

Theme I: Self-liberation from Slavery in Essex County

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From the early sixteenth to the late nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people of African descent who were enslaved in the Americas self-liberated or freed themselves from slavery. Evidence exists that a number of people enslaved in Essex County in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were among them. There were different ways in which an enslaved person could gain their freedom, each requiring a different investment of time and representing a varying degree of danger. Three of the strategies used by Black enslaved people in Essex County to free themselves from bondage were running away, filing a lawsuit against their enslaver, and purchasing their own freedom.¹

The most immediate method of self-liberation for an enslaved person, but also one of the riskiest, was escaping or running away. Escaping was a secretive act that didn't often leave evidence of how it was done or how those who successfully carried it out fared once they reached freedom. There are, however, a significant number of "runaway slave ads" proving that people enslaved in Essex County did run away, or attempt to run away, from bondage. One of them was a man from Beverly named Cesar Raymond.²

¹ Aline Helg, *Slave No More: Self-Liberation before Abolitionism in the Americas*, trans. Lara Vergnaud (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 3, 4, 12, 13, 284; "Self-Emancipation," *Martin Van Buren National Historic Site*, National Park Service, updated July 21, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/mava/learn/historyculture/self-emancipation.htm>; "The Struggle for Freedom," *African Americans and the End of Slavery in Massachusetts* (digital exhibit), Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed August 2023, <https://www.masshist.org/features/endofslavery/struggle>; "Fighting Back," *Set at Liberty: Stories of the Enslaved in a New England Town* (digital exhibit), Beverly Historical Society, accessed August 2023, <https://express.adobe.com/page/a4DHDs0LcwYfQ/>.

² *African Americans and the End of Slavery*, Massachusetts Historical Society; Helg, *Slave No More*, 5-6; Kabria Baumgartner and Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, *African Americans in Essex County, Massachusetts: An Annotated Guide* (Salem: Salem Maritime National Historic Site, 2022), 33, 86-87, 129; *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society; Runaway Advertisement from Beverly, *American Gazette*, July 16, 1776.



RUN away from *Jacob Fowle* Esq; the Twenty-ninth ult a Negro Boy, about Eighteen Years old, was born in *Hopkington*, and brought up by the Rev. Mr *Barret*; his Name is *Ishmael*, he has been a Soldier at the Lake, is thick sett, has thick Lips, and goes limping by Reason of the great Toe of his right Foot being froze and not quite well. He had on when he went away, a striped Jacket, leather Breeches, chequered woollen Shirt, blue under Jacket, light coloured Stockings, brass Buckles in his Shoes, and an old mill'd Cap. He is an artful Fellow, and is supposed will endeavour to pass for a Soldier, as he carried off with him a Firelock and Blanket.—Whoever shall take up the said Negro and bring him to his Master, or confine him in any of his Majesty's Goals so that his Master may have him again, shall have FOUR DOLLARS Reward, and all Charges paid.

Marblehead, April 2. 1765. JACOB FOWLE.

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Boston, Printed by EDES & GILL,
in Queen-Street, 1765.

Runaway Advertisement from Marblehead, *Boston Gazette*, April 29, 1765. Image: Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

RAN away from me the Subscriber, on Sunday Night the 25th of June, a Negro Man named *Scip*, about 30 Years of Age, about six Feet high, well set, speaks good English; he hath two Scars on his Temple, between his Eye and his Ear: He carried away with him a large Pack, two Suits of Cloaths, one blue Coat lined with Red, one Coat of a brown Colour, one calico lapel Jacket, a black Jacket, one Pair of Moose-skin Breeches, a Pair of black and white Breeches, besides a great Coat and other Jackets, Shirts and Trowsers, and a felt Hat. It is suspected he hath a Pass.—Whoever will take up said Negro and convey him to his Master, or commit him to Gaol, so that he may be returned to me, shall have Four Dollars Reward and necessary Charges paid by me,

JOHN LUMMUS.
Ipswich, June 27, 1775.

Runaway Advertisement from Ipswich, *Essex Gazette*, July 13, 1775. Image: Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

Two Dollars Reward.

RAN away from
the Subscriber, on Sunday the
Fourteenth Instant, a Negro
Man, named **CÆSAR**, a thick
well set Fellow, about Twenty-
five Years of Age, about Five
Feet Six Inches high: Had on
when he went away, a homespun
brown colored Great Jacket, a striped Under
Jacket, a Pair of brown-colored Fustian Bree-
ches, with black Kneebands; his Right Knee
bending inwards.

Whosoever shall take up said Negro, and re-
turn him to his Master, shall receive **TWO**
DOLLARS Reward, and all necessary Char-
ges paid by me.

BENJAMIN RAYMOND.

Beverly, July 15, 1776.

Runaway Advertisement for Cesar Raymond of Beverly, *American Gazette*, July 16, 1776. Image: GenealogyBank.com.

Not much is known about Cesar Raymond's life. He was about twenty-five years old in the summer of 1776, when he escaped from his enslaver Benjamin Raymond of Beverly. Cesar emerges from the historical record again on February 20, 1777, when he enlisted in the military to fight the British in the American Revolutionary War. His status as free or enslaved at the time of his enlistment is unclear, but records list Beverly as his place of residence, making it possible that he returned or was returned to Benjamin Raymond after an attempt to flee. Whatever the circumstances, Cesar became one of about 5,500 men of African descent, both free and enslaved,

who fought for the colonies during the war. Sadly, he was killed at the Battle of Hubbardton on July 7, 1777.³

Another strategy for self-liberation used by Black enslaved people in Essex County was suing their enslaver for their freedom in court. The earliest known Massachusetts “freedom suits” were initiated by enslaved Indigenous people in the late seventeenth century, but the state, and Essex County in particular, experienced an uptick in this type of legal action during the “revolutionary era” of the mid- to late eighteenth century. Even if an enslaved person could enlist a lawyer to represent them, suing for freedom took months and, if unsuccessful, could threaten an enslaved person’s life or safety. One enslaved Essex County woman who liberated herself through a freedom suit was Jenny Slew of Ipswich.⁴

Jenny Slew was born about 1715 to a white mother and a Black father. She was most likely the “Jane Sleigh” married to Caesar, an enslaved man, in Ipswich in 1747. Although her mother was white, and the status of the mother legally dictated whether their child would be enslaved or free, Jenny was, at some point, enslaved by John Whipple Jr. in “the Hamlet,” a portion of Ipswich that is now Hamilton. Exactly how and when Whipple enslaved her is unknown, but court records reflect that she sued him for her freedom in 1765.⁵

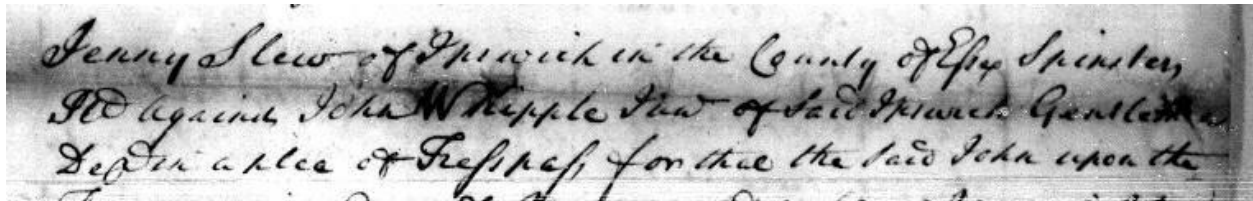
Jenny’s suit was filed with the Essex Court of Common Pleas in March of 1765 and heard in Salem in July of the same year. Jenny and her attorney Benjamin Kent pled trespass, arguing

³ Runaway Advertisement from Beverly, *American Gazette*, July 16, 1776; *Massachusetts, Revolutionary War, Index Cards to Muster Rolls, 1775-1783* (database online), FamilySearch.org, 2023; George Quintal Jr., *Patriots of Color, ‘A Peculiar Beauty and Merit:’ African Americans and Native Americans at Battle Road & Bunker Hill* (Boston: Boston National Historical Park, 2004), 22; “Hubbardton Battlefield,” *Agency of Commerce and Community Development: State Historic Sites*, Vermont Government, accessed January 2024, <https://historicsites.vermont.gov/hubbardton-battlefield>.

⁴ Edward L. Bell, *Persistence of Memories of Slavery and Emancipation in Historical Andover* (Boston: Shawsheen Press, 2021), 48-50; *African Americans and the End of Slavery*, Massachusetts Historical Society; Jeanne Pickering, “From Witchcraft to Slavery: The History of the Hoar/Slew Family” (lecture), History Camp Boston 2017, Suffolk Law School, Boston, Massachusetts, March 18, 2017; *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society.

⁵ Pickering, “From Witchcraft to Slavery;” Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), 156.

that Whipple had “restrained her of her liberty . . . without any lawfull right & authority so to do,” as Jenny’s mother was white. Whipple and his attorney Edmund Trowbridge attempted to have the case dismissed on the basis that Jenny represented herself as a “spinster” in her initial complaint when she had been married more than once. Their plea was overruled. Whipple pled “not guilty” and the case was continued. When the court reconvened in Newburyport in September, the judges ruled in favor of Whipple, awarding him court costs. Jenny appealed the verdict to the Superior Court of Judicature.⁶



Excerpt from the initial writ filed by Jenny Slew against John Whipple, *Slew vs. Whipple* (1776) Massachusetts Superior Court of Judicature, November 1766, Suffolk File #131426. Image: NorthShoreSlavery.org.

The Superior Court heard Jenny’s case in Salem in November of 1766. Benjamin Kent argued again that because Jenny’s mother was white, Whipple was enslaving her illegally, and also questioned why Whipple and his attorney could not produce a bill of sale for Jenny. He was apparently convincing because the jury ruled in Jenny’s favor, reversing the lower court’s decision. She was awarded four pounds and court costs, becoming the first enslaved person to win their freedom through a trial by jury.⁷

⁶ Jeanne Pickering, “Jenny Slew vs. John Whipple Jr. (1766),” *NorthShore Slavery*, accessed August 2023, <http://www.northshoreslavery.org/freedomcases/case.php?id=5>; George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866), 113-114.

⁷ Pickering, “Jenny Slew vs. John Whipple Jr. (1766);” “Legal Papers of John Adams, volume 2: Adams’ Minutes of the Argument,” *Adams Papers Digital Edition*, Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed August 2023, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-05-02-02-0004-0002-0002>; Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery*, 113-114; Daina Ramey Berry and Deleso A. Alford, eds., *Enslaved Women in America: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2012), 12-13.

Another woman enslaved in Essex County who sued for her freedom was Juno Larcom of Beverly. Juno was born about 1724 to an Indigenous mother and a Black father. In the late 1710s or early 1720s, Juno's mother was kidnapped in North Carolina and transported to Portsmouth, New Hampshire to be sold into slavery. She was purchased by Captain Henry Herrick and enslaved in his home in Beverly, Massachusetts.⁸

In 1731, Captain Herrick's daughter Mary married Beverly farmer Thomas West. Herrick gifted seven or eight-year-old Juno to Mary as a wedding present, but retained legal ownership of her. In 1745, Thomas West passed away, and Mary was remarried to widower David Larcom six years later. Henry Herrick died in 1755, willing ownership of Juno to his daughter, making her the legal property of David Larcom.⁹

During the intervening years, Juno met Jethro Thistle, a man who was enslaved by Mary's neighbors. She gave birth to four of Jethro's children before the couple were officially married in 1756. Eight more children followed, and all but one of the twelve survived childhood.¹⁰

In 1757, David Larcom sold Juno and Jethro's seventeen-year-old son Cesar to Beverly merchant Thomas Davis. It's believed that Davis sent Cesar to work at sea, separating him from his family indefinitely. Sixteen years later, Larcom sold two more of Juno's children. Twelve-year-old Reuben was purchased by Beverly farmer James Thistle, and Flora, who was about fourteen years old, was purchased by a man from New York.¹¹

Juno was obviously distressed by the sale of Cesar, Reuben, and Flora, and by her separation from them. She decided that she needed to act before Larcom could sell any more of

⁸ *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society; Charles L. Hill, "Slavery and Its Aftermath in Beverly, Massachusetts: Juno Larcom and Her Family," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 116, no. 2 (April 1980): 112.

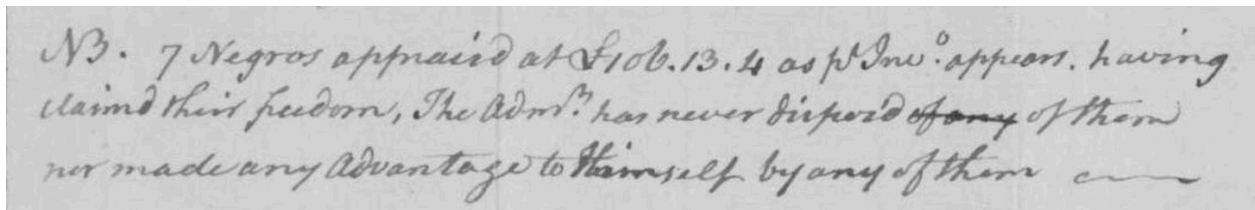
⁹ *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society; Hill, "Slavery and Its Aftermath," 112-114.

¹⁰ *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society; Hill, "Slavery and Its Aftermath," 114-115.

¹¹ *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society; Hill, "Slavery and Its Aftermath," 118-119.

her children. In December of 1774, Juno filed a lawsuit against Larcom for “trespass and assault” and for being “kept in Slavery against her will.” She stated that she was “oneasy By reason of selling my children” and asked “Weather or noe I hadent ort to Be set at Liberty.”¹²

Juno’s case was heard by the Essex Court of Common Pleas in Ipswich in May of 1775 and continued to the next session in Salem in July 1775. There, the case was dismissed because David Larcom had passed away. He died in April of that year at the age of seventy-four. What Juno did next was extraordinary. Sometime between Larcom’s death in 1775 and an account of his property given in 1779, Juno and her children “claimd their freedom,” or simply declared themselves free. Mary Larcom did not object.¹³

A photograph of a handwritten document in cursive script. The text reads: "N.B. 7 Negroes appraised at £106.13.4 as pt Inu. appears. having claimed their freedom, The Adm. has never disposed of any of them nor made any Advantage to himself by any of them".

Excerpt from David Larcom probate document stating that Juno and her children “claimd their freedom,” July 6, 1779. Image: AmericanAncestors.org.

In 1791, Mary deeded half an acre of land near the Larcom farm to Juno’s son Reuben. He, in turn, deeded half of the land and half of a house on the property to his mother. Juno lived there until her death in 1816. The house, apparently in a state of decay, was torn down in the 1840s when the railroad was expanded and a new street opened.¹⁴

Another way in which enslaved people in Essex County took back or gained their freedom was by purchasing it. This was achieved by compensating their enslaver for their

¹² *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society; Hill, “Slavery and Its Aftermath,” 119-121; Jeanne Pickering, “Juno vs. David Larcom (1775),” *NorthShore Slavery*, accessed August 2023, <http://www.northshoreslavery.org/freedomcases/case.php?id=15>.

¹³ Pickering, “Juno vs. David Larcom (1775),” *Vital Records of Beverly, Vol. II* (Topsfield: Topsfield Historical Society, 1907), 486; *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society; Hill, “Slavery and Its Aftermath,” 121-122.

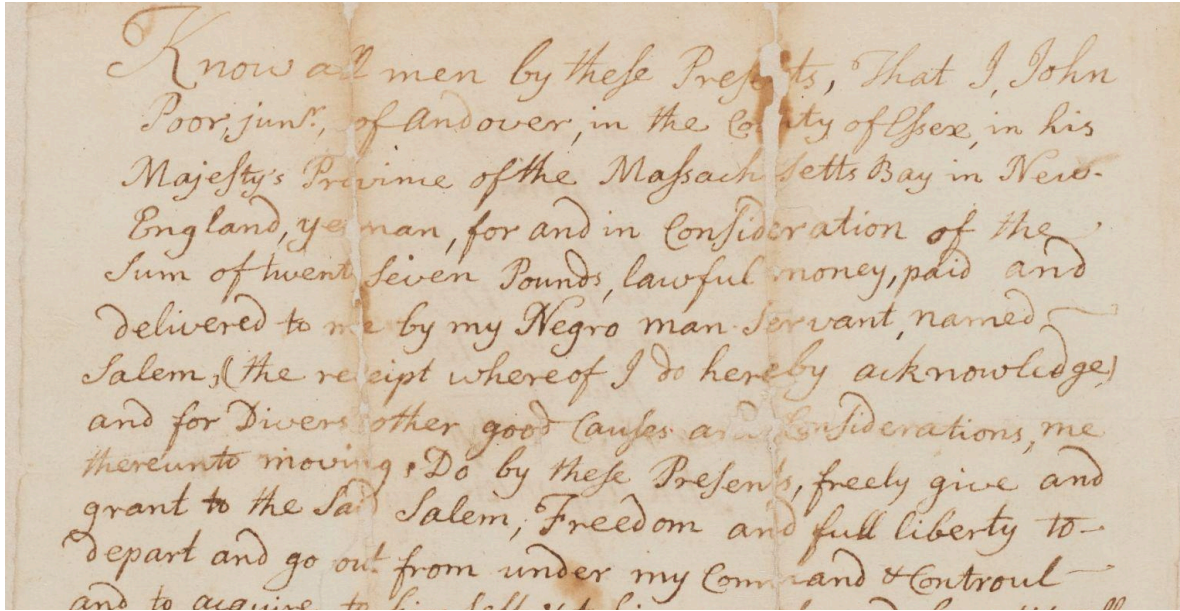
¹⁴ Hill, “Slavery and Its Aftermath,” 122-127.

“market value.” Self-purchase was not a right and had to be agreed upon by an enslaver. In addition, it presented a tremendous financial hurdle that could only be crossed by receiving an enormous sum of money from a third party, or by having the physical capacity and time to perform additional labor for a salary over the course of years. Two Black enslaved Essex County men who purchased their freedom were Salem Poor of Andover and Robin Freeman of Gloucester.¹⁵

According to tradition, Salem Poor was purchased at a Salem slave market as an infant. Many sources give 1747, the year he was baptized in Andover, as his birth year. Others indicate he was born earlier in the 1740s. Whether he was a baby or a small child, he was certainly enslaved by John and Rebecca Poor of Andover at the time of his baptism. On July 10, 1769, when he was in his twenties, Salem purchased his freedom from John Poor for twenty-seven pounds. He was issued a writ or deed of manumission, a piece of paper stating that he was legally free.¹⁶

¹⁵ Helg, *Slave No More*, 64, 72; *African Americans and the End of Slavery*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹⁶ Bell, *Persistence of Memories*, 1, 260n5, 312n1; Quintal, *Patriots of Color*, 170; “Person: Salem Poor,” *National Park Service*, updated January 17, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/people/salem-poor.htm>; *Vital Records of Andover, Vol. I* (Topsfield: Topsfield Historical Society, 1912), 319.



Excerpt from [Salem Poor's writ of manumission](#), July 10, 1769. Image: Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA.

On November 4, 1771, Salem married a free woman from Andover named Nancy Parker. Only months previously, Nancy sued her enslaver James Parker and won her freedom in court. The couple had a son named Jonas in 1774. The following year, Salem enlisted in the Massachusetts military.¹⁷

Salem Poor fought in what is probably the Revolutionary War's most famous battle, the Battle of Bunker Hill, on June 17, 1775. For his bravery there, thirteen Continental Army officers and a brigade surgeon sent a petition to the Massachusetts General Court requesting that Poor be recognized for "[behaving] like an Experienced officer, as Well as an Excellent Soldier." The court refused the request.¹⁸

¹⁷ Bell, *Persistence of Memories*, 150n4; Quintal, *Patriots of Color*, 171; Jeanne Pickering, "Nancy vs. James Parker Jr. and Dinah Parker (1771)," *NorthShore Slavery*, accessed August 2023, <http://www.northshoreslavery.org/freedomcases/case.php?id=12>; *Vital Records of Andover, Vol. I*, 390; "Person: Salem Poor," National Park Service.

¹⁸ Bell, *Persistence of Memories*, 186n22; "Person: Salem Poor," National Park Service; Quintal, *Patriots of Color*, 170; J. L. Bell, "Peter Salem? Salem Poor? Who Killed Major John Pitcairn?" *Journal of the American Revolution*, accessed August 2023, <https://allthingsliberty.com/2018/06/peter-salem-salem-poor-who-killed-major-john-pitcairn/>.

Robin Byles, probably born in the 1730s, purchased his freedom from his enslaver Captain Charles Byles of Gloucester in 1768. After liberating himself, Robin took the surname Freeman and lived with his family in a house he rented from his former enslaver. He probably made his living working on a nearby farm owned by John Gorham Rogers.¹⁹

In 1803, Robin's son Robert purchased eighty acres of land, referred to in the deed as "Robin's Farm," from an estate auction following John Gorham Rogers's death. This transaction made Robert Freeman the largest landowner in the "Kettle Cove" section of Gloucester. Twenty-three years later, he bought a house that stood across from the Byles property, where his father was once enslaved. Robert's house would remain in the Freeman family for another century, until the death of Harriet Freeman Johnson, the great-granddaughter of Robin Byles Freeman, who passed away there in 1931.²⁰

¹⁹ *Vital Records of Gloucester, Vol. III* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1924), 338; "Enslaved Persons of Record on Cape Ann," *Cape Ann Slavery & Abolition*, Cape Ann Slavery & Abolition Trust, accessed August 2023, <https://capeannslavery.org/enslaved-persons-of-record-on-cape-ann/>.

²⁰ Southern Essex District Registry of Deeds Book 171, Page 277; "Enslaved Persons of Record on Cape Ann," Cape Ann Slavery; Gail McCarthy, "Wellspring honors the achievements of a historic Black American family," *Gloucester Times*, June 7, 2023, https://www.gloucestertimes.com/wellspring-honors-the-achievements-of-a-historic-black-american-family/article_762b9886-0167-11ee-b3bd-af55492fe8d6.html; Claire Law, "A wellspring of Black family history uncovered at Gloucester house," *Boston Globe*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/06/19/metro/wellspring-black-family-history-uncovered-gloucester-house/>.



Harriet Freeman Johnson at the entrance of the Freeman house in Gloucester, 1928. Image: [The Cricket](#), courtesy of [Wellspring House](#), Gloucester, MA.

Although the self-liberation stories of Jenny Slew, Juno Larcom, Salem Poor, and Robin Freeman are lesser known than other episodes in Essex County history, efforts have been made to memorialize and interpret them. A mural of Ipswich history on an old mill building at the town's Riverwalk, painted by artist Alan Pearsall in 2005, includes a depiction of Jenny Slew receiving compensation from her former enslaver John Whipple Jr. Juno Larcom's story is explored in Historic Beverly's online exhibit *Set at Liberty: Stories of the Enslaved in a New*

England Town. In 1975, Salem Poor was immortalized on a stamp by the United States Postal Service in honor of his Revolutionary War service. The Freeman house still stands in Gloucester and is now the headquarters of Wellspring, a nonprofit organization dedicated to homelessness prevention. In 2023, the organization installed a permanent public exhibit on the Freemans entitled *History Lives Here* inside of the family's former home.²¹



Jenny Slew receiving compensation from her former enslaver John Whipple Jr. Detail from Ipswich Riverwalk Mural by Alan Pearsall, 2005. Image: [HistoricIpswich.net](https://www.historicipswich.net).

²¹ “The Ipswich Riverwalk Mural,” *Historic Ipswich*, accessed January 2024, <https://historicipswich.net/2022/12/19/the-ipswich-riverwalk-mural/>; *Set at Liberty*, Beverly Historical Society; 10c Salem Poor single, 1975, 1980.2493.6022, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Washington, D.C., https://postalmuseum.si.edu/object/npm_1980.2493.6022; Law, “A wellspring of Black family history uncovered at Gloucester house.”



[Salem Poor commemorative stamp](#), 1975. Image: Smithsonian National Postage Museum, Washington, D.C.