DR. GLORIA MCCAHON WHITING ON HER BOOK *BELONGING: AN INTIMATE HISTORY OF SLAVERY AND FAMILY IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND*

MARCH 5, 2025

KYLE ROBERTS: Well, good afternoon and happy Ash Wednesday to everyone.

My name is Kyle Roberts, and I'm the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives. Welcome to today's virtual book talk, *Belonging: An Intimate History of Slavery and Family in Early New England*, with Gloria McCahon Whiting.

To begin, I want to acknowledge that the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the Place of the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusett people, whose relationships and connections with the land continue to this day and into the future.

For those joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library & Archives as an independent research library. Established in 1853, the CLA's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and civic dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century.

We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, and our digital archive, which has more than 130,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, we love to offer educational programs, like this one, and research fellowships for students, scholars, churches, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story. I hope you'll go to our website to learn more about what we do and for news of forthcoming events.

Through our New England's Hidden Histories project, we have been blessed to be able to digitize a number of Congregational church records that reveal the lives and experience of Black and Indigenous New Englanders. And I'm gonna share a little later in this program, a link to the research guide to help you really get in and see some of the great materials that have been digitized, speaking to their lives and experience.

Without further ado, please allow me to introduce Gloria McCahon Whiting, who is the E. Gordon Fox Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she has received numerous teaching awards for her courses on early American history. Her

scholarly work has been featured in a variety of journals, including the *Journal of American History*, the *William and Mary Quarterly*, and *Slavery & Abolition*.

She recently launched a public-facing digital humanities project on slavery, liberty, and the American Revolution, which can be found at freedom-seekers.org. And I will put the link to that into the chat.

We are so blessed to learn today, to hear more about her first book, *Belonging: An Intimate History of Slavery and Family in early New England*, This was published in August of 2024 by Penn Press.

Gloria, thanks so much for being with us today. And I'll turn it over to you.

GLORIA MCCAHON WHITING: I would like to start by thanking you, Kyle, for inviting me to celebrate my book with you at the Congregational Library & Archives. It is especially fitting to be here, albeit virtually, because I spent many happy hours in your reading room perusing the 18th century records of Boston's Congregational churches.

So my book on family and slavery came out six months ago now. But this is my first talk about it because my own family life intervened. Just weeks after the publication of *Belonging*, I gave birth to my fourth child, a son named Logan.

And Logan is absolutely delightful. We are having so much fun with him, but he is not especially keen on sleep. So I have been exhausted, and I haven't taken the time to celebrate my book almost at all. So it's really good to do that now. Though, I do apologize in advance if my mental acuity is not what it might be under other circumstances.

So where to begin?

One of the first things that readers of my book will notice is that *Belonging* is a series of stories. I am a historian because historians a generation older than I told riveting stories about women who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries: stories of Martha Ballard, of Rebecca Protter, of Eunice Connolly, and of many others. The stories they told are what drew me to the past. And I wanted, in my own humble way, to draw readers to the past by telling stories in my book.

So each chapter of *Belonging* tells the story of an enslaved family, or of a cluster of bound kin, even as it explores a broader set of issues related to family life. So, for instance, one chapter is about childhood and slavery, another chapter is about the marriages of those in bondage, and so on.

Since stories are what made me a historian, and since stories provide the narrative trajectory for my book, I think it is fitting for me today to start off with a little story. This is a story that

comes toward the end of my book. And it's a story that prompted me to rethink what I thought I knew about how slavery had ended in Massachusetts.

After I tell this story, I will share some clues from the archive that I dug up while trying to make sense of the tale. I want to give you a glimpse of some of the evidence that I work with in the book, because while my book is about families and slavery, it is also about the archive and what the archive can show us.

Finally, I'll conclude today by connecting this little story and what it reveals about Revolutionary Boston to my book more broadly.

So for my story.

In early summer 1775, a diminutive figure moved across the landscape of eastern Massachusetts. Darby Vassall, a Black child who had been born into slavery six years prior, walked from Woburn to Medford to Charlestown to Cambridge.

At every turn, he encountered signs of war: homes plundered by the British, tree limbs blasted by stray bullets, stone walls toppled by colonial snipers. The very air that hung around him, hot and heavy as a blanket, was punctured by the sound of artillery.

Along the way, Darby likely crossed paths with refugees who had escaped from British-occupied Boston, whether secreted in fishing boats or rode on rafts after dark, refugees who brought with them nothing more than the clothes on their backs and tales of deprivation. For more than ten miles, the boy pushed on through destruction before arriving at his destination: the Cambridge mansion where his birth family had long been enslaved.

Another person arrived on the premises soon after Darby: George Washington, the Virginia enslaver who had recently been named Commander in Chief of the Continental Army.

Darby was supposedly at play, “swinging on the gate,” guarding the way to the stately home, when he first met George. Watching Darby on that gate, the towering slaveholder saw a child who needed a task with which to occupy himself. George therefore instructed the boy to go inside, where “they would tell him what to do and give him something to eat.”

But Darby did not follow the general's orders. Instead, the child asked how much his wages would be.

The Commander in Chief was taken aback. How could Darby be “so unreasonable at such a time as to expect to be paid?” But the six-year-old did not consider the demand unreasonable at all, for, as the story goes, he was “Feeling the value of his freedom.”

This snippet of a story connecting Darby and George is one of countless bits of antiquarian lore surrounding the wartime experiences of the first president of the United States.

There are plenty of reasons to discount it. Its teller remains anonymous, for instance, and it was not put to paper until nearly a century after it allegedly took place. Even more important, as I thought when I first read it, it simply doesn't make sense.

Why would this little boy, who had never been emancipated by his enslaver, believe himself to be free in 1775?

Like all historians of New England, I knew that bondspeople in Massachusetts were liberated nearly a decade later, after a 1783 court case in which a man of uncertain status named Quock Walker was found to be free on the basis of the state's 1780 constitution—a constitution that declared all men "free and equal."

Darby's encounter with the general took place well before the court case. It took place well before the passage of the Constitution. This story must have gotten scrambled.

But Darby's story, and many other anecdotes that I came across, fit so poorly with historians' well-worked explanations of emancipation in Massachusetts that I decided to test in the archive what we historians thought we knew.

The first place I turned was probate court, because there white people made claims to enslaved property more clearly than just about anywhere else.

I was astonished by what I found.

Before the onset of the Revolution, probate records show that the system of slavery in the region was relatively robust. Now, this was not all that surprising. But from 1775 on, wills bequeathing human property all but disappeared, and bound laborers of African descent pretty much vanished from inventories of estates. What is more, the 1780 constitution and the 1783 judicial decision influenced the rates of slaveholding in eastern Massachusetts not at all.

The probate evidence ran so directly counter to the accepted interpretation of abolition in Massachusetts that I decided it was necessary to look elsewhere. Would other sources corroborate these findings?

I turned first to print records, where I encountered a new category of persons being advertised in newspapers, able-bodied enslaved people who were considered of no economic value.

People in the early years of the Revolution began advertising laborers like the so-called "hardy Negro man," who was listed in 1776 by an owner who was eager enough to send him off that he promised to pay whomever would take him.

This was curious.

Boston's weeklies had long offered young children "to be given away," but people of full strength had always been advertised for sale rather than given for free.

Newspapers show that others at this time started buying and selling African-descended people for terms, rather than for life. And newspapers suggest as well that New Englanders living through the Revolution were increasingly willing to think of Black and white laborers in the same frame. Sometimes labor-seekers posted notices equating one with the other. Consider, for instance, the household head who sought a, quote, "white or Black servant man" for his family, promising the laborer "very large wages."

Other bodies of archival evidence confirm the changes evident in probate records and newspaper advertisements at this time.

For instance, thousands of petitions were submitted to Massachusetts authorities in the early years of the Revolution, and some of these documents provide insight into the ways in which Black people assessed the opportunities and the risks of wartime life in the Bay Colony.

Consider the case of a man named Joseph Johnson. Joseph had been captured at sea, and was living in Boston when he petitioned. But, even though he was, as he put it, a "free Negro man," he sensed that his autonomy was vulnerable. He was not worried about being reduced to bondage in Boston and forced to labor locally. However, Joseph feared enslavement elsewhere. He had been, as he put it, "threatened to be sold and sent to Albany as a slave." A different petition elaborates on the point.

Cuba, a 25-year-old woman of African descent, was captured by an American warship and brought to Boston in 1777. Once there, as she put it, she "rejoiced" that she had been brought to this "land of liberty." It was a place where she expected to "spend her life in comfort and in freedom."

However, she, like Joseph, feared being sent away. She claimed that an officer on board the ship that captured her planned to have her "sold as a slave and sent to Jamaica." The officer pledged to carry out his scheme "in spite of all courts and persons whatsoever," she said. This reveals his expectation that he would need to counter both the local justice system and the local populace in sending the woman away.

Court records provide additional evidence that local people were questioning slavery in the early years of the Revolution, and that white inhabitants realized they might not be able to claim the lives and labors of Black people much longer.

For example, in 1777, Cato, who was described as "an African by birth," arranged for a Boston man named Samuel Conant to be hauled into court for attempting to "sell him the said Cato as a slave and transport him to foreign parts." The warrant suggests that local white people were looking to offload the enslaved, or those nominally in bondage, to places with more robust systems of slavery.

And it suggests as well, that the Massachusetts justice system took seriously the claims of Black inhabitants who found themselves victimized in the process. Cato, who feared "foreign parts," like Cuba, who was terrified of Jamaica, and Joseph, who dreaded passage to Albany, appealed to local authorities in an attempt to keep himself in a place where the system of slavery was caving in around him.

So probate records, newspapers, petitions, and court records show that, at least in the eastern part of Massachusetts, slavery all but petered out in the 1770s during the early years of the Revolution.

This evidence, and a great deal of other evidence that I explore in the book, moves the timeline of slavery's demise in the region.

Now it moves that timeline by less than a decade, which might seem inconsequential. However, this movement is of real significance because it indicates that the mechanism for ending slavery in the region is different from what scholars had long assumed.

If most Black people in the area obtained their liberty before the great political and legal developments which supposedly eradicated slavery in the state, the emancipatory process must have been a bottom up rather than a top-down revolution in social relations. That is, the end of slavery must have been fueled more by the internal dynamics of slaveholding households, and less by the changes enacted by prominent citizens, such as delegates to the Constitutional Convention, lawyers, court justices, and juries.

This vision of emancipation runs counter to the past century of historical scholarship on the matter. But it is not altogether new. It echoes arguments made over 200 years ago by Jeremy Belknap, the first historian to study the end of slavery in Massachusetts. Slavery, Belknap, Jeremy concluded, had been abolished, not by the Constitution, nor by the courts, but by "public opinion."

The archive reveals that Black activists understood the power of public opinion, and they put forth great effort to shape it during this period. Surviving print records show this most clearly. In 1773, people of African descent, including the enslaved, launched a powerful abolitionist

campaign aimed ostensibly at lawmakers but intended every bit as much to sway the hearts and the minds of their neighbors.

Their first appeal, which circulated the region as a tract, was promoted in a Boston newspaper and advertised by local printer. Three months later, bound men composed another petition and sent it to the House of Representatives. This petition they managed to get appended to one of the most popular political treatises written in the Revolutionary era and advertised in four different Boston newspapers.

Two months later, enslaved Bostonians asked their lawmakers again for the abolition of slavery, and they persuaded a local newspaper to print the full text of their request across its front page.

Three weeks later, an unidentified bondsman sent a condemnation of slavery to a Boston newspaper. A similar statement, written by a “Son of Africa,” was printed in another Boston paper. And a third such appeal occupied nearly all of the cover page of the “Essex Journal,” which circulated just north of Boston.

The region's Black activists did not let up.

In January of 1774, enslaved Bostonians sent yet another petition to their lawmakers. Once again, local newspapers picked up the story, bringing the petitioners’ words into public houses and meetinghouses, courtrooms and bedrooms.

In May of that year, the petitioners addressed the House of Representatives again. Soon after, they sent yet another plea to Massachusetts lawmakers, and once more they made sure that the text of their complaint was broadcast in print to their community. Placed in the first column of the front page of a prominent paper, the entreaty could not be missed.

If you, my listeners, are exhausted by this laundry list of Black protests in print, that's the point. The appeals simply kept coming during these pre-Revolutionary years. The printers kept printing. The public presumably kept reading.

Now the legislature never acquiesced to the petitioners’ demands, at least in part because the Governor dissolved the General Court in the midst of the petition drive. But the petitioners won their broader point.

Smothered by the claims of Black activists, white Bostonians appear to have become convinced that the claims they laid to human properties were not legitimate.

But how? On what grounds did Boston's enslaved community render illegitimate long-held beliefs and long-practiced customs?

The answer has everything to do with the subject of my book: families.

Black families figure prominently in this body of protest literature, which moved through the region in newspapers, tracts, manuscripts, circular letters, oral recitations, and rumors. Enslaved activists consistently and with vigor, depicted slavery as a crime not merely against the individual, but against the family.

For those captured in Africa, the instance of enslavement nearly always severed intimate relationships, and for that it was damnable. "We were dragged by the cruel hand of power," one petition reads, "some of us stolen from the bosoms of tender parents and brought hither to be enslaved."

The petitioners repeated this line of reasoning over and over, even recycling the very words they used to express it. A later appeal echoed the complaint almost verbatim. Another petition used essentially the same words, and a fourth entreaty elaborated on the theme.

Black activists altered other aspects of their requests from petition to petition, which makes this continuity of language and argument striking. The supplicants clearly recognized that doubling down on the destruction of African families by the Atlantic trade was crucial to delegitimizing slavery.

If the instance of enslavement severed intimate ties, so too did the long grind of slavery as experienced over the course of a lifetime. "We are deprived of everything that has a tendency to make life even tolerable," the petitioners wrote. "The endearing ties of husband, wife, parent, child and friend we are generally strangers to: And whenever any of those connections are formed among us, the pleasures are embittered by the cruel consideration of our slavery."

Once again, the petitioners use repetition strategically to hammer home their point. Their next appeal reiterated the complaint nearly word for word and went on to provide specific examples of familial destruction wrought by the practices of slaveholding in Massachusetts.

Another petition laid out precisely the same scenarios. Slavery compromised family integrity in a host of disturbing ways, and bound activists highlighted in petition after petition the damage caused by these disruptions to their intimate lives.

The activists worked hard to elicit emotions on the part of their white audience, and for good reason. That audience was primed to respond on a sentimental register to family-related appeals.

Two broad historical changes account for this. First, as new ideas about the universality of human emotion emerged in the years before the Revolution, many of the activists' white neighbors began to believe for the first time that people of African descent experienced the

same kinds of feelings that their enslavers experienced. Second, colonists over the course of the 18th century came to think of families as affective units more than economic ones.

Putting these changes together, if Black people had the same sorts of sentiments that white people had, and if white people believed that families were (or at least ought to be) knit together by love and affection, it would follow that many of the activists' white neighbors could be convinced that enslaved people were deeply invested in an emotional level, in their familiar... on an emotional level in their familial relationships.

The authors of these anti-slavery pieces clearly understood this. They used sentiment-laden language to describe the "shocking inhumanities" which enslaved people suffered in Massachusetts.

And with passion, they reminded listeners of their complicity: in the course of their daily lives, after all, white readers "beheld our wives and children taken from us, bought and sold like dumb beasts."

The language of these entreaties was sometimes personal. As one anti-slavery advocate implored his audience, "let me, who now have no less than 11 relatives suffering in bondage, beseech you, good people."

This emotional language about family life was so effective in part because it was carefully calculated to employ the sentimental idioms that pulsed through pre-Revolutionary Boston. But that alone cannot explain its success.

In order to understand how these arguments about families could bring about real change in this time and place, we need to understand Black family life in eastern Massachusetts, which is the central objective of my book.

As *Belonging* shows, these arguments about families were particularly powerful because they built on a long-standing set of historical realities. The Black community in the region had a lengthy track record of building faithful families against all odds.

Evidence of the family ties of bondspeople was everywhere in 18th-century Massachusetts. In just the town of Boston, for instance, more than a thousand Black people were married by ministers and justices of the peace over the course of the 18th century. These Bostonians went to great effort to establish their marital ties in public and to wed in an official capacity.

The process of obtaining legal marriage involved town clerks, ministers, justices of the peace, and the broader community, which vetted the relationships of both Black people and white people, and had the potential to forbid from marrying couples that were deemed unsuitable.

If enslaved people married in great numbers, so too did they bear children. The fragmented records of Boston's churches indicate that hundreds of enslaved and free Black children were baptized before Boston's congregations over the course of the 18th century. This was a ritual that was ordinarily carried out by the minister with the aid of the child's father. Baptisms were performed in the same place where marriages were announced: in Boston's local meetinghouses, which stood at the center of the town's social life and which residents of all races were required to attend by law.

Because enslaved people engaged in family building so actively, and because they often chose to do it in public through the institutions that white people set up to govern marriage and family, Black families were visible in Massachusetts in a way they were not in much of the rest of the Anglo-Atlantic world.

Everyone in Boston knew Black people, many of them who had built and sustained kin ties despite the challenges of slavery. People who hashed out family arrangements with their owners prior to marriage. People who solicited ministers to proclaim from the pulpit their intention to wed. People who married before local justices of the peace. People who dashed across town as dusk fell so they could spend the night with their spouses. People who stood before their congregations and held up their infants for baptism.

Therefore, as Boston's white community encountered Black activists' demands for the end of slavery in order to preserve family integrity, they must actually have thought of Black families struggling against the forces of slavery that threatened to tear them asunder. Families they knew. Intact families. Bound people in their churches who had built kin ties with one another.

The claim that enslaved people should have a right to family autonomy made sense to white... made sense to white Bostonians because they had long watched Black people build family ties under the constraints of slavery.

Husbands and wives ordinarily lived in separate households. Children could be given away. Any family member could be sold out of town. And yet, enslaved people continued to broadcast their bids for family unity to their communities.

They stood before their congregations. They asked their ministers to announce their marriage intentions. They approached the local justices of the peace and other officials. They sought advocates in their communities. They tried to purchase their children's freedom. They sued for their wives' liberty in the courts.

Belonging tells this big story, the story of the sustained and often public struggle on the part of Black New Englanders for intimacy.

Throughout the century and a half from New England's founding to the American Revolution, the enslaved strove to influence the treatment of their family members. They pursued

opportunities for economic advancement, and they called for release from bondage. Sometimes Black New Englanders succeeded in securing meaningful concessions: the right to marry, protection for a child, a promise of freedom.

And the cumulative effects of these concessions was significant. The work of making and maintaining kin ties influenced the region's law, religion, society, and politics. This work led to the legal protection of enslaved people's right to marry, for instance, as well as helped foster uneasiness in the church about spousal separations.

Ultimately, the actions taken by people of African descent to fortify their splintered families played a pivotal role in bringing about the collapse of slavery in Massachusetts.

My book tells that larger narrative through a series of personal stories, pulling together these micro histories to demonstrate their cumulative effect in encouraging change in New England society. That larger narrative and those intimate stories help explain how Darby could march out of slavery in 1775.

Jeremy Belknap, the early historian who sought to grasp how slavery had ended in Massachusetts, concluded that by the time of the Revolution, “the public opinion was strongly in favor of the abolition of slavery.”

When six-year-old Darby deserted his owner’s household to rejoin his birth family three towns away, he clearly sensed the changing tide of public opinion: the recognition on the part of many white people that slavery was no longer defensible, in large part because it encroached on the right of bondspeople to family integrity.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Darby understood his circumstances better than have the historians who followed him.

The story of his walk out of slavery and his confrontation with the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, a story that once struck me as wildly improbable, well, it makes good sense when one takes care to excavate its context and to explore the history of slavery and family that came before it.

In fact, this story better follows the course of emancipation in Massachusetts, as revealed in a deep dive into the archive, than the conventional narrative of abolition does.

Darby's heel... Darby's walk came on the heels of an aggressive campaign waged by the enslaved to impugn slavery for the handicaps it placed on the intimate lives of those in bondage. This was a campaign that was built upon generations of faithful family-building on the part of the enslaved.

Since the mid-17th century, Black people in Boston and the surrounding area had been marrying, bearing children, and agitating in support of their intimate bonds. They did this in their churches. They did this in court. They did this on the streets.

The enslaved were the architects of their emancipation insofar as they made the conflict between slavery and family visible by working diligently to form kin ties in public and to demand protection for their intimacies.

Thank you.

KYLE: Well that was fantastic. Thank you so much, Gloria, for sharing that wonderful story. And really, in such a powerful way kind of taking us from that story... I think you accomplished what you said you were gonna set out to do, right, in giving us this insight.

I might just start off, you know, thinking a little bit about where you kind of landed in doing this book, right? I mean, I think we're accustomed to seeing scholars write about the enslaved, the labor worlds of enslaved people, certainly about their material culture.

Great exhibit at Historic Deerfield, which hopefully some of you got to see, fairly recently, you know, focused on, of course, on resistance, you know, outright resistance in acts of rebellion.

And even in their church life, you know, Richard Boles, one of our Board members who puts in the comments, "so great to see you." Somebody who I think you know well.

Why have we not talked more about their family lives? And did you know from the start that that was going to be kind of the key, or did you also kind of find your way to that?

GLORIA: Thank you, Kyle. That's a great question.

So, I think the reason we haven't talked very much about the family lives, the intimate experiences of people enslaved in New England is because the source material is perhaps a bit more fragmented for this kind of set of questions than it is for certain other questions.

So, I think you laid out some of the really rich work that's been done on kind of the material culture, the religious experiences, the sort of... especially the labor practices, of this place, of the enslaved in this place. And I really, I've used all of, you know, that rich literature to help me along.

But I think I just sort of somewhat naively thought, well, you know, if I just look hard, I'll just, you know, there's gotta be stuff out there to answer these questions.

I just became fascinated with the idea of what could intimacy and family look like in the sort of atomized experience that enslaved people lived in early New England where so often,

people in bondage might have been the only enslaved person that was living in a given household. And what did, what did intimacy look like? What did community look like?

So I kind of came up with these set of questions, and then I hit the archives thinking, oh, you know, it'll be there. And I was warned that it wouldn't be there. And I started, you know, started to use the indexes, the finding aids, all the things that are useful to historians.

And after a good period of, you know, a good number of months, maybe about a year of work, I realized this was not, this is not a feasible topic. I... or at least I couldn't move forward with it the way I had hoped to.

And so at that point, I could have just pivoted to something that... to a set of questions that I could answer more easily. But I'm a little bit of a stubborn person, I think. And so I just dug in my heels and decided, well, if I can't answer these questions the way sort of I've learned to answer questions as a historian, maybe I can just answer them by using a different set of methodologies.

And what I started doing was just reading everything, page by page, in the archive. And so, it was a very kind of lengthy research process.

But I started actually with probate records, which I reference in this, in the beginning of my talk here. And, I realized that the great majority of evidence found in probate records related to people of African descent, it was impossible to recover using any sort of shortcut. It just was a matter of, just the sometimes mind-numbing process of turning page, over page, over page through hundreds of volumes.

And at the end, really, there was a lot of richness there. But it's not easy to access.

And so I replicated that very inefficient research method through different bodies of court records, through church records, through town papers, through all sorts of different sources. And, kind of pulled together a body of evidence that in the end, kind of surprised me with its richness.

So, to answer your question of, you know, why hasn't this been told? I think it's just maybe nobody was willing, or able, or whatever... thought it was a good idea to engage in such an inefficient research process as I.

And then, in terms of where I landed, I think I might have indicated a little bit in my talk, like, that I surprised myself.

I really wanted to understand the intimacies of these, of these people. What family looked like under such unusual and difficult circumstances. And then, I realized that some big, you know, political questions, some big, economic questions actually could be answered by

better understanding these questions about the family and kin relationships of these people, which was, which was not something that I anticipated at the outset.

As I said, I was very surprised to learn that slavery ended in the eastern part of Massachusetts earlier and differently than I'd expected, in large part because of these relationships that had been cultivated in public over generations.

So, yeah, that's kind of, that's where the project kind of came from. And that's how I ended up, and that's how I ended up making these connections to abolition in the last chapter of my book.

KYLE: Well, I think I can speak for everybody in the virtual audience. Thank you for camping out in the archives.

And, you know, I imagine you probably spent a lot of time in the state archives going through these resources.

So, great question here from Rick Taylor, who is asking about the applicability of your findings for eastern Massachusetts as we move into western Massachusetts. And you know, he asks about "Ma Betts," you know, a very, you know, in public history world, a figure who really has gotten a lot of attention in the last couple of years.

Do you think the findings you're finding apply in that, in Stockbridge and in western Massachusetts as well? Or is there something distinctive about eastern Massachusetts?

GLORIA: Great question. Thank you, Rick.

I do think... So, one thing that this research has shown me is how very small places can differ from other places that are not very far away.

And so at first I, you know, I was... I did work in Rhode Island. I did work in Maine. I did work in Connecticut. This was gonna be sort of a story that ranged throughout the New England colonies.

And as I developed, as I kind of landed on a methodology that I thought would work, I realized that I was incapable of replicating that methodology in all of these different locales. So I can't answer, because I haven't done the research, Rick, I cannot give you a definitive answer.

But I can tell you what I think. And what I think is that central and western Massachusetts actually had a very different ending, that slavery there ended in a very different way.

I think that the, that as I, as I mentioned, you know, this 1780 Constitution declaring all men, "free and equal," the 1783 Quock Walker case, which found this man of uncertain status to be free based on that constitution. Those did not, those... what seemed like real landmark moments didn't really move the register on the radar of slavery of this eastern Massachusetts area that I was working with. But I think those were actually quite crucial for ending slavery in the more rural, central and western parts of the state.

So that is, that's what I expect. I expect that Quock Walker, who was from Central Mass, "Ma Betts," who was from Western Mass, that they needed to use the Constitution. They needed to use the law to establish their freedom, their freedom in court.

And that what happened in this sort of more densely populated, really, you know, Boston and its environs being the ground zero for kind of Revolutionary thought and rhetoric. And, this kind of very rich history of family building and community building in public, that was applicable in this, in Boston and the surrounding regions, I think gave it, kind of shifted it in another direction so that the process of ending slavery was actually quite different in the, in the area that I'm looking at than in the central and western parts of the state.

KYLE: Fantastic. Yeah, I think there's the, there's always that, you know... you do your study in one area and people want to know, and there's other questions in here, of course, what was happening in other states? What was happening in other parts?

And I think that's a, you know, your answer there really helps us kind of understand that we need to do the work, right? And we need to get in. But also think about the ramifications of what happens in one place and its usability in others.

Wonderful question here from Charlie Hambrick-Stowe, another long-time supporter of the library. Do you see a connection between the language of family and sentiment in these petitions in the late 18th century, with some of the major themes of American literature in the 19th century, where sentiment and family, you know, are in full bloom?

And he's asking here, you know, would it be going too far to identify the roots of, to cite the most famous example, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and the way Harriet Beecher Stowe is framing these politics of family, in what you're uncovering in the 18th century?

GLORIA: Wow, thank you. First of all, Charlie, I used your work in my work. So, thank you for the, for your careful scholarship.

That's a wonderful question. And I would say, yes. I would say in some ways, this group of Black activists who are building on this long tradition of family building in public, and the long tradition of... enslaved people demanding access to their kin... I think they're very much creating a foundation, or initiating something that would become very prominent later.

This sort of, this sentimental approach that somebody like Harriet Beecher Stowe took to her... anti-slavery activism, I think in some ways has its roots in what I've uncovered. Not that it's necessarily something that Stowe or those other practitioners would have recognized, but I think that people of African descent in this very important place made these claims, and they made Black families matter in a way that would continue to have resonance in the 19th century.

So, I absolutely think there's a connection between this, like, 18th-century story and what would come later in the 19th century. And I do, gesture to that in the conclusion of the book, which I don't have time, I think, for a full-scale explanation here, but you kind of anticipate where I leave my readers at the very end of the book. So, thank you.

KYLE: A really, you know, intriguing question here from Charles Scheinberg, who asks, was there any backlash by pro-slavery New Englanders? Because I'm sure there were pro-slavery New Englanders at this time... because of the demands for the recognition of the bondperson's humanity and right to family and intimacy?

You know, if this is, if there's this kind of growing recognition, are there holdouts that you're seeing that manifest in any sort of way?

GLORIA: Yes, I would say, I mean, there are absolutely... Again, I took, I went through kind of eastern Massachusetts with just such a fine comb, and then I did some work elsewhere.

But I can't speak with the same authority on the nuances of exactly what was being argued in other places. I would say certainly in eastern Massachusetts, there are people who are, you know, appear to be holdouts trying to, as I mentioned, even... or saying, gosh, I can't really change what's happening, but I can take this enslaved person and sell them somewhere else and make my money, you know, make a buck before this kind of, before I lose access to this so-called "property."

So it's not like everybody is just saying, you know, oh, these people deserve the right to, you know, intact families. You know, we've been... this system that we've developed is morally wrong. Let's just go ahead and make sure that everybody has a rich and fulfilling life and freedom. That unfortunately is not the story.

So there are certainly people who tried to kind of put the brakes on this in the region where I did my very careful work. But, then certainly in the rest of New England, there's, in much, many other places in New England, there's a real kind of cautious attitude toward what's happening in Boston.

You'll find, kind of, sarcastic comments like Boston, the haven for runaway slaves, and things like this in, just in the print culture in the Revolutionary era and beyond.

So there's a sense that, like, things kind of got a little out of control in Boston and, well, you know, some people might elsewhere... I'm not trying to suggest that only in Boston did anybody turn against slavery. We see that happening in other places in New England. But there's also a sense that, maybe Boston went a little too far, too fast.

KYLE: That's great. Thanks so much for that.

You know, we are in the moment, especially here in Boston, of thinking about the 250th outbreak of the American Revolution.

And Noah Good asks, you know, a seemingly simple question, but I'm really curious about it through the lens that you see about how recognizing this valuing of effective relationships and this, you know, fighting for it, intersected with the rhetoric of the American Revolution?

You know, do you see that, you know, sometimes we might think that the petitions are only coming from a political standpoint instead of a familial standpoint. But how do you think about the American Revolution coming on the scene in this?

GLORIA: Yeah, well, it was a very helpful thing for these Black activists.

Because a lot of the rhetoric, a lot of the ideas about liberty, about freedom, it only helped their points and gave them the ability to point to, inconsistencies in the thinking of the white revolutionaries around them. So the rhetoric, the ideas about personal liberty, the claims for independence, all of this was useful in terms of, just fostering this, almost this atmosphere of freedom.

And then there's also the chaos. The chaos of the Revolution helped as well. I didn't get into this, but Darby walked out of slavery, walked away from his enslaver's home because his enslaver had died in the very opening acts of the Revolution. He, you know, he was there, a freedom fighter representing the colonists in their... desire for independence while he held this enslaved boy in his, in his home, which was not unusual.

And then... but of course, under ordinary circumstances, Darby would then be inherited by, you know, whoever he left his property to. But Darby took this moment. His enslaver died, and then he, you know, okay, I think I'll leave now. He walked through this totally, you know, chaotic, postwar, you know, really just destroyed region.

So I think having... a lot of enslaved people took advantage of this, of the disruption of Revolution. And some enslaved people turned to the British in attempt to, and sometimes turned to the British alongside family members in attempt to find, to safeguard their relationships.

So I think both the ideas and rhetoric of the Revolution on the one hand, and the disruption that the Revolution caused, provided a lot of opportunities for enslaved people to, you know, make their exit from slavery.

KYLE: There are more questions here than we have time. But I want to, I want to do one final question if that's okay.

GLORIA: Of course.

KYLE: So this final question comes from Joanne Melish. And she asks, how does the routine incident of binding out of free kids of color in the early 19th century, you know, these are children of enslaved people, correlate with, or maybe reflect the abandonment of the seriousness with which whites took the formation and maintenance of families, you know, and of their affective relationships in Massachusetts? So is that something that you've had a chance to kind of think about, and... ?

GLORIA: Well Joanne, of course you would, you know, ask such a smart and just probing question. And of course, Joanne, thank you. Joanne helped me a great deal in, especially in the early stages of this project and was a cheerleader from the beginning. So, it's a wonderful question.

And I think that a big issue is that freedom did not mean good economic opportunities. Freedom left a lot of people in pretty dire straits. So I don't want to leave too rosy... leave everyone with too rosy of a picture.

And des... people who are desperate, people who, you know, in many cases, parents couldn't care for their children because of the economic situations in which they found themselves.

And so I think there's a couple things going on that the binding out was, is a reflection on, in some instances of, the really difficult circumstances that people, even who were, you know, “free,” that people endured.

And then there's also, as the earlier discussion of the holdouts, there are people who felt, you know, this is this is continuing. This is, you know, there are people who still felt that Black people ought rightfully to play subservient, you know, roles in the society. And, you know, were not willing to relinquish their, the bound property they claimed without a real fight.

So, as I see it, the process of emancipation did move piecemeal, even though you see this early moment in the Revolution is, I would say it's a real turning point. But it didn't absolutely eradicate these relations of dependency. By no means did it.

And then, even for those who obtained their freedom, many of them found themselves in situations of real hardship. So thank you.

Unfortunately, you know, I wish that the story were, you know, rosier, but, it's a great question, Joanne. I really appreciate that.

KYLE: Well, thank you, Gloria, so much for sharing this with us and for giving us this gift of this wonderful book. Take care everyone.

GLORIA: Thank you.