



The Hourglass

CCXXX NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY April 2014

www.Northboroughhistsoc.org

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April 25, 2014 – Money, Money Money; Making a Living in the 19th Century-
Presented by Ellen Racine, Kathy Pierce and Cindy Atwood.

Hosted by Brian and Lois Smith.

Twenty-Four Years a Slave

The recent film *Twelve Years a Slave* has reminded me of the story of William and Ellen Craft, which I told at greater length in “Northborough in the Civil War”. William Craft told it in a book called “Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom”. Why couldn’t a movie be made of the Crafts’ escape? I believe the reason that Hollywood prefers the story of Solomon Northup’s impressment into slavery is its greater amount of violence.

I didn’t see “*Twelve Years a Slave*”, having read the book and fearing that I would be disappointed by the film, as I usually am when I watch a movie based on a book I’ve already read. It must have been in many respects an excellent movie, but obviously I can’t comment on it. The reason Hollywood hasn’t taken up the Crafts, I believe, is that they accomplished their escape from the Georgia plantation in a different way—that is by craft. Ellen’s role in their escape was more demanding: playing the role of a white male slave-owner, while her husband had only to act the part of slave as he had been doing for twenty-four years.

An ex-slave abolitionist, William Wells Brown, brought them to Northborough. As he wrote to William Lloyd Garrison, the founder and editor of *The Liberator* on January 4, 1849 of the couple, who had just made their nearly thousand-mile way out of Georgia, “They are now hid away within 25 miles of Philadelphia. . . . I will lecture, in connexion with them, as follows.” He then gives several locations, all between January 18th and 28th. But on January 16th they spoke in Northborough, as is crystal-clear from a letter by Lucy Allen, who saw them. Very likely they told their story in this town before they told it anywhere else, including Worcester, where they would appear on the 19th.

I say “they.” As Dorothy Sterling put it in her book *Black Foremothers*:

Three Lives, “Women were not encouraged to speak in public, but after William addressed a meeting in Northborough, there were murmurs in the audience: ‘I want to hear his wife.’ At first Ellen replied to a few questions; by mid-April she had become a regular part of the program.” Another first for Northborough!

Most likely, Sterling based her account on a comment by another Northborough person, Lyman Allen (not, incidentally, part of Reverend Allen’s family), in a letter to Garrison written on February 16th and later printed in *The Liberator*: “W. W. Brown, and William and Ellen Craft held a meeting at the Town Hall. After telling of William’s talk, he says ‘there was a clamoring to hear his wife speak,’ then this comment: ‘is it possible that that creature was ever a slave?’ Old friends of the slave were confirmed, and new converts made to the anti-slavery faith. . . . Then came the separation, and what a rush, not to the door, but to take the hand that was so lately in chains! I wish my soul that Calhoun & Co. [the noted South Carolina senator] could have seen it. This growing sympathy for the slave is more to be dreaded by the South than bullets and guns combined.”

Three years later, when the Crafts were living in England, Ellen replied thus to a rumor spread in American newspapers that she was considering returning to Georgia: “I have never had the slightest inclination whatever of returning to bondage; and God forbid that I should ever be so false to liberty as to prefer slavery to its end. . . . I had much rather starve in England, a free woman, than be a slave for the best man that ever breathed in the American continent.”

Yet Ellen and her husband did return to Georgia after the Civil War, to farm and teach. Ellen ran a school for children in the day and one for adults at night. Night riders burned their house and barn, but they kept on despite many difficulties.

When Ellen died in 1891, "William lost the one person whose strength and determination had sustained their efforts," commented the editor of Craft's book. William died later at his daughter's home in Charleston, South Carolina.

Perhaps Hollywood will catch on to this story some day. Perhaps I would write a script myself, if I were forty or fifty years younger and had more confidence in Hollywood.

Bob Ellis, Historian

News from the Curator

The Museum will open for the season on Sunday, May 4 from 1 to 4:00. To celebrate the occasion, we will be hosting a "Made in Northborough" exhibit and sale downstairs in the meeting hall. We are asking members to come and show off their talents with their projects, hobbies, crafts, etc. Quilts, furniture, woodworking, jewelry, sewing, knitting, photography and paintings are some examples. Table space is free but we ask that you donate an item for the Raffle Table. We also will be having a Bake Sale and ask that members please donate decorated cakes, brownies, cookies, etc. for our sale. To sign up and reserve table space, please call Beryl Krouse at 508-393-6504 or email berylkrouse@yahoo.com. Come and tour the Museum and see what our members produce during their spare time. Refreshments will be served.

Director's Meeting
May 13, 2014
7:00 PM
Northborough Historical Society
Building

Cindy Atwood, Kathleen Pierce and I have been busy working on our program for April 25th. We'll be in costume and will explore the many ways that Northborough residents earned their living in the 1800s. We'd love to see you there.

Accessions:

World War II album of Paul Sadler from Helen Calverley

Ellen Racine, curator

Annual Reports

To all officers and committees:

Annual reports should be sent to me at fbissett@gmail.com no later than May 1st so that I can have the Annual report ready for our May meeting on the 16th.

Thank you.

Membership
Northborough Historical Society
Membership Dues:
Regular \$15.00; Student and Seniors (65 and over) \$10.00; Family \$35.00; and Life \$250.00.
Dues should be sent to
Judy Bissett
300 Ball St.
Northborough, MA 01532
Checks should be made out to the **Northborough Historical Society**
Red square on your label indicates that it is time to renew your membership.



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