

BEYOND EMANCIPATION

Prince Boston in the Revolutionary War Period

By Naomhán Fairweather

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While Prince Boston is not the most familiar figure in Nantucket history, his name often comes up regarding the end of slavery on the island—but only his name, with little else of him in those accounts. His strategies for navigating the eighteenth-century Atlantic world as a Black man have been reduced to a single misinterpreted 1773 court case. After 1773, the thread of his story drops out of the tapestry that is the history of Nantucket; but by casting a broader net into the documentary record, it is possible to pick up his thread again and, in doing so, follow his course through the American Revolution and the Anglo-French Wars as a free Black sailor.

Early Life and Emancipation

Prince Boston was born in Nantucket on March 15, 1750, to Boston and Maria, a Black couple enslaved by William Swain Sr., a wealthy white Quaker. Prince was the fifth of eight children. In 1760, William Swain freed Boston, Maria, and their baby Peter, but would continue to enslave Prince and his six other siblings until they each turned twenty-eight. Prince was only ten years old at the time, with the prospect of spending the rest of his childhood and early adulthood in bondage.¹

After William Swain Sr. died in 1770, his children continued to enforce Prince's servitude. In 1772, John Swain sent Prince Boston whaling on William Rotch Sr.'s sloop *Friendship*, commanded by Elisha Folger. On Nantucket and across coastal New England, white families would send men they enslaved to do the hard, dangerous work of whaling, and, at the end of the trip, they would take the enslaved men's lay—their share of the profits from

¹ Nantucket Registry of Deeds, Vol. 6, p. 264; *Vital Records of Nantucket, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1927) 4:563; Frances Karttunen, *The Other Islanders: People Who Pulled Nantucket's Oars* (Spinner Publications, 2005), 67. In descending order of age, Boston and Maria's children were Tobias, Essex, Seneca, Patience, Prince, Silas, George, and Peter. George does not conclusively appear in the documentary record after age 5; all other siblings lived until at least their late twenties.

Left: John Swain vs. Elisha Folger (1773) in the Nantucket County Court Records.

Noms des Prisonniers		Qualités		Paiemens				Potes	Mouvements
		Entreprise	en Lion						
Sur parole	Prince Boston			"	"	3"	4"	4"	" 11
	Chance								Page 1
									2"
									3
									4
Sur parole	Job. Humphrey			"	"	"	"	8"	" 8
									5
									6
	Britagne								7
									8
									9
	David Davies			"	"	3"	4"	4"	" 11
									10

Prince Boston's name in the register of British and Danish prisoners for the Department of Dinan, December 1779. Courtesy the National Archives, UK.

the voyage.² However, at the end of the *Friendship's* three-month trip, Captain Folger gave Prince Boston his share directly: a handsome sum of twenty-three pounds sterling, seven shillings, and sixpence. John Swain sued Captain Folger for not giving Swain the lay. The Nantucket Court of Common Pleas ruled in favor of Elisha Folger, meaning that Prince Boston was legally able to keep the money he had earned; in an appeal, the ruling was upheld and Swain was ordered to pay Elisha Folger's court costs.³

For two centuries, it has been widely believed that the Prince Boston case ended slavery on Nantucket. This belief started with an 1822 report to the Massachusetts Supreme Court by the Committee on Negros and Mulattos. It relays an account from William Rotch Sr., then eighty-eight years old. Instead of saying the legal action was about Boston's wages, Rotch said that "John Swain brought an action against the captain of the vessel in the Court of Common Pleas at Nantucket for the recovery of his slave, but the Jury returned a verdict in favor of the defendant, and the slave called Prince Boston was manumitted by the Magistrates." According to this report, Rotch asked John Adams to represent Prince Boston in the Court of Appeals, rather than the appeal being about recovering his lay and legal fees. This convinced Swain to drop his case, and Boston was a free man in possession of

2 Daniel Vickers, "Nantucket Whalers in the Deep-Sea Fishery: The Changing Anatomy of an Early American Labor Force," *Journal of American History* 72, no. 2 (1985), 291. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1903376>

3 Swain v. Folger (1773), Massachusetts Court of Common Pleas, Nantucket County Court Records, vols. 1–2, pp. 1721–1802, microfilm 906828, image group 8131500, frame 161, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/300823>; Folger v. Swain (1774), Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Court Records 1773–78, microfilm 947011, image group 7942992, frame 313, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/301381>.

just over twenty-three pounds sterling. Furthermore, Rotch's account says, Boston's legal case prompted the de-facto end of the practice of chattel slavery on Nantucket, though a handful of holdouts, Quakers and non-Quakers alike, refused to manumit the people they enslaved until Massachusetts officially outlawed slavery in 1783.⁴

No documentation has been found to support Rotch's version of the court case. Neither has any documentation been found relating to Boston's continued enslavement by John Swain, who died in 1772 shortly after the court decision with Elisha Folger, or by William Swain Jr., who died in 1773. Was Boston's continued enslavement to the Swains not enforced? Did he buy his freedom? Was he manumitted in 1778 following William Swain Sr.'s 1760 directions? The record does not say.

Regardless of when Prince Boston won his freedom, his younger siblings—Patience, Silas, and George—were still enslaved.⁵ In 1774, Silas Boston agreed to go whaling for the Swain family in exchange for his early freedom upon his return. The deal demonstrated the siblings' continued enslavement but also shows the Swain family's willingness to negotiate with the Bostons for their own self-determination.⁶

Although the exact circumstances of Prince Boston's emancipation are unknown, by 1777, at the age of twenty-seven, he was off to sea once more—this time against the socioeconomic and political backdrop of the American Revolution.

The Revolution Comes to Nantucket

Nantucket occupied an unenviable position in the conflict between the United Kingdom and the American colonies. Influential white families played a carefully-negotiated game of neutrality on behalf of both themselves and the community at large. As an island, Nantucket relied heavily on imports from the colonial mainland; as a predominantly whaling-based economy, Nantucketers also relied heavily on Britain to buy their whaling products so that they could purchase mainland goods.⁷ As tensions between the colonies and Britain grew, so too did the pressures on Nantucketers to choose a side. In 1775, William Rotch Sr. and his brother Francis attempted to “save the whaling industry” from the increasingly complicated restrictions placed on it by both sides of the brewing war. The Rotches planned to send ships to a new port in the politically-neutral Falkland Islands and ship whale oil to London from there, avoiding the blockades and port restrictions in New England.

The initial fleet consisted of five vessels: the *Minerva*, *Diana*, *Abigail*, *Falkland*, and *Enterprise*. Full crew lists do not survive for these voyages, but partial lists exist of the officers and leading skilled crew aboard the *Enterprise*'s 1777 and 1778 voyages under Captain Paul Pease of Nantucket. The *Enterprise* was, at this point, majority-owned by Dennis de Berdt, a London-based associate of the Rotch family. Here Prince Boston reappears as a “line man-

4 Theodore Lyman Jr., “No. 46. Free Negroes and Mulattoes,” *Report to Massachusetts House of Representatives* (Boston, 1822), 22–23; Karttunen, *Other Islanders*, 68.

5 If George was still living, he would have been 19 years old.

6 Karttunen, *Other Islanders*, 63.

7 Joseph Lawrence McDevitt Jr. “The House of Rotch: Whaling Merchants of Massachusetts, 1734–1828” (PhD diss., American University, 1978), 184–86, ProQuest 288053310.

ager / boatsteerer” on the crew of the *Enterprise*. This higher paying role required skill; it implies that he had already been on previous whaling voyages.⁸

It is therefore possible to conclude that Boston sailed on a ship from the Rotches’ Falkland Islands fleet during at least two voyages, with earlier trips in the fleet possible but ultimately unknown. He and his crewmates received Admiralty protection on both of these voyages: once in September 1777 and again in August 1778.⁹ Such protection was extended to mariners in the British whaling industry on behalf of the United Kingdom, particularly those with specialized skills such as boatsteerers, and granted the individual in question a temporary reprieve from impressment into naval service.¹⁰ The two dates of protection mark times when Boston and the rest of the *Enterprise*’s crew made port in London, either as two fully-separate voyages or to offload their cargo and resupply before setting sail once more.

How did a formerly-enslaved Black Nantucketer end up with British Admiralty protection during the American Revolution? Although Prince Boston had a large extended family tying him to Nantucket—he had seven siblings, three sisters-in-law, and at least fourteen living nieces and nephews by the mid-1770s—economic prospects likely influenced Prince Boston’s decision to set sail and leave behind his family and hometown. Few job opportunities were available to free Black men even in times of economic prosperity, and, while dangerous, maritime labor proved one of the most reliable sources of income for Black men. The income from whaling could, in turn, be put towards business ventures that other men in Nantucket’s Black community undertook, such as purchasing land, opening boarding houses, or owning retail stores.¹¹

But whaling income was scarce on Nantucket during the Revolution. The shuttering of the whaling industry hit shipowners and merchants hard. One can infer that Nantucket’s most economically marginalized citizens felt the effect even more profoundly. On the other hand, in 1777 the *Enterprise* brought forty tons of sperm whale oil to London as its cargo. His lay as a line manager might have been as high as one thirty-second, which would have come out to around sixty-seven pounds and ten shillings for six to eleven months’ labor, up to three times as much as the average “unskilled” laborer on the colonial mainland could expect to earn in the same time.¹²

The choice to go whaling with the Rotches’ fleet suggests the existence of interpersonal connections Boston had already made in the whaling industry. William Rotch Sr. had also been the owner of the *Friendship*, presumably agreeing with Elisha Folger’s choice to pay Prince Boston directly despite a contract with John Swain. Perhaps Boston felt it was a safer choice to join a whaling fleet already under the direction of a powerful white abolitionist who he knew respected him at least enough to pay him his own wages.

8 McDevitt, “House of Rotch,” 209; British Southern Whale Fishery voyage and crew list databases (BSWF), WhalingHistory.org, accessed August 23, 2023, <https://whalinghistory.org/bv/>; Lance E. Davis, Robert E. Gallman, and Karin Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816–1906* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 158.

9 BSWF.

10 A. G. E. Jones, *Ships Employed in the South Seas Trade, 1775–1861* (Roebuck Society, 1992 [1986]), 13.

11 W. Jeffrey Bolster, “‘To Feel like a Man’: Black Seamen in the Northern States, 1800–1860.” *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (1990), 1191, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2936594>; Karttunen, *Other Islanders*, 72.

12 McDevitt, “House of Rotch,” 203; BSWF; Gordon Jackson, *The British Whaling Trade* (Liverpool University Press, 2005), 241; Eric Dolin, *Rebels At Sea: Privateering in the American Revolution* (Liveright Press, 2022), 44.

Boston's presence in the Falklands fleet during the early years of the American Revolutionary War provides an interesting point of comparison with three of his brothers during the war's later years. Peter Boston, his youngest brother, and another "Mr. Boston" from Nantucket whose age matches that of his older brother, Essex, both joined the privateer *Aurora* under Captain David Porter in 1781. Another brother, Silas Boston, briefly enlisted in the Massachusetts Navy on the brig *Hazard*, commanded by Captain John F. Williams.¹³ Given the choices that his other brothers made to fight for the cause of American colonial independence, it is possible that Prince's decision to work far away from the war's effects was in part due to a difference in political opinions. Unfortunately, regardless of his reasons, he did not manage to avoid military entanglements for long.

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From Revolution to the Anglo-French War

The Anglo-French War officially began in spring of 1778, soon after France began openly supporting the American revolutionaries. Prince Boston and his crewmates received renewed Admiralty protection on August 17, 1778. After September 26, the brig left London for the whaling grounds off the coast of Brazil. Less than a month into their voyage, the *Enterprise*—along with Prince Boston and his crewmates—was captured by the French frigate *Belle-Poole*.¹⁴

Despite being manned and commanded largely by Americans, the brig was considered a British asset because it was majority-owned by a London agent. Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, in their positions as American Commissioners to France, wrote to the French secretary of state for the navy in 1778 to request that American crewmembers of several captured British ships be released back to America; however, though they refer multiple times to the plight of the Americans aboard the *Enterprise*, they never explicitly request their release.¹⁵ The next chapter of Prince Boston's life is sketched out in the records of allowance payments sent by British naval commissioners to prisoners of war held in France.

13 Office of the Secretary of State of Massachusetts, *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War: A Compilation from the Archives* (Wright & Potter Print Co., 1896), 2:292, 294, 295.

14 Renaud Morieux, *The Society of Prisoners: Anglo-French Wars and Incarceration in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 273; BSWF; Richard Grinnell to the American Commissioners, Oct. 23, 1778, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Claude A. Lopez (Yale University Press, 1998), 27:608, accessed via Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-27-02-0581>.

15 Jane Clayton, "Foundations of the British South Sea Whale Fishery: 1763–1785," *The Great Circle* 40, no. 2 (2018), 69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44955794>; Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to Gabriel de Sartine, Oct. 30, 1778, in *The Adams Papers*, ed. Gregg L. Lint, Robert J. Taylor, Richard Alan Ryerson, Celeste Walker, and Joanna M. Revelas. (Harvard University Press, 1989) 7:176, accessed via Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-07-02-0118>

A whaling brig like the *Enterprise* would have had about twenty-four men aboard. Of these twenty-four crew members, six—Captain Paul Pease, harpooner William Rhoads, ship's boys Archibald Essel and William Tommet, and ordinary seamen Thomas Moreton and John Maitman—were being held in February 1779 in prisons at Saumur, Thouars, Doué, Montreuil, and Monmoreau. By summer 1779 and until at least March 1780, all were held exclusively at Saumur. No members of the *Enterprise* crew appear in subsequent prisoner records at Saumur.¹⁶

What of Prince Boston during this time? The prisoner-of-war system of the eighteenth-century Atlantic was complex enough that full records and exact numbers are impossible to obtain, both due to underreporting and to incomplete document preservation.¹⁷ It seems likely that Boston was in a different location from the six men and boys listed in Saumur, considering prisoners in those papers were grouped by ship. It also seems likely that, following his capture, Boston spent those months moving through the prize courts and prisoner-of-war system in France.

The ordinariness of Prince Boston's briefly recorded time as a prisoner of war is quite remarkable, given the differential legal treatment and social degradation in other aspects of Blackmen's lives in the 1770s Atlantic world.

In his study of incarceration during the Anglo-French Wars, Renaud Moreaux discusses in depth the conditions and experiences of prisoners of different ranks. Unlike European and white American sailors, Black seamen were constantly at risk of being enslaved if their vessels were captured, though the risks were different depending on the capturing country. Throughout the 1700s, until the Napoleonic Wars, Britain largely appears to have refused to differentiate between free and enslaved non-white enemy combatants; men of color captured on prizes were treated as prize goods—able to be sold off—rather than as prisoners of war. France's requests that Britain not enslave free Black French combatants implies that France at this time did not, perhaps, follow the same policy; though Moreaux notes that “the treatment of black captives by European powers continued to vary a great deal throughout the 1790s.”¹⁸ Boston's status as a free Black man might have been called into question, and some of the missing ten months might have been spent dealing with prize courts. However, this is only one possibility; like the story of his emancipation, the details of those months may never be known.

16 James Farr, “A Slow Boat to Nowhere: The Multi-Racial Crews of the American Whaling Industry,” *The Journal of Negro History* 68, no. 2 (1983), 162, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717719>; Register of British and Danish Prisoners of War for Brest, Dinan, Fougères, La Rochelle, and Saumur, 1779–81, in “Prisoners of War 1715–1945,” ADM 103/134, parts 1–3, 1:30, 105, 168, 192, 369, 470, 554, 586, National Archives, London, UK, accessed Sept. 2023 via FindMyPast.com.

17 Morieux, *Society of Prisoners*, 12.

18 Ibid., 279–80.

Prince Boston is next recorded as a prisoner of war on parole in December 1779, in Dinan in northern France. He had been held there since at least September 9, 1779.¹⁹ Records from Dinan earlier in 1779 and later, in 1780, were not present in the digitized National Archives collection, so it is difficult to know more about his movements or how long he remained in France after that. Boston was the only member of his crew at Dinan, which does not seem to have been unusual: many allowance lists record only one or two people from a particular vessel in any given location. Like all the men at Dinan and like his crewmates at Saumur, Boston's prisoner's allowance was one livre per week, which seems to have been fairly standard across the non-commanding ranks at this time.²⁰

The ordinariness of Prince Boston's briefly recorded time as a prisoner of war is quite remarkable, given the differential legal treatment and social degradation in other aspects of Black men's lives in the 1770s Atlantic world. His legal freedom as an individual was upheld to the same extent as that of his white peers within the confines of their shared wartime capture. He was even granted a degree of mobility beyond that of his lower-ranking white crewmates, owing to his relative seniority on the *Enterprise*. Of the seven crewmen of the *Enterprise* who are listed in prisoner-of-war records, only Boston and three others (the master and two ship's boys) were allowed out "on Caution or Parole."²¹ Unlike many Black prisoners of war in the eighteenth century who were treated as property, sold by their captors, or forced to remain in prison, Boston would have been able to secure his own quarters and move about the town where he was paroled.²² Despite circumstances that once again placed Prince Boston in a position of captivity, he managed to maintain his emancipated status with enough honor to be considered worthy of parole by his white captors.

Beyond the Wars

After the Revolution, and after the Anglo-French War, Prince Boston disappears from archival documentation for a decade. It is unclear if he returned to Nantucket during that time. By 1790, the documentary record is clear that Boston had built a new, possibly more stable life for himself in London: a marriage license indicates that he became a member of a Church of England parish along the London docks, in an area where many Black Loyalists settled after the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783.²³ Prince Boston's time in England is outside the scope of this essay, but his activities during the Revolutionary War illustrate his character beyond a single case in the Nantucket Court of Common Pleas. Circumscribed by the social and political events of his day, he navigated complicated loyalties and scant opportunities to carve a path through a tumultuous decade on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

¹⁹ Register of British and Danish Prisoners of War, 2:679–80.

²⁰ Ibid., 1:168 and 192.

²¹ Ibid., 1:30.

²² Morieux, *Society of Prisoners*, 242.

²³ London Church of England Parish Registers, 1774–1812, Skt/C/01/Ms 9671, p. 228, London Metropolitan Archives, London, UK, accessed July 27, 2023, via Ancestry.com; Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation* (John Murray Publishers, 1995), 19.