

Massachusetts Liberty
Rev. Jennifer Brooks¹
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Nantucket 1842

When I think of Nantucket in 1842, I think of Swiss artist Carl Wendte beginning to paint his intricate trompe l'oeil on the walls of the Unitarian Meeting House. I imagine long summer days; golden light; delicate brush strokes; and the stillness of the walls awaiting the touch of the artist's hand.

Nantucket in 1842 was also the site of a gathering of Massachusetts abolitionists for a six-day Anti-Slavery Convention. The meeting featured the abolitionist publisher William Lloyd Garrison and former slave Frederick Douglass, whose first public appearance had been just one year before at the Convention's 1841 meeting.

But as Carl Wendte applied paint to these walls, the speech that created the greatest stir was an inflammatory oration by an abolitionist who declared that slavery was an act of theft; that slaveowners could not be considered Christians; that northern churches were connected to southern churches; and therefore most of organized Christianity could be considered a "bulwark of slavery" and church members nothing more than "a brotherhood of thieves." I wonder what Carl Wendte thought about that.

In 1842 Nantucket was in the grip of racial controversy. Two years before, Eunice Ross had asked to attend Nantucket High School. She was black, and she was refused admission. In the summer of 1842, "despite two years of explosive town and school committee meetings,"² Eunice still was not able to attend Nantucket High.

The Anti-Slavery Convention was well aware of the situation on Nantucket, and the fiery orator condemned by name the local clergy and congregations that practiced segregation. He was supplied with the names of members of Town Meeting who favored school segregation; he mentioned them specifically, calling them "Pimps to Satan."

The language was sufficiently inflammatory that a mob gathered outside the Atheneum, shouting and throwing stones and rotten eggs. When the abolitionists tried meeting in another location, the mob followed. Neither the police nor the Board of Selectmen took action to stop the riot. Later, the *Inquirer* and *Mirror* criticized the abolitionists for hurling abuse at "some of our most distinguished and highly valued fellow citizens." The *Inky* didn't say anything about distinguished citizens who hurled rotten eggs.

On Nantucket in 1842, Maria Mitchell became a Unitarian.

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² Susan F. Beegel, "The Brotherhood of Thieves Riot of 1842," *Historic Nantucket*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Fall 1992), pp. 45-48, published by the Nantucket Historical Association. The inflammatory orator was Stephen Symonds Foster.

America 1842

In America in 1842, the US Supreme Court declared that local police did not have to assist enforcement of the fugitive slave act.

The fugitive slave law was enacted in 1793 to give “teeth” to a clause in the brand-new US Constitution (Art. 4, Section 2): runaway slaves were to be treated as property and returned to their owners. Over the next few years, some northern states passed “personal liberty laws,” which required a jury trial forcing the alleged owner to prove ownership. The goal was to prevent kidnapping of free blacks living in non-slave states, but sometimes, no matter what the evidence, the jury reached the conclusion that the person detained was not a fugitive slave.

But in 1850, as part of the Compromise of 1850 allowing California to enter the Union as a free state, Congress passed a tougher fugitive slave act. This new law imposed penalties on local law-enforcement officers who did not assist in the capture of someone said to be a fugitive slave. The law did away with the right to a jury trial to determine whether the person detained was, in fact, a runaway slave, and the only evidence needed was, essentially, an accusation.

Savannah, Georgia and Boston, Massachusetts in 1851: Thomas Sims³

The story of Thomas Sims begins in Savannah, Georgia. He was the property of James Potter of Savannah. Thomas was 23 when he escaped from slavery. He had been working in Savannah as a bricklayer, with relative freedom to come and go to work while living in his mother’s home and away from his owner’s premises, required only to pay his wages over to his owner, James Potter. At the beginning of 1851, Sims spent his evenings on the docks in Savannah, getting to know the ships and their destinations. Near the end of February he stowed away on the Gilmore, a ship bound for Boston. As the Gilmore had entered Boston harbor, he was discovered and told the Captain that he was a free black from Florida, and had come to Boston to visit his mother. The Captain ordered him locked in a cabin, but Sims jimmed the lock with a penknife and escaped over the ship’s side.

Sims found a boardinghouse in Boston’s North End populated by African American sailors. For more than a month he worked in Boston doing odd jobs, including some bricklaying. Slaveowner James Potter traced him to Boston and sent an agent, John Bacon, to Boston to swear out a warrant describing Sims. Local police and the US Marshal found him the next day. He fought, but was taken into custody.

Boston abolitionists, including Unitarian ministers George Young, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Theodore Parker, arranged to have the fugitive slave law challenged in court, and

³ Sources: *Trial of Thomas Sims on an Issue of Personal Liberty* (Pamphlet) (the title continues: “on the Claim of James Potter of Georgia Against Him, as an Alleged Fugitive from Service; Arguments of Robert Rantoul Jr., Charles G. Loring with the Decision of George T. Curtis, Boston April 7-11, 1851, Phonographic Record by Dr. James W. Stone”), Boston 1851 (Rantoul and Loring represented Sims along with Samuel E. Sewall; Seth J. Thomas represented the slaveowner); Steven Puleo, “When Boston Awoke,” *The Boston Globe* (April 11, 2010); “Sims, Thomas,” *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War* (New York 2000).

found a lawyer to represent Sims.⁴ The judge ruled that the law was constitutional and that Sims was a fugitive slave owned by James Potter.

The next day before dawn, armed officers formed a hollow square formation, with Sims at the center, to escort him to the ship that would carry him back to slavery. A crowd of abolitionists was waiting, and followed them from State Street to the Long Wharf.

There, at the site of the Boston tea party, where American colonials took a symbolic step against oppression by British overlords, Sims was led from land to sea, onto deck of the brig Acorn. One of the abolitionists shouted to him, “Sims! Preach liberty to the slaves!”

Sims turned to look at them. He said, “And this is Massachusetts liberty?”

What Happened Next

His words must have roiled and tumbled through the abolitionist community and into the broader court of public opinion. The Boston newspapers published sketches of what Rev. Higginson called the “horrible hollow square” marching Sims to the dock, and of the Acorn sailing away with Sims on board, the armed men still standing at the water’s edge.

The young slave’s swift rejoinder, “Massachusetts liberty?” took on an added sting when the Boston public learned that the slaveowner James Potter punished Sims with a public whipping, 39 lashes.

This shocking dénouement galvanized Boston and the Commonwealth. In the year after Sims was returned to slavery, anti-slavery candidate Charles Sumner was elected to the US Senate. The Massachusetts legislature petitioned Congress for repeal of the fugitive slave law. The petition called the law “unconstitutional, inhumane, wicked.” Boston’s underground railroad shepherded more than a hundred escaped slaves on to safety in Canada. A Boston publisher brought out the book “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” stirring anti-slavery sentiment across the North. Ralph Waldo Emerson, lecturing to a crowd in Concord, urged that it was the duty of all moral people to break an immoral law no matter what the hazard. Unitarian minister Theodore Parker lectured to a crowd in Boston about the tragic consequences of the fugitive slave law. He and George Young personally assisted fugitive slaves traveling the underground railroad, Parker famously with a gun in his desk in case a US Marshal came to recapture the fugitives.

Truth and Transformation

The shocking events of the detention and return of Thomas Sims were the catalyst Boston needed to transform anti-slavery talk into a broader understanding of the fundamental immorality of one human being owning another.

People sometimes say that it was the Civil War that freed the slaves. But the South might never have seceded had it continued to be comfortable for the North to buy slave-grown cotton to keep

⁴ The abolitionists worked through the Boston Vigilance Committee, an interracial group dedicated to the aid and protection of fugitive slaves.

its cloth mills profitable. Whether or not America's church members were a "brotherhood of thieves," there was an economic partnership between the slave-owning cotton-growers and the Northern industrialists. As long as the ills of slavery remained barely visible to the Northern public, there was no widespread outcry.

On Nantucket, Maria Mitchell stopped wearing cotton as a protest against slavery. Others did too. The story of Thomas Sims helped people see the truth hidden beneath what had been common and ordinary.

Epilogue

There is an epilogue. Eunice Ross was admitted to Nantucket High School in 1847, the same year Maria Mitchell discovered her comet.

Thomas Sims' mother and wife were able to buy their freedom, but James Potter refused to allow Boston abolitionists to buy Sims out of slavery. He sold Sims to slavers in Charleston, South Carolina. They put him on the auction block in New Orleans, and he was purchased by a mason from Mississippi. During the chaos of the Civil War, in 1863 Thomas Sims again escaped from slavery. He returned to Boston where he lived for a few years; in 1877 he moved to Washington, DC, to take a job as a messenger in the US Department of Justice. The Attorney General who hired him was the US Marshal who had arrested him in Boston 25 years before.⁵

Carl Wendte finished decorating the sanctuary of the Nantucket Unitarian Meeting House in 1846. For many years his trompe l'oeil shone on these walls. Gradually his work was covered over by touch-ups and re-paintings. Recently it became incontrovertible that Carl Wendte's original designs were hidden under layers of paint. Beginning October 18 we will begin to uncover the truth of his work, stripping away what has concealed it.

In a letter to their people, the Hopi elders said, "Where is your water? Know your garden. It is time to speak your Truth.

We, too, must uncover our truth, and speak it.

⁵ The US Marshal was Charles Devans, who later became Attorney General in the administration of President Rutherford B. Hayes and, in that role, offered Sims a job.