



REIMAGINING
New England Histories
Historical Injustice, Sovereignty and Freedom

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Black Anti-Slavery Activists in 1850 Worcester

By Cheryll Toney Holley (Hassanamisco Nipmuc)

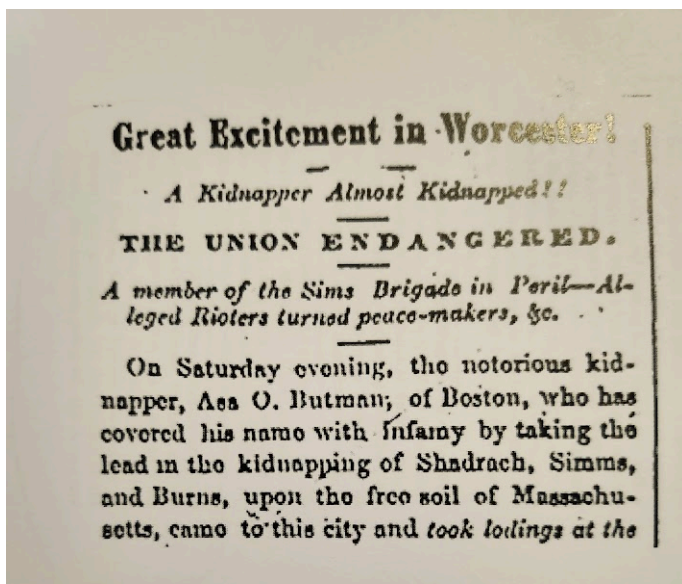
Slavery was a deeply divisive issue in the United States in 1850, with tensions between the North and South continuing to escalate in the years leading up to the Civil War. The country was divided over the issue of slavery, with the southern states depending heavily on it for their agricultural-based economy, while the northern states increasingly viewed it as a moral wrong.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed by Congress, which required citizens to assist in the capture and return of runaway slaves and made it illegal to assist or harbor escaped slaves. This law was deeply controversial and led to tensions between the North and South, as many in the North refused to comply with the law and actively helped runaway slaves escape to freedom.

The **Underground Railroad**, a network of secret routes on land and at sea as well as safe houses, operated in the North, provided a means for self-emancipated people to escape to freedom. **Abolitionists** in Massachusetts such as **Frederick Douglass** and **William Lloyd Garrison** spoke out against slavery and advocated for its immediate end. The anti-slavery movement in Massachusetts played a significant role in the national movement to end slavery in the United States. Massachusetts was one of the first states to abolish slavery, with a judicial decision enacted in 1783, and its citizens, Black and White, were at the forefront of the abolitionist movement throughout the nineteenth century.

The anti-slavery movement in Worcester, Massachusetts was a crucial part of the broader state and national effort to end slavery, and the city's role in the movement helped to shape the course of American history. The black community in Worcester in 1850 was small but a growing, active, and visible part of the city, with its own churches, schools, and social organizations. This community was at the forefront of the anti-slavery movement.

Worcester was a center of anti-slavery activity in the mid-nineteenth century, and the city was home to several influential abolitionist leaders and organizations including **Abby Kelley Foster**, a Quaker abolitionist who





moved to the city in the 1840s. Foster was an eloquent speaker and tireless organizer, and she played a key role in the founding of the **Worcester County Anti-Slavery Society** in 1841. The organization quickly became one of the most active and multi-racial anti-slavery groups in the state, and it held regular meetings and events to rally support for the cause.

Worcester's Black community also played a key role in the anti-slavery movement, hosting speeches and events for prominent abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison and supporting political candidates who were opposed to slavery. Known as a safe haven, self-emancipated persons were welcomed into the homes of Black citizens of Worcester. Jobs, shelter, and protection were made available. Soon, the newly free persons themselves became protectors and leaders of the community including **Gilbert Walker** and **Isaac Mason** who separately escaped slavery in Maryland.

One example of Worcester's Black community's dedication to freedom was the Asa Butman incident. **US Marshall Asa Butman** was a notorious slave catcher who operated out of Boston, Massachusetts. Butman was known for his brutal tactics and his success in capturing and returning enslaved persons to their enslavers in the South. On October 28, 1854, Butman made the mistake of entering the city of Worcester. Earlier in the day, a local newspaper, *The Worcester Daily Spy*, printed and distributed handbills throughout the city warning of Butman's arrival. While Black citizens safeguarded themselves and any new residents, a committee of White citizens visited Butman at his hotel to learn what his business in Worcester was. Butman assured his visitors that he was only in town to question witnesses about an incident in Boston.

Unfortunately for Butman, no one believed his story. Some of the local abolitionists tried to escort Butman out of town for his safety. They did not get far – a crowd numbering at least 1000 people trailed Butman to the rail station. More than once Butman was struck by a rock and knocked down. Butman missed his train and to keep him from further attack, he was driven to nearby Grafton by coach to catch the Boston train there.

Six men were arrested in the attack on Butman including Nipmuc **Alexander Hemenway**, Abby Foster's husband, and a Black man named Solomon Dutton. All were freed the next day on bail except for Foster who refused bail. In exchange for his escort out of Worcester, Butman promised to never return. And never did he return.

Black women in Worcester also participated in anti-slavery efforts. **Martha Brown** and **Susan Van Rensselaer** were among local women who hosted speakers, led protests, and chaired meetings. Susan's daughter, **Lucy Schuyler**, an Indian doctress and wife of Peter Schuyler, a minister and faith healer, became an active part of the Underground Railroad and a tireless defender of those persons trying to self-emancipate.

Lucy and Peter moved from Worcester to Lawrence in 1855 where they continued to support anti-slavery efforts. Peter died only a year after moving to Lawrence and of the couple's seven children, only two survived



after the death of their father. To support herself and her children, Lucy continued to work as an Indian Doctress from her home in Lawrence. She did not neglect her anti-slavery activities though. In 1857, an enslaved woman named **Betty Booth** traveled from Tennessee to Lawrence with her enslavers, the Sweets. Lucy became aware of Betty's situation and obtained a writ of habeas corpus to win Betty's freedom. The case backfired when Betty chose of her own free will to continue her arrangement with the Sweets. Betty told the judge presiding over the case that her husband and family were still in Tennessee and that she had no desire to be parted from them. The judge allowed Betty to decide for herself and also issued instructions for Lucy to not interfere with Betty's decision.

Lucy continued her work with the Underground Railroad. In 1859, she met George Brown, a self-emancipated man from St Louis, MS. Brown changed his name to John Thompson to avoid slave catchers. Lucy and John married in 1860 and continued to live and work in Lawrence. Lucy's last remaining child, Arthur, joined the Massachusetts 54th regiment by falsifying his age. He did return home only to die a year later of tuberculosis.

Lucy also wrote at least two slave narratives for persons she encountered – Mattie J. Jackson and Mrs. H.N. Tuthill. Mattie was the stepdaughter of Lucy's husband John. Slave narratives are autobiographical accounts of the experiences of enslaved individuals from throughout the United States. Many of these narratives were written by enslaved individuals themselves or transcribed through interviews with formerly enslaved persons. Lucy narrated and published these stories as fundraisers for the women, in Mattie's case, to pay for her education. She continued to champion other women and work as a healer until her death. She died in 1881, the last of her line.

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