



High Moral Courage

The historic bond between
Nantucket Unitarian Universalists
and the island's Black community

High Moral Courage

*“High Moral Courage” is a phrase penned by Frederick Douglass
in a letter honoring Nantucket Unitarian David Joy*

Introduction to *High Moral Courage*



Rev. Althea M. Smith, PhD

When I arrived at the Second Congregation Meeting House Society, Unitarian Universalist, my introduction included a book entitled *The Unitarian Meeting House Nantucket: A History*. It is a comprehensive overview of the church's structure and how we came to be. There were suggestions that we were active in the abolitionist movement. That we took risks that were not popular. And we lived our beliefs into life.

Through word of mouth, I learned that Booker T. Washington had preached from our pulpit. Frederick Douglass gave his famous speech at the Nantucket Atheneum and then gave a similar speech at our Meeting House. I also learned that the minister of this white church often married Black couples, which was not a usual practice for the time. I found this intriguing and began to explore whether any of this was accurate.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have long sought to create the beloved community. We have a history of risk-taking, and we have tried to center love, noticing that we are part of an interconnected web.

This is a written account of our history. It celebrates our past, sets the groundwork for our future, and boldly asserts that this is a Meeting House for everyone.

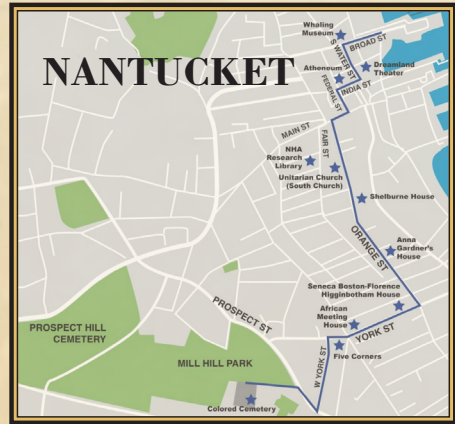
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Althea M. Smith".

Rev. Althea M. Smith, PhD



By Barbara Ann White

From its founding in 1809, the Second Congregational Meeting House (Unitarian Universalist) fostered a bond with the Black community on Nantucket. Members of the church worked to abolish slavery, campaigned for the integration of schools, hosted Frederick Douglass for his first-ever public speech, and advocated for social justice.



Absalom Boston

The historic bond between the church and the island's Black community of New Guinea (*see map*) first showed itself in marriage ceremonies. Nantucket's Black community did not have its own church until 1825, and the Second Congregational Church performed sixty marriages for the Black community between 1816 and 1832. The first recorded was whaling captain Absalom Boston's marriage to Phebe Spriggins on January 9, 1814.

Marriages.		
4. 1815	John H. Folger to Susan Starbuck	3.50
1. 1816	George R. Bennett to Mary Starbuck	1.50
2. 1816	Edward J. Gardner to Susan Allen	3.00
3. 1816	Franklin Chase to Nancy Ellis	2.00
4. 1816	Samuel W. Coffin to Polly Gardner	1.25
5. 1816	Joseph Baring to Susan Coleman	1.25
6. 1816	John H. Stone to Mary B. Brewster	Given
7. 1816	George Coffin to Sally Gales	Given
8. 1816	Byron Pearce to Hannah Coffin	1.25
9. 1816	Charles Johnson to Sarah Lewis	5.00
10. 1816	Charles Thompson to Sarah Abbott	1.00
11. 1816	George Coffin to Lucy Baring	1.00
12. 1816	Joseph Thompson to Sally Smith	1.00
13. 1816	Henry A. Brown to Lucy to Eliza Parker	2.00
14. 1816	Henry A. Brown to Lucinda Gardner	1.00
15. 1816	John B. Brown to Lucinda Gardner	2.00
16. 1816	John B. Brown to Mary Ann Burt	2.00
17. 1816	John B. Brown to Mary Ann Burt	1.00
18. 1816	Edward B. Coffin to Elizabeth Brewster	1.50
19. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
20. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
21. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
22. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
23. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
24. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
25. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
26. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
27. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
28. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
29. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
30. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
31. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
32. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
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38. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
39. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50
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50. 1816	Prisoners to Susan Brown	1.50

It is not surprising that this church celebrated Black marriages, as it aligned with the liberal wing of the Congregationalists. In 1809, the congregation hired its first minister, twenty-one-year-old Seth Swift, educated at Harvard University at a time the faculty had broken away from orthodox Congregationalism. Swift represented a new group of ministers with their belief in a benevolent God, the inherent goodness of humankind, and

in the teachings of the New Testament. A portrait of Swift hangs downstairs in Hendrix Hall at the Meeting House.

There is no evidence, however, that Black people were full members of the church at that time. None are recorded as committee members or owners of pews. It is not known if they attended services. If they did, they likely sat in separate sections.

In 1837 the church became a Unitarian church, and many Unitarians on Nantucket joined the quest to end slavery.

Abolitionism grew as a force from the 1830s through the advent of the Civil War, but the abolitionists never made up a majority of the population of the island. Unitarians, however, made up a majority of the White abolitionist leaders. These included the ministers, especially the first three: Seth Swift, Henry F. Edes and William H. Knapp.

Abolition and the rights of Black citizens divided the island and its churches. The Society of Friends (also known as Quakers) divided over the issue of whether it was proper for the Friends to weigh in on secular issues. Mainstream Friends, comprising a majority of the Nantucket Meeting, choose to withdraw from politics. Splinter groups disagreed, most famously the Hicksites who followed the teaching of Elias Hicks. The most famous Hicksite was Nantucket-born Lucretia Mott, who later gained national prominence as an abolitionist and women's rights advocate. Lucretia Mott lectured in the Unitarian Church on several occasions.



Lucretia Mott

A number of Hicksites were disowned. Being disowned in the island's tight-knit community was not to be taken lightly. It split families and social groups. In Nantucket's Quaker Book of Objections, it is written that the Hicksites were "all without exception disowned." Most of those who were disowned joined the Unitarians, many becoming outspoken leaders in progressive issues on the island from abolition to public education.

Nantucket hosted a series of Anti-Slavery Conventions for several years in the 1840s. These attracted famous abolitionists to the island including William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator*. The conventions were chaired almost entirely by local Unitarians including David Joy, Isaac and Charlotte Austin, Nathaniel Barney, Edward Gardner, Anna Gardner and Thomas Macy, all former members of the Society of the Friends.



Frederick Douglass

In 1841, the abolitionists included twenty-three-year old Frederick Douglass and his wife, Anna. A racially mixed group of about forty people set off from New Bedford. When the captain restricted the Black passengers to the outside deck, the abolitionists held an impromptu anti-slavery meeting on board. The convention, chaired that year by David Joy at the Atheneum, attracted almost 1000 people.

Douglass spoke on three occasions over the second and third days. No records exist of his exact words, but Samuel J. May described the account of Douglass's life in enslavement as "evidence of such intellectual power...that all present were astonished." Douglass recollected that he was "stammering" when he began, and "trembled in every limb." He wrote that the attentive crowd gave him confidence. His

eloquence changed his life; within a week he had been hired by Garrison to go on the road, launching him into his illustrious career of an orator and champion of social justice.

Years later, Frederick Douglass wrote a letter to be read at the funeral of David Joy, recalling that Joy had introduced him that fateful day. "It required high moral courage to stand by the side of a fugitive slave and welcome him to his home, introduce him to his neighbors, and appear with him on the platform. But our late friend was able to do this and more."

happiness to see men of our
departed friend the reports of his
noble life and of his benevolent work
have reached me from many
quarters. Permit me then, in
the name of my long enslaved
but now emancipated people, whose
cause he made his own, remembering
those who were in bonds as
and with them and in my
name, to bring one laurel
the tomb of this true man and
benefactor.

Frederick Douglass

Appropriately, Nantucket's Black minister, the Reverend James E. Crawford, participated in the memorial service. Ten years later, in 1835, Douglass returned to Nantucket and spoke at the Meeting House about the failings of Reconstruction.

Despite opposition, local Unitarians joined with the New Guinea community on many occasions. They served on joint committees, held rallies on behalf of fugitive slaves, and initiated petitions on issues such as

“It required high moral courage to stand by the side of a fugitive slave and welcome him to his home, introduce him to his neighbors, and appear with him on the platform...”

integration of public transportation and repealing the law against interracial marriage. Violence occasionally erupted. In 1842, after an especially contentious Anti-Slavery Convention, bricks and coal were thrown at the house of the Unitarian abolitionist, Isaac Austin.

Many Unitarians displayed “high moral courage” in their work for social justice on Nantucket. The best example was their unwavering support of school integration. The most divisive local issue during the 1840s concerned school integration. Black children had been restricted to the African School at the African Meeting House since Nantucket instituted public education in 1827.

The controversy was precipitated when 16-year-old Eunice Ross, passed the entrance examination to Nantucket High School. She was refused admittance by a vote at Town Meeting in June, 1840.

The Unitarians' stance brought them into conflict with a majority of their neighbors. A determined group fought for six years to integrate the schools. They ran for the School Committee and the Board of Selectmen. Most of the time, they lost their bids, but doggedly continued to put their names forward. To their surprise, many of them were elected to the School Committee in 1843 including several Unitarians such as Nathaniel and Obed Barney, Cyrus Peirce and Andrew Macy. They set about integrating the schools, but in a backlash the following year, a new School Committee publicly expelled all Black children who had been admitted to the town's two grammar schools.

The Black community turned to the Massachusetts legislature when all local attempts to integrate the schools had failed. In January, 1845, Edward

J. Pompey and 104 other Black members of the New Guinea community submitted a petition to the State House airing their grievances and asking that a law be passed to ensure all children equal access to public education. Shortly after it was submitted, a meeting at Nantucket's town hall was organized by Thomas Macy, Unitarian, in support of the Pompey petition. Isaac Macy and Andrew M. Macy were elected as president and secretary, respectively. They mobilized to send two petitions in support of Pompey's petition. Signed by almost 250 White Nantucketers, they read like a who's who of the island's abolitionists, a great many members of the Unitarian church.

The petitions succeeded and Massachusetts passed the first law in the nation to guarantee equal access to the schools.

The bond between the Black community and the Unitarians did not end there. As the island's population dwindled after the Civil War, at least two Black ministers were invited to talk at the Unitarian Church. One was Reverend Crawford, minister of the Pleasant Street Baptist Church at the African Meeting House for over forty years.



*The Unitarian Sanctuary on the day of
David Joy's memorial service*

In 1880, Unitarian minister James B. Morrison presented the African Meeting House with a chandelier. And, in 1883, when the Unitarian Church re-opened its doors after renovations, Reverend Crawford was invited to read a psalm. Reverend James Gardner Ross, the nephew of Eunice Ross, participated in several services with the Unitarian minister, John A. Savage, and served with him on a temperance committee.

And, in August, 1904, the educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington, spoke at the Unitarian Church.

Thus, the bond between the Black community and the Unitarian Church brought together progressive forces that helped to foster social change on the island and throughout the nation.

Written March, 2025



About the Author

Barbara Ann White is a Research Fellow with the Nantucket Historical Association and a retired history teacher. Her books include *A Line in the Sand: The Battle to Integrate Nantucket Public Schools 1825-1847*, *Live to the Truth: The Life and Times of Cyrus Peirce*, and *Disturber of Tradition: A Portrait of Anna Gardner*. White lives in Nantucket with her husband, Mark.

This effort was started and sustained by the Meeting House congregation. It represents a shared ministry. Thanks to Barbara Ann White for research and writing, to Jim Sulzer for editing and overseeing production, and to Rev. Althea Smith, minister, for leadership. And thanks to Kathy Stevens for her generous support of the project.

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Charlotte Austin Joy scrapbook, in the Joy Family Papers, Nantucket Historical Association.
Book 1, in the Second Congregational Society, Unitarian Universalist Church records, Nantucket Historical Association.

P628A Photographic portrait of Lucretia Mott, NHA Collection of Photographic Prints (PH165), circa 1860, Nantucket Historical Association.

GPN446 Unitarian Church interior, Collection of Glass Plate Negatives (PH170), 1875, Nantucket Historical Association.

Portrait of Captain Absalom F. Boston, circa 1835, Prior-Hamblin School, Gift of Sampson D. Pompey (1906.0056.001), Nantucket Historical Association.

Thanks to the Museum of African American History Boston/Nantucket for the use of their map of Nantucket Town.