

Summary

Investigating Elements of Racial Injustice and Privilege Among the Ancestors of St. John's Founding Families

**St. John's Episcopal Church
Newtonville, MA**

October 16, 2023

Slavery was legal in the North American British Colonies from the early 1600's to the mid 1700's and persisted in some northeast states more than 50 years beyond the official end of slavery. The economy of the region was tightly entwined with the slave trade. Slave traders bought and sold people to prominent families for work in their homes or in agricultural endeavors. Investors bought shares in ships used in the Intra-American and Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Craftsmen built or repaired slave ships or refitted commercial ships for the slave trade. Mariners were employed as captains or crew for slave voyages. New England and New York based insurance companies insured owners against death of enslaved people during transport or against injury of the enslaved during their labor. Farmers and fishermen sold meat, fish, wheat, and vegetables to plantations in the West Indies to feed enslaved laborers. New England textile mills and rum distilleries received raw materials produced by enslaved people in Southern states or West Indies plantations.

St. John's Episcopal Church - Newtonville, Massachusetts was founded in 1897. All of the founders were born after the official end of slavery in Massachusetts in 1783. The St. John's Antiracism Ministry conducted genealogical research to determine if the ancestors of the parish founders or prominent benefactors had a connection to slavery or racial injustices in the North American British Colonies and/or the antebellum United States. In addition we wished to know if St. John's founders or benefactors benefited from a transfer of intergenerational wealth from their ancestors.

Using [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com), a genealogy database of family histories and historical documents, the lineal ancestors of parish founders and benefactors and the resulting family trees were drawn; siblings of the ancestors were not recorded. Pertinent life dates, locations, and occupations were documented. The family trees were summarized and annotated in a document, St. Johns Founder & Benefactor Genealogy Summary. The first and last names of ancestors of founders

or benefactors were cross-referenced with lists of names of enslavers found in books, reports, and blogs about slavery in northeast American colonies and in the Intra-American and Trans-Atlantic Slave Voyages databases (<https://www.slavevoyages.org/>).

There were no first and last names of ancestors of founders or benefactors who matched the names of owners of enslaved people published in the books and reports. One of the largest slave trading families in the country was directly related to one of the former rectors of St. John's. There were a few ancestor names found among the lists of slave ship owners and captains and a few others who may have been engaged in building slave ships. There were several ancestors who worked in industries whose supply chain was likely fed by plantations in the southern or mid-Atlantic United States or the West Indies where enslaved people harvested the raw materials. A few of the ancestors were known missionaries to Indigenous People in what was known as Plymouth Colony. Although it is difficult to document and quantify, it is likely that some ancestors of St. John's founders and benefactors benefited from white privilege and may have amassed family wealth through the ill-gotten gains originating in the slave trade or with slave labor. There are members of the current congregation whose ancestors enslaved people.

With the exception of Indigenous People and subsistence farmers, many residents of colonial New England benefited from the labor of unpaid or exploited people. The parallel to society of the 21st Century is striking and provides some context for our understanding of history. It is on the backs of enslaved, poorly paid, or exploited people that minerals and metals are mined for electronic devices, food is grown, harvested or slaughtered and packaged for our dinner tables, and soft goods are manufactured to clothe our bodies and outfit our homes. Rarely does society consider the injustice of this type of labor when purchasing these goods. If we as Episcopalians are to live into our Baptismal Covenant, "Will you persevere in resisting evil and when you fall into sin repent and return to the Lord? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?", then we need to learn about—and to repent for—the evils we have done or the evils done on our behalf and to do our part to repair those systemic injustices. Discovering the racial history of St. John's is the first step on the road to repentance and efforts toward repair of those relationships.