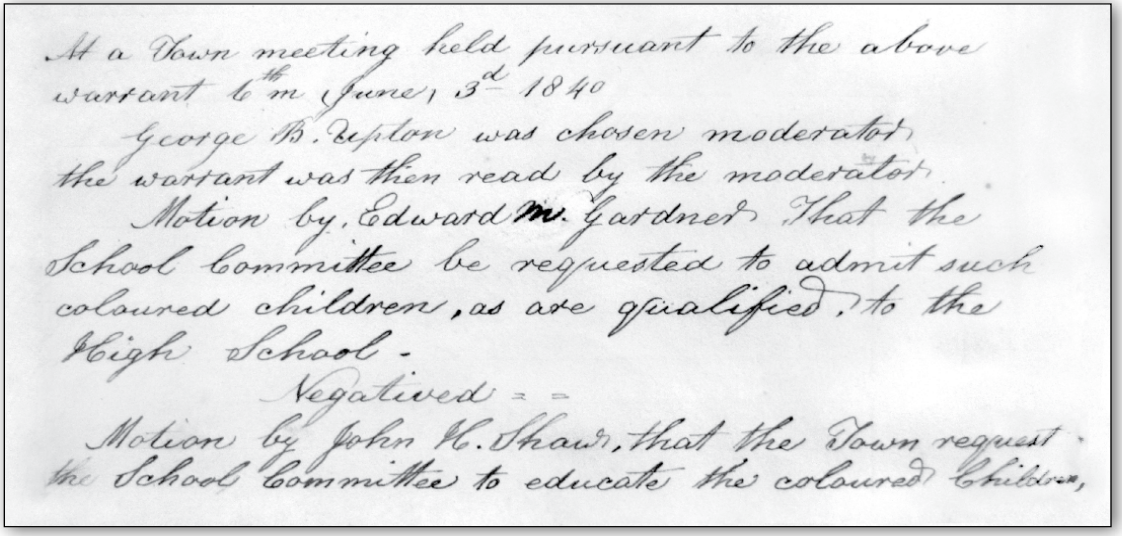
Shortly after the failed bid for integration on the floor of the June town meeting, a house in the New Guinea neighborhood was attacked and "partially demolished by a number of persons unknown."[6] Also unknown is whether that violence was in any way connected to the racial hostility that was growing in Nantucket.

Despite this initial defeat, those who wanted the schools open to all students, regardless of race, were not about to give up the fight.

Attitudes Harden

As 1841 began, it quickly became clear that the issue of Eunice Ross and her successful examination was not going away. Early in the year, Nathaniel Barney, writing

Town Meeting records show the first motion to integrate schools was made by Edward M. Gardner on June 3, 1840. It was "negatived." A similar motion by John H. Shaw was also turned down.



At a Town meeting held pursuant to the above warrant 6th m June 3d 1840

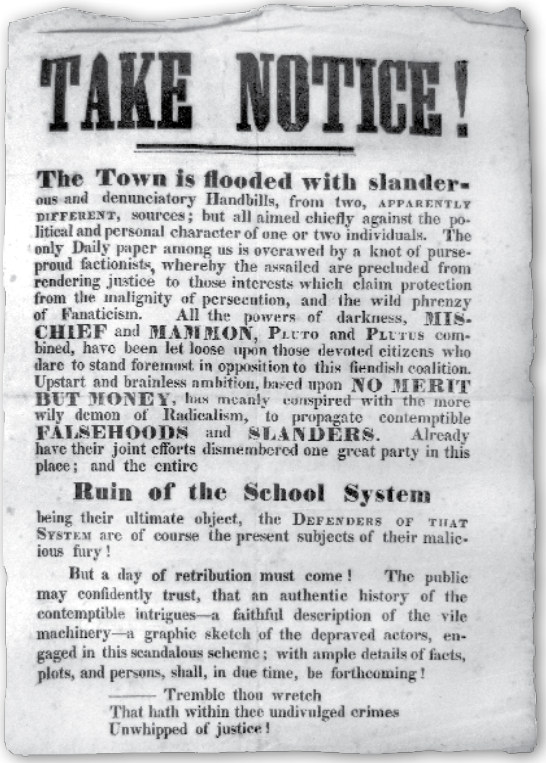
George B. Upton was chosen moderator the warrant was then read by the moderator

Motion by Edward M. Gardner That the School committee be requested to admit such coloured children, as are qualified, to the High School.

Negatived = =

Motion by John H. Shaw, that the Town request the School Committee to educate the coloured Children,

Nantucket Town Records



TAKE NOTICE!

The Town is flooded with slander-ous and denunciatory Handbills, from two, APPARENTLY DIFFERENT, sources; but all aimed chiefly against the political and personal character of one or two individuals. The only Daily paper among us is overawed by a knot of purse-proud factionists, whereby the assailed are precluded from rendering justice to those interests which claim protection from the malignity of persecution, and the wild phrenzy of Fanaticism. All the powers of darkness, **MISCHIEF** and **MAMMON**, PLUTO and PLUTUS combined, have been let loose upon those devoted citizens who dare to stand foremost in opposition to this fiendish coalition. Upstart and brainless ambition, based upon **NO MERIT BUT MONEY**, has meanly conspired with the more wily demon of Radicalism, to propagate contemptible **FALSEHOODS** and **SLANDERS**. Already have their joint efforts dismembered one great party in this place; and the entire

Ruin of the School System

being their ultimate object, the DEFENDERS OF THAT SYSTEM are of course the present subjects of their malicious fury!

But a day of retribution must come! The public may confidently trust, that an authentic history of the contemptible intrigues—a faithful description of the vile machinery—a graphic sketch of the depraved actors, engaged in this scandalous scheme; with ample details of facts, plots, and persons, shall, in due time, be forthcoming!

——— Tremble thou wretch
That hath within thee undivulged crimes
Unwhipped of justice!

Broadside from the 1840's warning voters that the abolitionists aimed to ruin the school system. This was probably published by Samuel H. Jenks. — Nantucket Historical Association

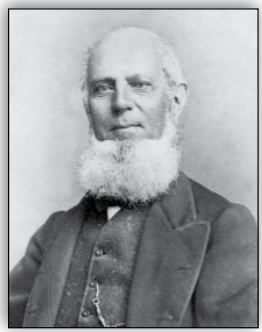
as "Thy Friend," attacked the School Committee: "Does your school committee—who should be men of intelligence and moral worth—do they, in their school regulations, recognize no oppression?" One unnamed member of the committee was singled out as an "exception to the general rule. He sees where the right is, and he is faithful in pleading for that right."[7]

Barney was optimistic, however, that forces of change on Nantucket were emerging and strengthening. "I do not mean to say there are not men and women, and the number is daily increasing, who are true to humanity."[8] This was the first of dozens of letters about school integration to be published in the local papers during the next few years.

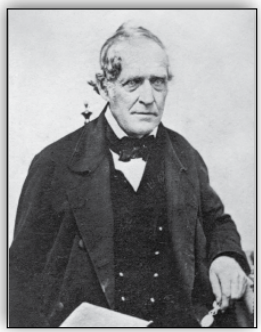
Also in the first month of the year, the executives of the Nantucket Women's Anti-Slavery Society reported that black women were barred from their meetings at the North Congregational Church. Harriet Peirce, wife of Cyrus, and Eliza Barney wrote that the church had put "impossible" conditions upon their organization. The abolitionists tried to compromise with the church by offering to split the room in half so as to reserve space for those who did not wish to sit "near a colored person," but their compromise was refused, so, they decided not to meet in that church any longer: "We can make no compromise; as our object is to improve and elevate the colored man and not to lend our aid in his opposition."[9]

The election for the next year's School Committee was crowded with candidates. Behind-the-scenes preparations had been made to stack the committee with abolitionists. They were accused of producing a block of 13 names ahead of the annual town meeting "to constitute a School Committee for the year ensuing." The group "printed tickets" called "Liberty Hall tickets," which were "freely circulated" throughout town beforehand. The ethics of their "ploy" were debated for weeks afterward. Two of the so-called "Liberty Hall boys" were criticized by one letter writer for campaigning in New Guinea "with especial reference to 'abolitionism.'"[10]

Samuel H. Jenks was especially outraged by the "alleged confraternity" that made up the School Committee ticket, even though he was


Nantucket Historical Association

David Joy, 1801–1875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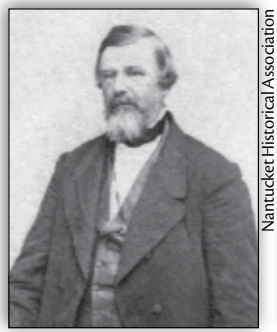
Isaac Austin,1785–1864


Nantucket Historical Association

Edward W. Gardner, 1802–1868


Library of Congress

Horace Mann, 1796–1859

reelected to it. Jenks accused the abolitionists of plotting "the destruction… of our public schools," an accusation he repeated often in his battle to prevent the integration of the school system. He warned those who had been elected with him to the School Committee to remember that they were charged with representing the *majority* of the electorate and to "legislate not for themselves."[11]

More abolitionist activity was seen in 1841 than in previous years. At its table of crafts and handiwork at the annual Anti-Slavery Fair held in Boston that year, the Nantucket group raised more money than any other town in Massachusetts. Susan Clasby and Charlotte Austin staffed the table.[12] The chairperson in Boston, Henry G. Chapman, said, "at the head of the host stood Nantucket unrivalled." The variety and quality of the items for sale from Nantucket were "managed with a taste and exactitude that charged every beholder."[13]

1841 was also the year that Obed Barney helped to establish the Anti-Slavery Library over his store on Main Street. An advertisement for the library called it a "light for the people." It boasted that the room contained "as extensive a collection of the standard Anti-Slavery productions as can be found in any Anti-Slavery depository in the country." People were invited to take advantage of the materials "free of expense" and to learn the "condition of 3,000,000 of American citizens."[14] In an advertisement taken out in the local papers, four black citizens—William Harris, William H. Harris, Henry T. Wheeler and William Morris—publicly thanked those who had created the library. Later that month, a local Anti-Slavery Fair was held there, and a "variety of useful and ornamental articles" were sold.[15]

In March, the Anti-Slavery Society ran a cryptic notice in the paper, announcing that a "special meeting" would be held to discuss which "measures of the Abolitionists generally tended to advance the object which they have in view." Individuals had been "engaged to speak on both sides of the question."

This meeting was announced by abolitionist Daniel Jones Jr., who was also secretary of the School Committee that year. The meeting undoubtedly discussed the school integration question, but no records of the meeting survive.[16]

arrange for the proceedings of the meeting, as well as a lengthy address to be published both on- and off-island.

In the address presented by members of the New Guinea community, they repeatedly referred to themselves as "oppressed," and bluntly informed the islanders that the town meeting vote was not "a recent wound but a wound of some years' standing, the sensation of which, if it be chafed, is apt to become keen." The address referred to the U. S. Constitution and the laws of the Commonwealth which, they said, did not distinguish "on account of complexion or symmetry."

> *If this be the ground of our exclusion, as we have stated, and we think our statement is undeniable, then we will most respectfully, ask this intelligent and Christian community who know this to be the ground of our exclusion, is it right, is it just?*

The address went on to state that Nantucket's black community was "weary" of the "privilege" of having a separate school. The address expressed a strong desire to become part of the mainstream community, stating that black people, too, were "citizens of this great republic; our veins are full of republican blood." They pointed out that the school system provided for the black children did not have the "needed several gradations," and thus the children were deprived of an equivalent education to that of the "more favored" portion of town.

The address ended on an optimistic note hoping that the time was:

> *not too far distant when the good sense and Christianity of this republic will proceed to make its distinctions in society on just and reasonable grounds, not according to the color of skin.*[30]

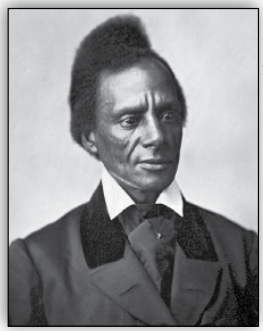
The School Committee did not respond. No public acknowledgments of the resolutions or the address appeared in the local papers. The lack of response was unprecedented, as most town debates were fully covered in the local press. In this case, there was eloquent silence.

Mobs in Nantucket!!! [31]

While there was silence about the black community's address to the town, there was no silence about the issue of abolition. In one interesting letter, "Othello" wrote he had been a "bundle of prejudices" who had thought "the black skull is peculiarly thick" until he attended a lecture by Frederick Douglass, then lecturing in New Bedford. "Othello" said he was amazed at Douglass's charm, eloquence, and intelligence. "His mind seemed to overflow with noble ideas," said "Othello," who stated that he "left that hall with a mountain load of prejudice tumbling [from his back]."[32]

In mid-August 1842, an explosive six-day Anti-Slavery Convention was held on Nantucket. Once again, nationally known and radical abolitionists attended, but what they had to say that summer did not find favor with the beliefs of most Nantucketers.

The keynote speaker once again was William Lloyd Garrison. He spoke on themes he was known for, including his inflammatory antigovernment rhetoric and his lack of faith in the possibility of a political resolution of slavery. He called the U. S. Constitution a "Covenant with Death and an Agreement with Hell." These were strong and shocking

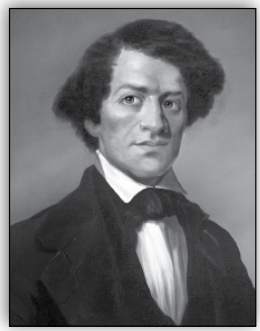


Boston Public Library

Charles L. Remond, 1810–1873

Massachusetts Historical Society

George Latimer, 1819–1894



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Frederick Douglass, 1818–1895

Nantucket Historical Association

Rev. Stephen S. Foster, 1809–1881

words to Nantucketers, including some members of the Nantucket Anti-Slavery Society, many of whom, such as George Bradburn, continued to believe in the political process. Fiery black speaker C. Lenox Remond, who believed that rifles would be needed to end slavery, was also on hand.

The most vitriolic and inflammatory speaker of all, however, was the Reverend Stephen S. Foster. Foster's words about the clergy have been blamed for riots that erupted in the heart of Nantucket.

On the first day of the convention, officers were elected and a slate of resolutions chosen for discussion. Garrison spoke in his usual strong terms. The resolution that sparked the most bitter debate concerned the clergy:

> *Resolved, That it is dreadful libel on the Christian church to affirm that slaveholders, or the apologists of slavery, were ever members of it; and therefore, the real disciples of Christ, who is the Prince of Emancipators, will never give the right hand of Christian fellowship to any such persons, nor recognize them as among those who are born of God.*[33]

When the group reconvened in the evening, Stephen S. Foster delivered his famous "Brotherhood of Thieves" address, or "a true picture of the American Church and Clergy." The "brotherhood" referenced by Foster was the brotherhood of Christian churches. The five crimes Foster accused the clergy of were: the theft of slaves' labor, kidnapping, murder, piracy and adultery. He accused the clergy of being "pimps of Satan" for their complicity in the preservation of slavery and the exploitation of black women. Foster especially singled out churches with congregations on Nantucket—the Methodists, Episcopalians and Baptists.[34]

Foster's "grossly insulting and personally abusive" words were the subject of gossip the next day, and that evening an unruly crowd gathered outside the Atheneum. The abolitionists continued to debate inside the hall, but the situation deteriorated quickly. On Friday, the third day of the convention, things came to a head during the evening session. Unruly spectators crowded inside the hall to heckle the speakers, while outside, a large and even more unruly crowd gathered. They hurled rotten eggs and other missiles into the hall. One woman was hit with a brickbat. The situation had spiraled out of the control of the local authorities.

The trustees of the Atheneum, fearing the hall would be damaged, and possibly also fearing damage to their reputation, closed their doors to the convention. The next day the abolitionists were forced to seek another venue and were able to secure Franklin Hall for that evening.

But when they reconvened at Franklin Hall they were again viciously attacked by "a shower of rotten eggs, in an exceedingly nauseous and offensive state of putrefaction."[35] Franklin Hall was a public gathering place on South Water Street, subsequently consumed in the Great Fire of 1846. With it no longer available, the convention was on the verge of closing down, and the abolitionists, many of them influential town officials, appealed for assistance and requested the use of the town hall so the convention could continue.

An emergency town meeting was held on Saturday, August 13, to discuss the disturbances that had taken place and to consider the request of the abolitionists to use the town hall. A five-member committee was chosen to investigate why the authorities had been ineffective in quelling the riots and took a vote censuring those who had perpetrated the violence. Finally, they directed the town constables to call another town meeting for Monday, August 15, to discuss whether they even had the authority to grant the use of the town property to citizens to "discuss, in a peaceable manner, any and all subjects upon which they may wish to confer, whether such subjects be popular in our Community or not." This is puzzling, as the Anti-Slavery Convention was scheduled to end on that day. In addition, the selectmen had already decided to let the abolitionists use town property for the remaining days of the convention. [36] It may have been a political maneuver to make it appear less partisan than it was; letting the convention continue on town property was a bold move.

So, early on Monday, the abolitionists met at the town hall with little disturbance, but at nightfall, a crowd outside pelted them once again with stones and rotten eggs. "An unhatched chicken remained for days afterward stuck to the shingles."[37] In addition, at the emergency town meeting that day, Isaac Austin brought "a brick and a piece of coal" that had been thrown into his house downtown, endangering "the lives of defenseless women and children." The meeting resolved that the insult to Austin was "deprecated by all our Citizens" and pledged to attempt to find and convict "the cowardly villains."[38] No evidence exists that anyone involved in the violence during the six days of the Anti-Slavery Convention was ever arrested and brought to court.

Finally, a third emergency town meeting was convened a few days after the off-island abolitionists had left Nantucket. The committee that had been called upon to investigate the riots gave its report, no one taking responsibility for what had happened. The committee had questioned both the sheriff and his deputy, and the sheriff had denied all knowledge of the riots, "until after its adjournment." The deputy, however, said that he had been in the Atheneum when a stone was hurled through a window, and that particles of "shivered glass lodged on the back of his neck." He said that he had seen several

town magistrates at the meeting, but none of them had given him any orders and that it was not his duty to intervene "in the absence of orders."

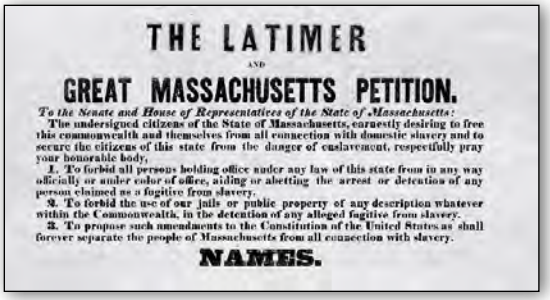
Two selectmen also testified that they had rushed to the Atheneum when they heard about the disorder, but did not think that the demonstration was of sufficient severity to take action.[39] The town officials had failed to protect the abolitionists.

The riots seemed to have taken Nantucket by surprise. At the time, the *Inquirer* called them a "blot on the character of the island," and the selectmen were criticized in the newspapers and by the abolitionists for not suppressing the mobs. Nevertheless, the bulk of the blame for the riots was laid upon Stephen S. Foster and the off-island radicals for inciting the mobs by their inflammatory remarks. It has been accepted over the years that the attack on the churches and clergy in the "Brotherhood of Thieves" speech was the reason that riots erupted.

That view, however, was challenged more than 40 years later in 1885 and 1886 in a series of letters in the *Inquirer* and in the *Journal*. Despite the passage of considerable time, the topic of the riots was still a sensitive subject on Nantucket, disputed in the papers by a handful of people who claimed to have been eyewitnesses. A writer using the initials "WRE" reiterated the commonly held

Riots were no stranger to abolitionists. In Boston, events came to head in October 1835 when anti-abolition rioting broke out at the Women's Anti-Slavery Society office where William Lloyd Garrison was speaking. This pro-slavery cartoon depicts some of the mayhem.

Boston Public Library



THE LATIMER

AND

GREAT MASSACHUSETTS PETITION.

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts:

The undersigned citizens of the State of Massachusetts, earnestly desiring to free this commonwealth and themselves from all connection with domestic slavery and to secure the citizens of this state from the danger of enslavement, respectfully pray your honorable body,

1. To forbid all persons holding office under any law of this state from in any way officially or under color of office, aiding or abetting the arrest or detention of any person claimed as a fugitive from slavery.

2. To forbid the use of our jails or public property of any description whatever within the Commonwealth, in the detention of any alleged fugitive from slavery.

3. To propose such amendments to the Constitution of the United States as shall forever separate the people of Massachusetts from all connection with slavery.

NAMES.

The Latimer Petition. — Massachusetts Historical Society

evening dinner soiree attended by 120 people. At the soiree, both Cyrus and Harriet Peirce spoke—he about the success of the "Free Latimer" petition and she about the "rapid progress of the anti-slavery cause" in Nantucket. She reflected on how different the first anti-slavery meeting on Nantucket had been, "when the claims of the slaves were not at all recognized and only two or three could be found willing to meet."[51] The evening ended with the unanimous passage of several resolutions introduced by Cyrus Peirce. One was that the state of Massachusetts could not consider itself free so long as fugitives could be returned to the South; another that once fugitives arrived in Massachusetts, they should be free and safe from harm.

Abolitionists realized, however, that passage of the Personal Liberty Act was not enough as it applied to only one state, so they organized another "Latimer Petition Drive" to be presented to the Congress in Washington, DC. Once again, signatures were sought all through New England, and once again, Nantucket abolitionists rallied, with Cyrus Peirce again a leader. The petition asked that taxes be apportioned amongst the states based on each state's free population. Cyrus Peirce was selected to take the giant petition, signed by more than 51,000, to Washington. The signatures had been gathered and put into a single continuous roll. When Peirce arrived in Washington, he had the signatures wound onto a large spool, which he said was as big as a washtub. He met with former President of the United States, John Quincy Adams, who had returned to the House of Representatives. The two men conferred as to how they would present the giant petition in the face of an existing gag rule against all slavery-related petitions. They tried for three days to get the petition considered, but were unable to do so.

Nevertheless, Cyrus Peirce felt that the effort had not been in vain. In a letter to the *Inquirer,* he wrote that the effect of taking the huge petition to the floor of the House of Representatives had warranted the work that had been put into collecting the signatures.[52]

The year 1842 ended with the island still divided. With successful rallies and petitions, such as the Latimer petitions, the abolitionist ranks were growing, but those opposed to integration had also been successful. The black community's address had gone unanswered. The anti-abolitionists had managed to incite riots with their rhetoric, riling the mobs with the bogey-man of racial amalgamation and intermarriage. The mobs had almost shut down the August convention. The anti-abolitionists continued to dominate town government, including the School Committee. They continued to restrict black schoolchildren to the York Street School. Both sides were firm in their resolve and determined to prevail.

Appendix

Petition of Eunice F. Ross to the Massachusetts State House, 1845

To the Hon. Senate and House of Representatives of the state of Massachusetts.

The undersigned respectfully requests that the prayer of the petition of E. J. Pompey and others may be granted—The undersigned has good reason to feel on this subject as she was examined in 1840 by the School Committee and found amply qualified for admission into the High School at Nantucket and was refused admittance by a vote of the Town, instructing the School Committee not to admit her, on account of her colour.

Eunice F. Ross

Address to the School Committee and Other Inhabitants of Nantucket March 2, 1842

At a public meeting of the colored inhabitants of Nantucket, held in the Zion's Church, February 23rd, 1842, the following Resolution was offered by the Reverend William Serrington, and after some remarks from Wesley Berry, William Harris and others, was adopted:

Resolved, That whereas the law of this Commonwealth, in reference to the privilege of education in our town schools makes no distinction in relation to the complexion or symmetry of its inhabitants, it is therefore the judgment of the oppressed portion of the citizens of Nantucket, that it is their right, and they ought to claim, and do desire to enjoy, among other rights, the right of having their youth educated in the same schools which are common to the more favored members of this community.

The following Resolution was offered by William Morris:

Resolved, That the course of those gentlemen who advocated and sustained by their vote a procedure which would enable our children to receive equal advantages with all the children of this Commonwealth, is duly appreciated by us, and entitles them to our confidence, approbation and esteem.

This resolution was advocated by William R. Robinson, C. D. Brown, and others, and was unanimously adopted.

It was voted that a committee of three be appointed to have the proceedings of this meeting, with an address to the citizens of Nantucket, published in the Nantucket *Inquirer* and the *Islander* of this place.

Address To the School Committee and other Inhabitants of Nantucket

Having availed ourselves of the opportunity of witnessing your proceedings at the Town Hall, a short time ago, we were forcibly struck by the matter which was then the subject of your deliberations, and on which you were called to act. It will not be necessary for us to say anything in relation to the power of the School Committee, nor of the duty which necessarily devolves upon them, by virtue of their being a School Committee—the agents of the whole community—to attend to the department of what is called "Common School Education," and to see that the law in reference to their charge is carried out. Nor does the resolution, together with its amendment, appear to us to be of vital importance either way, if we understood the arguments that were advanced by some of the gentlemen then present; and our reasons are these.

First, the citizens of the town there assembled were not a legislature.

Second, We did not assemble to offer a resolution to abolish a proscriptive and unjust law which forbade the extension of a common school privilege to all classes of the community; but, if we were assembled for anything, at the moment of action upon the amendment of that resolution, it appears to have been this, whether it be best to observe the laws which are in themselves impartial and just, which extend like privileges to all classes of the Commonwealth!!! In bringing the subject of our claim before our fellow citizens, we wish, by no means, to convey the idea that they have inflicted a recent wound upon us, an oppressed portion of the citizens of this town, but a wound of some years standing, the sensation of which, if it be chafed, is apt to become keen. We look upon ourselves, and we feel as an INJURED PORTION of this community, and injured indeed in such a way that no member of this Commonwealth can possibly be benefited by it. It may now be asked, in what respect are you injured? How can it be shown that you are not impartially dealt with? When have your rights been violated? To these injuries, we answer briefly.

This Community is, or may be considered, as a large society, having an instrument called a Constitution. This instrument is intended to express the object of the association, and defines the obligations under which its members have come in respect to each other. It expresses the manner in which that object is to be accomplished; that is, it declares what the individual promises to do for the society, and what the society promises to do for the individual, and the object for which the association is formed. We have also a code of laws, which is supposed to be agreeable with the spirit of the Constitution in general.

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About the Author

— Rob Benchley photograph, *Nantucket Independent*

Barbara White holds a master's degree from Boston University in African-American Studies, as well as a master's degree in Educational Administration from the University of Lancaster in England.

Barbara was a teacher in the Nantucket Public Schools for 33 years until her retirement in June 2004. She taught in the high school and the middle school, where she also served as interim principal.

In 2005, Barbara received the James Bradford Ames Fellowship administered at UMass Boston. She used the grant to further her research of Nantucket abolitionist-teacher, Anna Gardner. Her research was presented at a symposium in Boston and published in 2006 by University Press of America in *Nantucket's People of Color: Essays on History, Politics, and Community*, edited by Robert Johnson Jr.

Barbara's work on African-American history on Nantucket was first funded through a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship received in 1978, and resulted in the publication of this title's first edition, *The African School and the Integration of Nantucket Public Schools 1825-1847* (Boston University Press). Her work encouraged preservation of the African Meeting House, now owned and managed by the Museum of African American History in Boston. She continues to research Nantucket's abolitionist past.