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Rack Focus:  
Bringing Northern Slavery into View

Over the past decade, scholars, preservationists, and educators have finally turned their collective attention to the history of Northern slavery. Whereas there used to be just a few books on the topic, there are now many, including Catherine Manegold's *Ten Hills Farm* and Robert Romer's *Slavery in the Connecticut Valley*. Films are being made about the topic, including Katrina Browne's award-winning documentary *Traces of the Trade*. Conferences are being devoted to Northern slavery, most recently one this past April sponsored by Brown and Harvard Universities. And some towns have developed significant public programming on the topic of Northern slavery. Organizations in and residents of Concord, Medford, Newton, Deerfield, and Brookline, for example, have organized public walking tours, lecture series, film screenings, and exhibits, and are writing guidebooks, developing school curricula, and engaging in preservation efforts.

But before we congratulate ourselves on all of the progress that's been made, let's remember that most Northern communities have *not* unearthed, much less made available, information about slavery's existence in their towns. Many communities prefer to busy themselves telling other stories, particularly stories that make them feel good about themselves. One favorite focus is the Underground Railroad. How many house museums have you visited that claim to be a stop on the Underground Railroad? I would guess more than a few. While the Underground Railroad is certainly an important part of the history of American slavery and the North's participation in its demise, helping southern slaves run away isn't the only role the North played in slavery's history. Before there was an underground railroad, there was 150 years of slave history in Massachusetts.

Many communities that might be willing to examine the presence of slaves and slavery in the colonial and early national period assume there aren't enough surviving

materials to put together a meaningful narrative. Certainly it is difficult to walk into an archive or a museum and find a plethora of material filed under Northern slavery. The institution of slavery denied slaves the civil rights that would have allowed them to appear as agents within the legal system and thereafter under their last names as subject headings in the archives. But what seems like a total erasure is really more of a slight of hand. In the years leading up to the Civil War, New England was recast as the white, free, and industrial origins of the nation as a means of distinguishing it from the South and of absolving the entire nation of the guilt of slavery. Northerners worked hard in the antebellum period to forget indigenous slavery. And thus much of the evidence that would reveal who was enslaved in the North and how Northern slaves lived was either consigned to the junk heap or tucked out of sight. But just because generations of Americans have been convinced that slavery was a Southern institution doesn't mean that we can't find plenty of remaining evidence of Northern slavery's existence.

I believe that despite the region-wide attempt to erase the signs of enslaved people in the North, everything a town or an organization needs to tell or present a coherent history of Northern slavery is, in fact, still available if we know where and how to look. My talk today, born of this conviction, has three parts. First, I will address the issue of how and where the history of slavery is hidden all around us. I'll do this by way of three examples, one from the visual arts and two from the built environment. Secondly, taking a cue from cinematography, I will share with you a few simple principles that can help us bring this hidden history, or any other under-represented or obscured history for that matter, into the public's field of vision. This is where I'll talk about and show three examples of racking focus. And finally, I'll discuss the importance of linking the goal of educating the public about Northern slavery to what I regard as equally important goals: remembrance and commemoration.

### Part I: Hidden in Plain Sight

I'll start with a pretty basic example of the history of slavery hidden in a very prominent part of Boston.



**Slide 1: *Watson and the Shark***

This is one of the most popular paintings at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. *Watson and the Shark* was completed by Boston painter John Singleton Copley while he was living in London in 1778. (The version in Boston is a copy the artist made for himself. The original hangs in Washington DC.)

The painting depicts a real-life attack on 14-year old Brook Watson, an English orphan who had been sent to live with his aunt and uncle in Boston. In 1749, his relatives hired him out as a crew member on a Boston trading ship. While docked in Havana, Cuba, Watson makes the regrettable decision to go for a swim in the harbor. A shark comes along. First, the shark bites off a chunk of Watson's right calf. Then it returns to bite off his entire right foot. The painting captures the moment when the shark is returning for a third bite just as Watson's fellow sailors arrive on the scene in a dingy. The painting captivates us because it's unclear who will prevail: the shark or the nine men in the boat.

Watson commissioned the painting himself, so we know he survived. He was rescued by the sailors and survived the amputation of the rest of his leg below his knee. Watson went on to become a successful merchant, a member of Parliament from 1784 to 1793, and the Lord Mayor of London, to name just a few of the prestigious and lucrative posts he achieved.

At six by seven-and-a-half feet, this painting is hard for museum visitors to miss, even in the four soaring levels that comprise the MFA's new Art of the Americas Wing. Here in the gallery and on the museum's website, visitors learn about Copley's belief that "ordinary people" can be effectively depicted as heroes. But this reference to "ordinary people" is as close as we are allowed to get without a good docent on hand to the questions raised by Copley's positioning of a black or West Indian sailor at the apex of the painting's triangular composition, of which Watson and the shark form the other two points. At the time, figural arrangements in painting were supposed to replicate social hierarchies, with the most elite in the most prominent positions. This arrangement, again where the black figure forms the apex of the triangle, clearly does not. Moreover, it is the black or West Indian sailor who has thrown Watson a life line. Infrared analysis of the painting has revealed that the black or West Indian sailor was originally a white sailor with long flowing hair. We don't know why Copley made this particular change, but as historian Louis Masur and other scholars have pointed out, it was a "radical" decision.

A bit of research reveals that as a merchant, Watson profited directly from the slave trade, and that he staunchly defended the slave trade in Parliament during the debates about abolishing it. This makes the fact of him being thrown a life line by a black or West Indian sailor even more interesting. Some scholars believe that Copley is depicting Watson as "a victim of divine wrath for his... involvement in slave trading." Others argue that Copley is showing Watson receiving forgiveness for his involvement. And while this debate hasn't been resolved, the fact that there is a debate makes clear that the painting can be a spark for discussion about slavery and racial conventions in art.

Unfortunately, this discussion is being waged solely in academic journals. If you search the MFA's website for the keyword "slavery," *Watson and the Shark* doesn't come up. Unless you're on a guided tour and the guide or docent is inclined to bring up slavery, the museum doesn't provide any contextualization that includes information about Watson's later business and political career or the racial conventions of figure placement in art. The museum leaves the history of slavery hidden here in plain sight.

Slavery is often hidden too in house museums, which typically are preservations of the more grand homes of the colonial era and thus of the very residences where slavery

existed. Take the example of what Historic New England, which owns this property, calls the Codman House.



**Slide 2: Codman House**

Historic New England shows the house, which is located in Lincoln, as it appeared after it was decorated in 1897 by the American architect and interior decorator Odgen Codman. But the house was built by Charles Chambers in 1740 on land owned by Concord's first minister. Both the minister and Chambers were slaveholders. Documents pertaining to the slaves who lived at the estate have survived and speak quite plainly to the desire on the part of the enslaved to take their freedom at the first opportunity. Indeed, no story throughout the entire state says more about this matter than that of the three slaves owned by Charles Chamber's ward, John Codman, after whose grandson the estate is now named. In 1755, Codman was murdered in Charlestown by three of his slaves. One of the condemned was hanged for the offense and left gibbeted on the main Charlestown road for over twenty years. When Paul Revere set out on his midnight ride in 1775, he passed the tarred corpse still hanging there. In short, the stories connected to

the Codman family reveal much about slave agency, on the one hand, and the widespread acceptance of slavery, on the other, and yet the Codman House as currently preserved and interpreted for the public is mute on this front, as if the grandeur of the building and grounds has nothing to do with the lives of its earliest occupants.

I've singled out this particular house because it speaks to a real conundrum for the organization that owns and shows it. It makes a good deal of sense to show the house at it appeared in the early twentieth century. Ogden Codman was an important figure and Historic New England has the Codman family's fine furnishings as well as photographs of the family living in the home. But there's a cost. The Chambers-Russell-Codman Estate, as I prefer to call it, was once the largest slave estate in Concord. (It became part of Lincoln only after that town was founded in 1754.) The property still includes an extensive amount of farm land and farm outbuildings that are being used to this day. Other large slave estates in town have been completely dismantled. The estate of John Cuming, for example, is now part of the state prison located in Concord. Historic New England has a wholly unique opportunity then to help tell the story of slavery in the nation's birthplace. Until that happens, visitors won't have an opportunity in the Concord area to see how the elegance and comforts of these kinds of house museums are a product of slavery.

Slavery is also hidden in the landscape. Henry David Thoreau is quite clear about this in his 1854 masterpiece *Walden*. He notes of one former slave family who lived not far from his cabin: "Cato's half-obliterated cellar hole still remains, though known to few, being concealed from the traveler by a fringe of pines." Again and again in *Walden*, Thoreau reads the landscape for what it can tell him about where and how Concord's slaves lived after taking their freedom. The home site of Zilpah White was revealed to him by the bricks Thoreau saw "amid the oak copse." Brister Freeman lived where "the apple-trees which Brister planted and tended [are] large old trees now," Thoreau explains, "but their fruit still wild and ciderish to my taste."

Brister Freeman's apple trees are now long gone but a moss-clad, two-hundred-year-old ditch fence still remains on the site in Walden Woods where Brister Freeman owned an acre of what his land deed describes as "old field." Most likely, Freeman threw up this mound of dirt to keep animals either in or out of his small lot.



**Slide 3: Brister Freeman's Ditch Fence;** *Photo courtesy of Donna Thomas*

Talk about something being hidden in plain sight! Thousands of people walking from downtown Concord to Walden Pond have passed this ditch fence without ever seeing it. It took Walter Brain, a local amateur naturalist who has spent decades walking and studying Thoreau country, to see this hump in the landscape as something manmade.

This fence is particularly precious because it seems to be one of only two surviving marks left by former slave Brister Freeman, the other being the X he marked on his land deed. Both marks are testimonies to be cherished of his ambition to claim a place in Concord as a landowner and thereby as a citizen.

While an archaeological dig would be necessary to better date the fence and solidify the connection to Freeman, in the meantime every community should be looking for clues about how former slaves lived in those sandy, gravelly and marshy parts of the region where former slaves were forced to settle after taking their freedom. Were they able to preserve any aspect of their African past? Were they able to reconstitute the family ties sundered by slavery? Did they succeed in getting a financial and social toehold? Why or why not?

Part II: Rack Focus

If, as these few examples reveal, Northern slavery is hidden in plain sight, the way to think about bringing it into view is, I think, in terms of the rack focus. What do I mean by that exactly?

“Rack focus” is the name of a technique that came into prominence in the 1960s, when many cinematographers were filming in shallow focus as a means of directing the viewer’s attention to one plane of action. Every plane but one was left blurry, forcing your eye to look at what it could decipher. Here’s an example from the British TV show *Dr. Finlay*.

Video Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vKalvXbCg8>

Racking focus is how the cinematographer brings people and objects in the blurry plane into focus, while blurring out the plane that was formerly sharp. It is achieved by turning the focal ring on the lens and is a means of directing the viewer’s attention to something that was on screen but that the viewer previously couldn’t decipher.

Here are two film stills that also illustrate the technique.



**Slide 4: Before a Rack Focus**



**Slide 5: After a Rack Focus**

First, only the man holding the telephone to his ear is in clear focus. Then, after the rack focus, the man holding the phone becomes blurry, while the formerly blurry plane in the distance is now in sharp focus and we can now tell a woman is standing there.

One of the effects on the viewer of racking focus is that she looks for links between the people and/or objects that were originally in focus and those brought into view. In the video example of the girl smashing her doll, we come to recognize through the rack focus that she is jealous of her baby sibling and would like to smash the real baby. In short, rack focus compels us to build a story that connects the two planes.

I'm proposing that rack focus is a very useful metaphor for talking about what we do as scholars interested in Northern slavery. We take something that is already there but blurred out of the readable image and we bring it into the field of vision. In doing so, we connect slavery to the plane that has long been in focus.

An excellent example of racking focus in order to bring Northern slavery into view occurs in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's wonderful book *The Age of Homespun*.



**Slide 6: Prudence Punderson, *The First, Second, and Last Scenes of Mortality*, 1775**

This embroidered picture was made in Connecticut in 1775 by a woman named Prudence Punderson. The piece is entitled *The First, Second, and Last Scenes of Mortality* because it chronicles the stages of life, from infancy (on the right), to adulthood, signified by the embroiderer in the center of the image, presumably Punderson whose younger brother had just died, through death, represented on the left by the coffin and the shrouded looking glass.

Notice that the slave woman tending the baby doesn't fit into the image's announced schema. She exists outside of chronological time and thus might be overlooked as part of the meaning the picture announces it wants to make. Ulrich, however, stops to read the slave woman. Noting the tilt-top tea table, the gilt-framed looking glass, and the other expensive accessories adorning the space, Ulrich concludes that the slave woman serves here as one of many status objects in the room. The slave's role, in other words, is to make clear the social and economic class of the woman in the center of the image. Ulrich notes, too, that Prudence has the time to sit at her tilt-top tea table writing or embroidering because a slave woman is on hand to watch the baby. But Ulrich doesn't stop there. She heads to the archives, where she researches the Punderson

family and their slaves. She discovers that the enslaved woman in the print may very well be a representation of the Punderson's slave woman Jane, who led a remarkable life of her own. After taking her freedom, Jane married, becoming Jane Cato. Towards the end of her life, Jane Cato, like her former mistress, contemplated her mortality. In a rather different response, she asserted her personhood by writing a will, which survives to this day.

By racking focus, Ulrich has pulled our eye away from the center of the print, bringing Jane Cato back into the chronological time denied her by the image. She has given Jane Cato back her history and thereby brought Northern slavery into view, an institution revealed here as one used by whites for the labor and the status slaves provided. And by racking focus Ulrich has connected the announced theme of the image, contemplations of mortality, to issues of class and labor. Only those with enough money to purchase the physical space and implements within which to write and embroider, as well as the labor to afford the time, can fashion genteel representations of their life journeys.

Of course, not all of us have such rich visual images in our repositories. What many towns do have, however, is mahogany furniture from the colonial period. Racking focus in these instances often yields surprisingly rich results.



**Slide 7: John Cuming's Desk**

I first came across this desk in the Concord Museum's catalog of decorative arts. The catalog entry tells us the dimensions of the desk, the materials out of which it's made, its provenance, and much about its design. We read, for example, that "The hinged lid has mitered battens along the sides and top. The lopers which support the lid when open are made of solid mahogany. The writing surface within the interior consists of a 11 in. deep mahogany board set in grooves in the case sides." The author of this entry concludes of the person who made the desk that he "was truly flaunting the use of spectacular wood."

What the entry doesn't say is that mahogany became a popular wood in the American mainland colonies after regular trade routes opened to the tropical forests of the West Indies. As the land there was cleared for sugar plantations, mahogany was shipped overseas, and slaves were brought from Africa to work the plantations, although some were brought by the New England traders who engaged in this triangle trade to the American mainland for sale.

When polished to a high shine with linseed oil and brick dust, mahogany furniture literally reflects a man's good taste and his financial ability to own such a piece, as evidenced by the 1768 portrait of Paul Revere painted by John Singleton Copley. The Concord desk's writing surface was, as the catalog points out, cut from a single board an astounding eleven inches wide. Polished, it too would certainly reflect the demeanor of a gentleman well situated in the ranks of the colonial elite.

Of course the fact of the desk's many drawers and pigeonholes is important too. Desks of this sort were designed to store the vast amount of paperwork that engrossed a man with agricultural, business and political interests, making such desks the perfect gift for young wealthy young men on the brink of adulthood.

Isaac Royall, the owner of 500 acres and forty slaves in Charlestown (now Medford), gave his only son a desk in 1738 in anticipation of his son taking over this and the family's other plantation in Antigua. The Concord desk seems to have been a gift to John Cuming from his father on the occasion of John's wedding. John Cuming also seems to have received, as a wedding present from his future father-in-law, a nine-year-old slave boy. This boy grew up to be the Brister Freeman who built the ditch fence in Walden Woods. In his youth, Freeman was surely charged with polishing John Cuming's

mahogany desk, even as he was never allowed to sit at it and learn to read or write, as evidenced by the X he marked on his land deed. As a slave, he was intended to serve as a laboring body and a status object in the same way Jane Cato was.

The fact that an object made of wood and a flesh-and-blood boy were regarded as commensurate provides an opportunity to make the desk, through a rack focus, speak the history of slavery and slavery's impact on the very young. A museum exhibit might, for example, ask the public to focus on the wood the desk is made out of and thus see it within the context of the triangular trade, one leg of which was mahogany and sugar, another of which was slaves. The same exhibit might also ask the public to focus on the desk within the context of Brister Freeman's life. Presented that way, the desk makes you really feel the horror of the fact that a young child was separated from his parents because he was regarded as the equivalent of a very desirable piece of furniture.

Let me give you a final example of racking focus, this time on a particularly mundane item. I want us to think about how much of an impression we can make on the general public when we take something we see and use every day that seems to have nothing to do with slavery and we show that slavery was there all the time.

Picture in your mind's eye, if you will, an American one dollar bill. Whose image is on it? George Washington, right? I'm going to make you see someone else. I'm going to make you see someone else every time you take out a one dollar bill. To do this, I need you to think with me about what this portrait of Washington tells us about the man. It might not seem like the portrait tells us very much. He's a white man. He's not particularly young. His hair line has receded somewhat and his hair, which is tied back with a ribbon, is completely white. He's wearing a beautiful ruffled linen shirt and a dark colored suit jacket. But he doesn't appear particularly happy if you consider that his lips are firmly pressed together.

Let's unpack these details. Most gentlemen in Washington's era owned wigs, the wearing of which was a very complicated affair. A man had to shave his head regularly so the wig would fit. The wig itself, which was made of human or animal hair depending on how wealthy you were, had to be cleaned, oiled, and powdered so that it would be fashionably white. Washington didn't shave his head, nor is he wearing a wig here, but

he did follow the fashion of the day by assiduously powdering his graying light brown hair.

What about that facial expression? George Washington lost all but one of his adult teeth in his twenties and thirties. In the 1780s, he compelled several of his slaves to have their teeth extracted so he could have their teeth implanted in his own jaw. When these didn't take, Washington's dentist made plates, fashioned out of hippopotamus ivory, into which he inserted, not the mythological wooden teeth, but a combination of human and animal teeth. These dentures were spring-loaded and Washington had to clamp down on them to keep them in his mouth. That's what created the bulge you see around his mouth and the distortion of his jaw line.

Now for his attire. Obviously that shirt also speaks to Washington's wealth and taste as a gentleman. But the suit says something else besides. Up until his inauguration, Washington had always appeared on the public stage in his military uniform. He switched to suits at the time of his first inauguration as a means of conveying the idea that a president is a citizen-leader, not a monarch. Washington also believed it was important to be seen in American-made textiles. He famously ordered a bolt of brown cloth from a manufactory in Hartford, Connecticut, to make this suit.

It's conceivable that this suit was made by people Washington owned. He had a slave woman named Betty who he used exclusively as a lady's maid and seamstress. He also had an indentured servant, Andrew Judge, who was an English-born tailor. In 1773, Betty and Andrew had a child together, a daughter named Oney, who grew up to be, in the President's own words, a "perfect Mistress of her needle."

Picture Oney working in the President's House in Philadelphia, then the nation's capital. (The President's House has recently become a museum dedicated in part to the story of Washington's slaves.) By then, Oney is in her early twenties. She's one of nine slaves the President has brought from his plantation in Virginia. Each has been carefully chosen to perform certain duties. It's possible that one of Oney's duties is to make the suit that the President wears when he sits for his portrait.

One day, Oney overhears a conversation that changes her life forever. She is going to be given as a wedding present to one of Martha Washington's granddaughters.

Learning this, something inside Oney clicks into place. She realizes she is very tired of other people dictating her future. Oney Judge runs away.

Three days later, President Washington puts an advertisement for Oney in the newspaper. He offers ten dollars to the person who can “bring her home.” And this is just the President’s opening gambit. He spends the next two years trying to recapture his seamstress, who by then has made her way to New Hampshire.

Years later, Oney Judge is asked by abolitionists if she regrets the poverty she has endured as a free woman. “No, I am free,” she replies, “and have, I trust been made a child of God by the means.”

So who do you see when you look at an American one dollar bill? You see a citizen leading the world’s first democracy. You also see a slaveholder. But now, behind that terrible contradiction, you see a young woman of great conviction and courage. You see Oney Judge.

To take the one dollar bill, something virtually all Americans see on a regular basis, and make it speak the story of slavery, I did exactly what Ulrich did. I focused your attention on the details, in this case George Washington’s smile and his plain dark suit. I contextualized those details. I asked you to reject the deeply American ideal of the self-made man. And finally I individualized the story of Washington’s over 400 slaves in order to personalize what would otherwise be dry facts and statistics. The result was a kind of rack focus. Your attention has been shifted from the plane our culture keeps in sharp focus, the first president of our nation, to the story behind his appearance of a young woman who was enslaved in the North. But you’ve also been asked to connect those two planes. Behind the wealthiest seemingly self-made American men our nation most reveres are often the slaves who provided them with status and labor.

You may have noticed that in discussing these various examples, I’ve often had to hedge a bit, to speculate, although always carefully. Brister Freeman *might* have been given as a wedding present to John Cuming. Jane Cato *might* be the woman depicted in Prudence Punderson’s picture. Oney Judge *might* have sewn President Washington’s suit. When it comes to Northern slave history, the archives often provide tantalizing possibilities and not the absolute certainties we would prefer. But as I hope my examples have also made clear, the lack of absolute certainties shouldn’t preclude us from

connecting the dots where we can and speculating responsibly when we can't. We can't allow the scale of what's been lost to prevent us from pushing ahead with educational initiatives and preservation efforts. In order to insure that we don't continue to recast the North as the nation's "free states," it's critical that we raise questions about Northern slavery, test possible answers, offer hypotheses, and continually recast the questions. And just as importantly, it's critical that we remember and memorialize, which leads me to the third and final section of my talk.

### Part III: Commemoration

As recently as 1989, Toni Morrison remarked that there are no American memorials to the nation's enslaved peoples:

There is no place you or I can go to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves.... There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the side of the road.

The Toni Morrison Society has recently dedicated itself to installing commemorative benches where people can sit for awhile "by the side of the road" in order to remember the enslaved people who suffered so much to build this nation and who fought so valiantly for their freedom. In 2008 the first Toni Morrison bench was installed on Sullivan's Island in South Carolina. In 2009, I suggested in the Epilogue to my book *Black Walden* that Concord needed such a bench. The men, women and children enslaved there are just as deserving of our honor and thanks as the Minute Men who helped birth our nation and the many famous Concord authors who strengthened it in the nineteenth century.

I'm happy to say that last month, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of a new Concord organization called The Drinking Gourd Project, the fifth Toni Morrison bench was installed in Concord, Massachusetts, outside of what will become an interpretive center near the Old North Bridge dedicated to educating the public about Concord's slave and later abolitionist history.



**Slide 8: A Bench by the Side of the Road; Dedication Ceremony, Concord, Massachusetts, May 21, 2011; Photo Courtesy of Tom Hersey**



**Slide 9: Officers from the Drinking Gourd Project and the Toni Morrison Society; Dedication of the Bench by the Side of the Road, Concord, Massachusetts, May 21, 2011; Photo Courtesy of Tom Hersey**

When she sat on the first bench, Toni Morrison declared “It’s never too late to honor the dead.” And of course she’s absolutely right. Honoring the men, women and children who were enslaved in the North accomplishes three important things: 1) we

remind future generations that Northern slavery existed; 2) we expand our nation's definition of heroism; and 3) we affirm that the lessons from slavery are crucial to the continued life of our country.

I hope one or two of my examples this morning have reminded you of a building, a feature in the landscape, a document, a picture, or a piece of furniture that you can reexamine and recontextualize in order to bring the history of Northern slavery into view.

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For more on Northern slavery, please visit the author's website, [www.BlackWalden.com](http://www.BlackWalden.com)