**Theme II: Black Educational Activism in Nineteenth-Century Salem**

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In the early years of the nineteenth century, Salem was becoming renowned for the quality of its schools, but access to them was not guaranteed for the town's African American community. The legality of slavery was challenged in Massachusetts courts beginning in the 1780s, but even as enslavement gradually ended, Black Salemites, whether born free or recently freed, were not bestowed with the same rights as their white counterparts. In order to secure a quality education for their children, African Americans in Salem had to act. Over the course of several decades, their action would change an entire system, advancing equal school rights for all of Salem's children.[1]

In the 1790's, Salem's public schools were neither segregated nor integrated by law. A small number of Black children attended public primary schools with white children, and African American boys were enrolled at each of Salem's "English" or "writing" schools, a type of secondary school. Accepting Black students into a public school was the exception, however, and not the rule. Whether white residents would tolerate African American children being educated alongside their own children varied from neighborhood to neighborhood. In 1807, Joshua Spaulding, a minister who presided over an integrated congregation at Salem's Branch Meeting House, suggested to the Salem school committee that the town establish an all-Black or "African" primary school, allowing the youngest African American children to attend school without fear of being rejected or capriciously cast out. The committee agreed and Spaulding recommended a Boston woman named Chloe Minns for the position of schoolmistress.[2]

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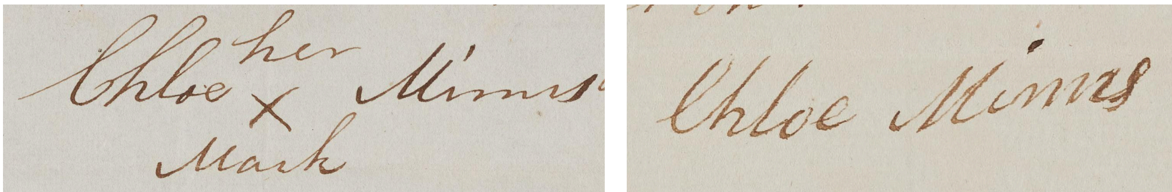
[1] For more on the gradual end of slavery in Massachusetts, see Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[2] Kabria Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 111, 112, 113; Rebecca R. Noel, "Salem as the Nation's

Chloe Minns, a woman of mixed race, was born in Connecticut about 1781. In 1799, she married an African American hairdresser named Daniel Minns in Boston. Chloe was hired for the schoolmistress position at the new African School even though she was only semiliterate, meaning she could read but not write. A salary receipt from 1808 shows that she could only sign her name with an "x." Another one from 1810 displays a complete signature, indicating that Chloe learned to write within three years of accepting her new position.[3]




(Left) Chloe's "mark" on an 1808 salary receipt. (Right) Chloe's signature on an 1810 salary receipt. Images: Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA.

Salem's African School opened in 1807. Located on Mill Hill in South Salem, it was attended by about forty students. Reverend William Bentley, a member of the school committee, mentioned in his diary after a visit in 1810 that the school was "better kept" than others and that several of the students "repeated their hymns with great ease & propriety." On another visit in 1810, Bentley found the African School to be "in good order." He wrote several years later that Chloe Minns "acquitted herself with great honour, as to her manners & as to her instructions."[4]

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Schoolhouse," in *Salem: Place, Myth, and Memory*, ed. Dane Anthony Morrison and Nancy Lusignan Schultz (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 145; Arthur O. White, "Salem's Antebellum Black Community: Seedbed of the School Integration Movement," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* Vol. 108, No. 2 (April 1972): 104n, 105; William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D. D., Pastor of the East Church Salem, Massachusetts, Vol. 3, January, 1803 - December, 1810* (Salem: The Essex Institute, 1911), 273, 296.

[3] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 113; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 145; White, "Salem's Antebellum Black Community," 105-106.

[4] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 113; Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, Vol. 3*, 500, 528; White, "Salem's Antebellum Black Community," 105; William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D. D., Pastor of the East Church Salem, Massachusetts, Vol. 4, January, 1811 - December, 1819* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1962), 435.

Daniel Minns died of consumption in 1816 at the age of forty-five. The following year, Reverend Bentley presided over Chloe's marriage to an African American caterer named Schuyler Lawrence. The couple moved into a house at 8 High Street in Salem, a building that still stands today. After the marriage, Chloe began using the name Clarissa Lawrence.[5]

In 1823, Clarissa retired from teaching after sixteen years at the African School. She remained in Salem and became active in both the moral reform and abolition movements. In 1833, she restarted the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem, an organization established in 1818 that had become defunct by the 1830s. She also served as a Vice President of the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society.[6]

The education of African Americans remained important to Clarissa during these days. In May of 1839, she attended the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in Philadelphia as one of two Black women delegates from Massachusetts. On the third day of the convention, white abolitionist Susan Grew made a motion to increase efforts to "improve the condition of our free colored population" by providing opportunities for learning. Clarissa seconded the motion and gave a powerful statement about the limitations that "the monster prejudice" had imposed upon her community, asking the audience of primarily white abolitionists to "give us light, give us learning, and see then what places we can occupy."[7]

After Clarissa's retirement in 1823, Salem's African School closed, and a few Black children returned to the unofficially white primary schools. Three years later, an all-Black English school under the instruction of an African American man was opened, but it soon closed.

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[5] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 113-114.
[6] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 114, 133-134; "Ladies' Department," *Liberator*, February 16, 1833.
[7] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 133-134; *Proceedings of the Third Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, Held in Philadelphia, May 1st, 2d and 3d, 1839* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1839), 8-9.

Once again, Salem's African American children could only attend school at the whims of their white neighbors.[8]

In October 1827, the town of Salem opened two public high schools for girls, the East School for Girls and the West School for Girls. An African American student was accepted to the East School in 1830, after some discussion by the Salem school committee. Although her name is unknown (it went unrecorded in the committee's notes), this young woman was the first Black student to attend a Salem public high school, paving the way for other African American children to follow.[9]

And they did. In the spring of 1834, three African American sisters passed the high school entrance exam and were admitted to the East School for Girls. Sarah, Maritchia Juan, and Caroline were the daughters of John and Nancy Lenox Remond, Black abolitionists who ran an upscale catering business out of Salem's Hamilton Hall. Before enrolling at the East School, the girls had attended a de facto white public primary school. Sarah was a voracious reader whose "strongest desire through life" was "to be educated." Sarah, Maritchia Juan, and Caroline excelled at the East School, their teacher noting that they were "among his best pupils." Unfortunately, it wasn't long before their academic success became a point of contention in the town.[10]

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[8] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 114; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 145-146; Joseph B. Felt, *Annals of Salem, Vol. I., Second Edition* (Salem: W. & S. B. Ives, 1845), 472-473.
[9] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 116-118.
[10] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 118, 119-120, 131; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 146-147; Sarah Parker Remond, "A Colored Lady Lecturer," *The English Woman's Journal* 7 (June 1, 1861): 269, 270, 271.

Sarah Parker Remond later in life (c. 1865). Image: Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA.

In June 1834, only a few months after the Remond sisters enrolled at the East School for Girls, a petition on behalf of 176 white residents of Salem was submitted to the school committee. Most likely written by lead signatory David Becket, the petition stressed that the admission of Black children to Salem's high schools was unprecedented, and asked that they be removed and provided with a separate school. The petitioners declared that they were willing to pay taxes for the "improvement" of Salem's Black citizens, but "not at the expense of their own or their children's feelings," implying that they could not tolerate Black students outperforming their own children in school. The school committee sided with Becket. On July 24th, the town of

Salem voted to "provide a school in some convenient place, for the instruction of the colored children belonging to the town: and to remove said children, now in the public schools, to said school."[11]

Sarah, Maritchia Juan, and Caroline Remond were formally expelled from the East School for Girls. Sarah was just ten years old. Their white teacher, who was critical of the actions taken by the school committee and the town, walked them home on their last day of school to discuss the situation with their parents. Later in life, Sarah remembered that she "wept bitter tears" that day. "Years have elapsed since this occurred," she reflected, "but the memory of it is as fresh as ever in my mind, and, like the scarlet letter of Hester, is engraven on my heart. We had been expelled from the school on the sole ground of our complexion." Following the expulsion of their daughters, the Remonds relocated to Newport, Rhode Island and enrolled their girls in an all-Black private school.[12]

The 1834 decision by the town to expel Black students from the public schools and limit them to a separate school amounted to an official policy of school segregation that had not previously existed in Salem. Before 1834, even after the African primary school was established, African American children were not officially expelled from or barred from entering other public schools. They were certainly barred from many by racism, but not by an official policy. In deciding to enact a policy of segregation, the Salem school committee relied on the legal opinion of attorney, and future Salem mayor, Leverett Saltonstall. Saltonstall advised that the town could create separate schools for Black students if they were provided with "equal means of

[11] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 118-120; David Becket, "To the School Committee of the Town of Salem," June 1834, Fam. Mss 71, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA; *Salem Gazette*, July 25, 1834.
[12] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 118, 120, 130; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 146-147; Remond, "A Colored Lady Lecturer," 271.

instruction" to their white peers. Saltonstall's opinion is considered to be "among the earliest known conceptualizations of the separate but equal doctrine."[13]

But the new African School established in Salem in 1834 was not equal. At a time when Salem's public schools were expanding to accommodate more students at different academic levels in more neighborhoods around town, African American children were relegated to a one-size-fits-all institution that met in the upstairs room of another school. As Sarah Remond later wrote, this "inferior exclusive public school" was meant for both "young and old, advanced pupils and those less advanced" in a location where "boys and girls were all to occupy but one room." It didn't matter to the Salem school committee "in what district a colored child might live; it must walk in the heat of summer, and the cold of winter, to this one school."[14]

William B. Dodge, the founding master of the North Fields English School, was chosen as instructor of the new African School. Dodge was an abolitionist who had a generally positive relationship with Salem's Black community. He had previously taught a few African American boys at North Fields English School. Dodge was an obvious choice for the new position, but an expensive one. He retained his "master's" salary when he took the new position, even though the school would accept students at the primary as well as secondary levels.[15]

By the summer of 1841, there was considerable unrest within Salem's Black community regarding the African School, so much so that the school committee appointed a subcommittee to investigate the situation. Besides the school's shortcomings, and the obvious injustice of the entire situation, two developments may have contributed to an uptick in dissatisfaction: William Dodge's upcoming retirement and replacement, and the school committee's plans to build a new

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[13] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 121-122; Leverett Saltonstall, Opinion, June 15, 1834, Salem, Massachusetts Town records, EC 35, Box 39, Folder 11, Item 5, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA; Peabody Essex Museum, Let None Be Excluded exhibition graphics, 2022, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA.
[14] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 121; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 147; Remond, "A Colored Lady Lecturer,"270-271.
[15] Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 147; Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 121.

schoolhouse for the African School, rendering school segregation in Salem as permanent as a building foundation. This unrest led Salem's Black community to take direct action against school segregation.[16]

Some Black Salemites protested, invoking their rights as citizens. In the fall of 1843, an African American man "who had been absent a few years" (probably John Remond, who had by then returned to Salem with his family) visited the home of a school committee member to declare his wish for his grandchildren to attend a public primary school. When the committee member denied him, and insisted that his grandchildren must attend the African school, he replied "I do not recognize any distinction; I demand, as a citizen, to put my children to school. I have lived in this city many years, demeaned myself well, and paid my taxes." When the committee member later visited him at home to smooth things over, one of the man's daughters asserted that the family "never will allow" that their children "or any colored children, can, with justice, be shut out from participating freely and in fair and open competition in all the advantages of the public schools."[17]

The Black community also boycotted the African School. In 1834, about sixty students attended the school. This number fell to seventeen by early 1844. The boycott was intentional and strategic. The excessive and unnecessary cost of maintaining a separate school for African American students that employed an instructor on a master's salary had been pointed out as early as the summer of 1834. When the student population fell below a third of its original number,

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[16] Salem School Committee, Minutes of July 19, 1841 meeting, Salem School Committee record book, 1839-1861, City of Salem, Massachusetts; Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 131-132; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 147, 148.
[17] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 131-132; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 147-148; "The Colored School," *Salem Register*, March 14, 1844.

there was considerable pressure on the Salem school committee to cease their increasingly wasteful spending.[18]

Finally, in December of 1843, Salem's African American community petitioned the school committee. The petition was written by nineteen-year-old Robert Morris, a native of Salem who would go on to become one of the country's first Black lawyers. Morris "respectfully but earnestly" requested "the immediate & entire abolition of the colored schools in Salem" on the grounds that establishing and maintaining separate schools was "inexpedient." He outlined a number of arguments to bolster his claim of inexpedience, including that African schools would never be equal to white schools, that they would be costly to maintain, and that segregating African American children was offensive and detrimental, "calculated to repress an honorable ambition." He continued that "people are apt to become what they see is expected of them. It is very hard to retain self respect, if we see ourselves set apart and avoided as a degraded race, by others." Morris's petition was signed by forty-three Black Salem residents.[19]

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[18] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 120-121, 134-135, 139; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 147, 148; "The Colored School," *Salem Register*, March 14, 1844; "Costly Prejudice," *Liberator*, August 23, 1834.
[19] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 135; Peabody Essex Museum, Let None Be Excluded exhibition graphics, 2022, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA; Robert Morris, "To the School Committee of the City of Salem," January 1844, EC 35, Box 39, Folder 11, Item 1, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA.

Robert Morris (about 1824-1882). Image: Social Law Library, Boston, MA.

The signatures of forty-three Black Salem residents on [Robert Morris's petition to the school committee](), December 1843. Image: Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA.

The coordinated protest of Salem's African American community proved effective. In a meeting on February 29, 1844, the Salem school committee voted to close the African School, resolving that continuing it would not be in the public interest. On March 23, 1844, the school committee went a step further, passing a resolution stating that the exclusion of a child from public school on the basis of race was contrary to the constitution and laws of Massachusetts, neither of which "make any distinction between a colored person and a white person." This

resolution made Salem one of the first municipalities in the country to fully integrate its public schools.[20]

News of school equality in Salem spread beyond Massachusetts. In late 1853, a sixteen-year-old girl named Charlotte Forten left her home in Philadelphia to complete her education in Salem's integrated schools. Charlotte's father, a wealthy and prominent Black abolitionist named Robert Bridges Forten, wanted a better education for his daughter than Philadelphia's segregated schools could provide. He arranged for Charlotte to stay with the family of abolitionist Charles Lenox Remond, son of John and Nancy Remond and brother of Sarah, Maritchia Juan, and Caroline Remond. Charlotte enrolled at Salem's Higginson Grammar School. In March 1855, she graduated with honors.[21]

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[20] Salem School Committee, Minutes of February 29, 1844 meeting, Salem School Committee record book, 1839-1861, City of Salem, Massachusetts; Salem School Committee, Minutes of March 23, 1844 meeting, Salem School Committee record book, 1839-1861, City of Salem, Massachusetts.

[21] Brenda Stevenson, ed., *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxxiii, 3, 17, 18; Noel, "Salem as the Nation's Schoolhouse," 149.

Charlotte Forten (1837-1914). Image: Salem State University Archives and Special Collections, Salem, MA.

After finishing grammar school, Charlotte enrolled at the Salem Normal School, an institution of higher learning that would eventually become Salem State University. There she studied education, believing that a career as a teacher would allow her "to live for the good" of her "oppressed and suffering fellow-creatures." In the summer of 1856, Charlotte completed her studies, becoming Salem Normal School's first African American graduate.[22]

Black educational activism in Salem in the nineteenth century took different forms. Clarissa Lawrence took action by teaching herself to write, in an effort to be a better educator for the students of the African School. African American parents took a stand by enrolling their children in de facto white schools. Black students acted bravely by showing up to these schools

[22] Stevenson, *Journals*, xxxiii, xxxiv, 17-18; "Charlotte Forten," *Salem State University*, accessed October 2023, https://www.salemstate.edu/charlotte-forten.

in the face of adversity and excelling. Protesting, boycotting, and petitioning took direct aim at school segregation and changed a racist system. The collective action of Salem's African American community advanced the cause of equal school rights for all, over a century before the nation at large would declare school segregation unconstitutional.[23]

[23] Baumgartner, *In Pursuit*, 1-2.