Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery

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On June 7, 1731, four men gathered around a table in a southern New England seaport, possibly at a tavern, to transact some business. Three of them—one of advanced middle age, the other two about a decade younger, wearing fashionable suits and having by them on the table, or balanced on a crossed knee, fine hats—had the look of experienced sailors. Beneath the coats of at least two of them could be seen what might, in the low light, have been the glint off of a sword hilt or the lock plate of a pistol.1 The fourth was an apparently fragile man in his late twenties, so thin as to look "emaciated, and impair’d in his Health."2 He was dressed in the wig, black suit, and Geneva tabs that he always made a point of wearing in public. To see this fourth man, with all the distinguishing marks of a clergyman, in such company must have struck onlookers as odd, and perhaps the other three men covertly shared bemused looks over the serious, thin-lipped minister as he watched one of his companions take up a quill, dip it into a well, and fill out a bill of sale—a receipt for a slave, "a Negro Girle named Venus," whom this man of God was buying.

Jonathan Edwards, whose scarecrow appearance belied colonial America’s most prominent religious thinker, later became the father of the American evangelical tradition. In 1734 and 1735, as the minister of Northampton, Massachusetts, his preaching instigated a spate of awakenings up and down the Connecticut River Valley, securing him international fame and establishing him as the major American apologist for revivalism during the so-called "Great Awakening" that began in 1740. Edwards was also a slave owner. Focusing on two episodes in Edwards’s life, this study identifies specific charac-

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In his childhood and youth, Edwards must have met with many men of rank who owned slaves. His first exposure to slavery came in his parents’ home. His father, the Reverend Timothy Edwards of East Windsor, Connecticut, owned at least one slave during his lifetime, a man named Ansars. In 1729, when Jonathan became sole pastor of Northampton, Massachusetts, following the death of his grandfather Solomon Stoddard, the community offered more examples of slaveholding. While there is no record that Stoddard himself owned slaves, several prominent merchants, politicians, and militia officers in Northampton, including Stoddard’s son John, Maj. Ebenezer Pomeroy, and Col. Timothy Dwight, did. Following these leads, Edwards must have deemed it right and proper for a person of his station to acquire a slave. Besides, he now had a growing family, and the presence of a house servant to work under the direction of his wife, Sarah Pierpont Edwards, would help ease her burden and mark her social status. Through his life, in fact, Edwards owned a succession of slaves, beginning with Venus.

Edwards’s first experience in buying a slave took him out of his local web of familiar and familial connections—the ministers of the Hampshire County Association and the merchant and magisterial “River Gods,” as they were called—and into unfamiliar environs. In late May or early June of 1731, Edwards had departed for the seaport that, even this early in its history, was known for its market in slaves: Newport, Rhode Island. This was the very place, some four decades later, where Edwards’s disciple Samuel Hopkins,
horrified by the spectacle of slave auctions, would begin his campaign against slavery. By 1731, Rhode Island was well on its way to controlling a large majority of the North American trade in African slaves, with Newport as the hub. Most of the individuals taken from Africa were sold in the Caribbean for molasses that was used to produce rum, the liquor that drove Rhode Island’s economy. Some Africans, however, landed in New England among cargoes for sale in the region.

Edwards’s visit to Newport may have reminded him of his brief pastorate in New York City during 1722 and 1723, where for the first time he stepped out of the New England Congregational culture in which he moved with ease and authority and was exposed to individuals from many lands and of many faiths. In that center of world commerce, Edwards also saw more slaves, slave owners, and slave trading than he had seen in New England. But had he ever transacted business with the likes of the three men in Newport on that June day? What arrangements went into the purchase of Edwards’s first slave we do not know. Nor do we know if Venus had been described to him and the purchase arranged beforehand; if he came to Newport and, working through an agent, bought her on the spot; or if he bid on her at an auction. We have only a copy of that bill of sale, transferring (for the price of eighty pounds) the ownership of Venus from one Richard Perkins—the man we left with quill in hand—to Edwards and, as the bill stated, to “his heirs Executors & Assigns and to his and their own proper Use & behoof for Ever.” The document is also signed by two witnesses, John Cranston and James Martin. These three individuals were soldiers, privateers, and slave traders who circulated in the larger British imperial system, a world less familiar with the names of humanitarian writers such as Baron Montesquieu, Philip Spener, or Francis Hutcheson than those of buccaneers such as William Kidd, Edward Teach, and Richard Barrick.

In 1726, Richard Perkins, “mariner,” had bought a house in Newport from a local rum distiller—a place to stay between voyages. Although the term “mariner” referred to seamen of many ranks, this one commanded a slave ship. In November 1731, Perkins would set out at the helm of a sloop on another expedition to Africa. The following April, while off the African coast, his human cargo revolted, resulting in the deaths of “several” Africans and one crew member, who, in a bit of poetic justice, may have been Perkins himself, since he died around that time. Venus may have been the last slave he ever sold.

Facing page: Edwards’s receipt for “Negro Girle named Venus,” June 7, 1731.
Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.
Know all Men by these Presents, That I, Richard Darkness, of ..., in the County of New-Hampshire, in the Province of New-Hampshire, have in my own proper estate, in use and delivery, one Negro Girl, named Susannah, aged three years and three months. I, the said Richard Darkness, do hereby sell, lease and deliver unto the said Jonathan ...
As for the witnesses, Martin and Cranston, they too were seafaring men—gentlemen to be sure, but adventurers and profiteers with a swashbuckling edge. It is easy to imagine that they intimidated even the aristocratic Edwards. Martin, a recent émigré from England, had established himself as a ship owner and privateer and risen rapidly in Rhode Island politics. In a few years he would become secretary of the colony, a post he held for more than a decade. Rhode Island’s governor commissioned his ships, including the sloop Revenge, to plunder Spanish merchant vessels, from which Martin would have realized handsome returns.\textsuperscript{16} Lt. Col. John Cranston, son of the colony’s first governor, was a career soldier. Born around \textit{1683}, he first served as one of Newport’s deputies to the General Assembly in \textit{1707} and then as Captain of Vessels for Rhode Island during Queen Anne’s War, in which he commanded a sloop that preyed on Spanish shipping. Through the interwar years, he battled pirates plying the coasts of southeastern New England and eastern Long Island.\textsuperscript{17} During King George’s War, he commanded Fort George and was appointed captain of the colony’s twenty-four gun sloop, Tartar, with the mission to “detect any illegal Traders, and take any of the King of Spain’s subjects or Interests.”\textsuperscript{18}

After the beginning of the eighteenth century, and certainly by the time Edwards came of age, inhabitants of Newport, Northampton, and other sea and river towns in New England became more and more affluent through the development of domestic economies and involvement in the transatlantic mercantile trade.\textsuperscript{19} This growing affluence permitted and encouraged a process of “refinement,” as Richard Bushman has called it,\textsuperscript{20} an emulation of the mother country’s tastes for the latest fashions, modern houses, fine food, genteel social manners—and owning slaves, or “servants,” as polite society referred to them. So, along with building expensive homes and acquiring coaches and silver tea sets, the new American landed and monied class purchased more and more slaves.\textsuperscript{21} In the decade and a half after \textit{1700}, for example, the number of slaves in New England increased tenfold, from 400 to 4,000.\textsuperscript{22} By \textit{1730}, several western Massachusetts ministers besides Edwards, such as Stephen Williams of Longmeadow (Edwards’s cousin), Samuel Hopkins of West Springfield (his brother-in-law), and Daniel Brewer of Springfield, followed a growing trend among their fellow clergy by “projecting Something concerning purchaseing of Slaves.”\textsuperscript{23} Within Northampton, a small but growing number of elites typically owned one or two slaves—a female for domestic chores and a male for fieldwork—and Edwards was willing to commit a substantial part of his annual salary to establish his membership in this select group.\textsuperscript{24} Owning a slave had become a prerequisite for the
“Newport, Rhode Island, in 1730.”

Courtesy of the Newport Historical Society (01.953).
gentry, a symbol of rank as much as a source of profit, insuring that journeys by ministers, magistrates, and merchants to places such as Newport would become less and less novel.

The long journey back to Northampton, probably by a combination of coach, sloop, and horseback,25 gave Edwards some time to become acquainted with Venus. Of her appearance we know nothing. As for her name, traders and owners commonly re-named slaves after figures from antiquity and mythology. “Venus” had particularly ironic associations. The name condescendingly commented on her physical appearance—although she may indeed have possessed, even to a European’s prejudiced eye, an exotic, Venus-like beauty—and on her shared fate with the goddess in her powerlessness and in the subservience of her sons. Whatever note Edwards took of Venus’s name and her appearance, he was probably more interested in engaging her in conversation, when opportunity presented, to assess her language skills. If Venus had remained for any time at another stopping point in the Atlantic passage, such as the West Indies or a southern port, or if she had lived in Perkins’s household for a while, she may have known rudimentary English words and phrases. If not, she was, as the description of her as “age Fourteen years or thereabout” indicates, still young, and could be taught fairly easily. For this reason, among others, New England masters preferred to purchase their slaves as juveniles or adolescents. Aside from evaluating Venus, Edwards may well have spent the journey becoming accustomed to—and perhaps taking some satisfaction in—being attended by his own personal slave.

Massachusetts law required the humane treatment of servants, which included religious instruction; among the traditional duties to which ministers exhorted slaveowners acculturation and Christianization of their slaves figured prominently.26 As a minister, Edwards would have taken this duty to heart, and doubly so in regard to a domestic servant who would become an integral part of his family. Now responsible for Venus’s soul, he also had to insure that she would not be a disruptive influence in his home. Perhaps he was unsuccessful on one or both counts, for there is no further mention of Venus in any of Edwards’s letters, personal accounts, or church records. Alternatively, she may have died, since it was not uncommon for even “seasoned” slaves to succumb to a disease when exposed to a new environment. If she did not die, Edwards apparently sold or traded her in fairly short order, for the only slave known to be in his household by 1736 was Leah, a woman named after the first, unloved wife of the biblical patriarch Jacob.27
For the next episode in our story, we must move forward to a day in the late summer or early fall of 1741, to the Edwards parsonage in Northampton. Waves of revivals were sweeping across New England and beyond; in fact, only a few weeks had passed since Edwards himself preached the quintessential awakening sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Going into his study, he passed his “great bookcase” and sat down at his sprawling “scutore,” or writing desk, crammed with manuscripts. He then took out his penknife and began to pick at the ever-growing hole in the desktop, the product of countless writing sessions on theology, philosophy, and ethics.\(^{28}\) On this day, however, Edwards had to set down his thoughts on a topic that, on the face of it, seemed far removed from the urgent calls to conversion and the “cryings out” of auditors that filled the pulpits and fields in town after town. His subject was slave owning and the slave trade. As far as we know, he had never written anything like this before, nor did he return to it ever again. The notes he made that day on old letter covers in his spidery, nearly illegible hand were fragmentary, consisting mostly of elliptical phrases and undeveloped points.\(^{29}\) At a later time, if need be, he could flesh out his outline in prose or verbally—most preachers could improvise from outlines—perhaps at an association meeting or an ecclesiastical council.

Edwards wrote that day in response to some trouble that beset a fellow clergyman. The Reverend Benjamin Doolittle, a native of Wallingford, Connecticut, and a 1716 graduate of Yale College, had settled in Northfield, at the extreme northern border of present-day Massachusetts along the Connecticut River, in 1718. During his first decade and a half there, which came in the wake of repeated Indian attacks that had twice emptied the town, he gained wide approval among his people. Despite continuing threats from the French and their Indian allies, the third settlement stuck, thanks in part to Doolittle’s steady presence.

Trouble started as early as 1736, following the Connecticut Valley revivals. In *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, Edwards mentioned Northfield as among the towns that experienced “a very great and general concern.” In this instance, however, as he noted, it lasted only a “short time.”\(^{30}\) Some in Northfield who wished to see the stir among them continue blamed Doolittle for snuffing it out. They detected in his preaching and in his “private conversation” a distinct Arminian bent. Arminianism, a term used to tar a broad spectrum of heterodox beliefs including freedom of the will and the efficacy of good works, had become a byword in Hampshire County in 1734. In that year, the ordination of Robert Breck at Springfield had been opposed by the Hampshire ministerial association on the basis of reports that...
the young Breck was tainted.31 Edwards had sounded the alarm in his sermon *Justification by Faith Alone*, which had been instrumental in setting off revival fervor.

The pro-revival Calvinists of Northfield marshaled a number of grievances about what they felt were Doolittle’s exorbitant demands for salary, firewood, and the like to bolster their efforts to remove him. For his part, Doolittle ignored the dissenters’ calls for a council. He also belittled their charges of Arminianism, declaring, “I am no papist to make Either Calvin or Arminius my pope to Determine my Articles of faith for me.”32

Thus far, the case differed little from any number of disputes between New England congregations and their ministers. But after several years of contention, another, very unusual complaint was lodged against Doolittle—one that made the ministers of Hampshire County sit up and take notice: the minister owned a slave, whose name, we know, was Abijah Prince.33 This, on top of the impressive sums that Doolittle made as a doctor, as a proprietor’s clerk, and as a minister, was ample proof to the brethren of how, as Edwards characterized their charge, the Northfield pastor “lived in notorious iniquity and indulgence of his lusts.”34 Though some masters engaged in sexual activities with slaves, Edwards here used “lust” not with a sexual connotation but rather in the more general contemporary sense of “greed.” Doolittle’s detractors found him avaricious and acquisitive and believed his sins to be on a par with “robbery in the high way.” From what we can learn from Edwards’s jottings, some of the dissenters had approached the pastor in private to confront him about his slave owning and later “boasted” that they had “baffled” him to the point that he “could say nothing that was worth a-saying.”35

Remarkably, we can identify these “disaffected brethren,” who numbered about twenty. Chief among them was eighty-year-old Capt. Benjamin Wright, famous throughout the province as an Indian fighter who had led several gruesome scalping expeditions near the Canadian border. The others were prominent older spiritual leaders of the church: Benjamin’s brother Deacon Eleazer Wright, a lieutenant who had served in Father Râle’s War (1721–1725); Deacon Eleazar Mattoon, another veteran, who, disgusted with Doolittle, eventually left Northfield to live in Hadley, where he continued to agitate against his former minister; and Eleazar Holton, who had been stationed at Fort Dummer, served as the Northfield town clerk for a decade, and would also abandon the town. Three of these warrior-saints, as well as others among the disaffected, had been born and raised in Northampton or had close relatives there.36
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We can only speculate about what made slave owning so sensitive an issue as to prompt these objections. The dissidents could have been influenced by a small but persistent body of printed literature, both indigenous and European, that excoriated slavery and the slave trade. Some Massachusetts writers called for an end to the expensive habit of keeping African slaves (in favor of white indentured servitude) as a remedy to the colony’s high taxes, inflation, and devalued bills of credit. These economic woes stemmed in no small part from costly imperial wars. Arguably, recent rumors of invasion by the Spanish, in the midst of the latest in a string of ill-fortuned wars that had begun two years previous, could have played on popular anxieties. More ominously, however, was the so-called New York Slave Revolt, which played itself out in shockingly bloody fashion during the summer of 1741—the very time when Edwards penned his notes on slavery. The purported “revolt” and ensuing trials spread fears of murder and arson by Africans and Indians, fears that would have been especially pronounced in a garrison town such as Northfield, at the front line of an ongoing racial war.

Accounts of convicted blacks being burned at the stake in New York caused New Englanders, such as Josiah Cotton of Plymouth, to compare the search for perpetrators to the Salem witchcraft hysteria and to plead with New Yorkers to cease “making bonfires of your Negroes.” The accumulated memory of alleged incidents of incendiaryism could only have exacerbated the situation. For example, in 1723, following a series of fires in Boston for which blacks were blamed, laws were enacted severely punishing any found in the vicinity of a fire. Gov. William Dummer issued a proclamation stating that “Fires have been designedly and industriously kindled by some villainous and desperate Negroes.” He offered fifty pounds to anyone giving evidence, and a pardon and reward to any involved who confessed and gave the names of accomplices. In 1738, a group of Boston blacks accidentally set fire to a warehouse during a “night frolic,” and in that same year a panic ensued on Nantucket after rumors spread of an Indian plot to destroy the English in the town. Despite the pleas of individuals such as Cotton, the contagion of paranoia in 1741 spread northward; in early October a supposed conspiracy to burn Charlestown was detected, which resulted in the execution of a black boatswain.

In addition to such fears, opponents of both slavery and the slave trade alike were motivated by a wish to limit the number of blacks in their vicinity, if not North America. This impulse, in turn, was the product of racial and economic tensions. By the 1720s, critics pointed to slaveholding as chief
among the extravagances that were debilitating Massachusetts society.⁴² Such tensions could explain why the brethren’s complaint against Doolittle’s slave owning highlighted his greed. An examination of landholding in Northfield raises the possibility of a rivalry involving the disaffected brethren, led by the Wrights, against Doolittle and Ensign Zechariah Field, the largest landholder and the only other slave owner in town. The attack on slave owning may have, in part, reflected this rivalry.⁴³ In a related vein, historians have noted that the increasing number of slaves in New England, even in rural areas, precipitated the movement of slave labor outside of the household, threatening occupations among the white artisan class in a highly competitive economy.⁴⁴ In this light, it appears that Doolittle’s critics gave voice to an ideology of self-reliance that developed in response to these and other economic pressures. Slavery, argued contemporary writers, enervated the virtue and industry of a people.⁴⁵ The value of hard work, they warned, was degraded; indolence and insensitivity would become epidemic. Colonists were called back to hard work, frugality, and economy—Puritan domestic virtues that would undergird New England revolutionary thought.⁴⁶

Africans first gained admittance into many churches across the province during the awakenings of the 1730s and 1740s, a trend that reflected their increasing numbers in New England as well as growing concerns among colonists for the spiritual well-being of slaves and free blacks.⁴⁷ In Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival, published in 1743, Edwards remarked the variety of persons who had experienced dramatic religious conversions, including “many of the poor Negroes” who had been “wrought upon and changed.”⁴⁸ Surprisingly, Edwards was the first minister at Northampton to baptize blacks and admit them into full membership.⁴⁹ In addition, revivalist ministers and itinerants found slaves and free blacks responsive to their messages. Controversial revivalists such as James Davenport, Gilbert Tennent, and George Whitefield reported many black converts in 1741, while anti-revivalists such as Charles Chauncy complained about black exhorters.⁵⁰ Though members of the laity, including the Northfield dissenters, supported the revivals, the growing presence of enslaved and free blacks within some churches may have aggravated nativist attitudes.

Scholars have commented, in passing, on the implicit leveling impact of African Americans on full church membership during these awakenings.⁵¹ Theoretically, full membership accorded equal status to blacks and whites as fellow Christians. In his published treatises on revivals, Edwards time and again pointed to black converts who, he declared, had been “vindicated into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”⁵² The “liberty” he assumed for
blacks was not a social and political liberty on a par with whites, but a solely spiritual one. Even ontologically, Edwards harbored a typically paternalistic outlook that saw black and Indian adults, before conversion, as little more than children in the extent of their innate capacities. To be sure, both blacks and whites were equally in need of the means of grace and of salvation, but that was as far as equality went. Edwards and his fellow colonists lived in a hierarchical world, including racially, and that hierarchy was to be strictly observed; even in heaven, as Edwards conceived it, there would be “degrees of glory.”

Whatever the combination of causes that motivated the venerable Captain Wright and his fellow Calvinists, the awakenings created an atmosphere of heightened moral, even apocalyptic, urgency that provided the catalyst for their indictment of slave owning. In this case, the pro-revival faction’s objections against slave owning—objections they might otherwise have kept to themselves—became a weapon in their fight against their pastor and his opposition to the revivals. The debate over slavery could now be counted among the many issues that divided New Lights and Old Lights.

We must also recognize that the brethren’s accusation was, considered by itself, a remarkable act that flew in the face of long-standing racial, spiritual, and social assumptions, as well as established practices and recent trends in regional slave owning. Considered in context, the indictment testified to a vein of antislavery sentiment that bubbled just below the surface of New England society—though how deep and wide that vein was, we cannot say. In any case, the Hampshire County ministers felt a palpable attack upon their way of life and their aspirations to improve their worldly estates. In 1739 and 1740, the ministerial association, including Edwards, had discussed the Northfield case and tried unsuccessfully to broker a peace. For their next move, they called upon Edwards to prepare an official reply to the brethren’s antislavery arguments. He was given the letters between Doolittle and the disaffected members—still among his papers today—to help him draft the response. He knew this role well: he had, for example, written the Hampshire Association’s defense of its actions in opposing Breck’s ordination. These letters, therefore, may well have lain before him on his desk on that day in 1741 as he wrote his notes on slavery.

To say the least, Edwards found himself in an awkward situation, a situation that wonderfully illustrates how slave owning made for strange bedfellows. Here he was, placed in the position of defending an alleged advocate of Arminianism, the very disease he was so actively fighting to root out, against fellow evangelicals, some of whom were Northampton transplants who es-

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posed Edwards’s Calvinist doctrine and method of revivalism. Nevertheless, a range of issues, ecclesiastical, political, and military, took precedence. Edwards upheld a high concept of the clergy as “ambassadors of Christ” that obliged him to come to the aid of a besieged fellow clergyman in order to restore deference and respect among the laity—a laity excited to occasional insurgency by the awakenings. Salary had long been a sore point between Edwards and his church, and he, like Doolittle before him, would soon come under attack for being “lavish” and of a “craving disposition.” In 1744, a number of his parishioners insisted upon an account of his own expenditures, an action suggesting the jealousy and resentment aroused by the family’s taste for jewelry, chocolate, Boston-made clothing, children’s toys—and slaves.58

Edwards also had to remain mindful of his political support in Northampton. The proprietors of the Northfield patent included influential land speculators and military officers from Northampton, including Col. John Stoddard. A son of the former pastor and commander of all western Massachusetts militia, Stoddard was Edwards’s uncle and chief advisor. Blood, in this case, was thicker than the Spirit. Stoddard and others had purchased large parcels of land for resale to prospective settlers, many of whom were also Northampton-born. A number of these gentry, like Edwards and his fellow ministers, owned slaves.59 Finally, Edwards knew that Doolittle had wide connections and the respect of provincial military and religious leaders. To seek his removal would be unwise in almost every respect.

In his draft to the disaffected members who had criticized Doolittle’s slave owning, Edwards, as he so often did with his opponents, turned their arguments against them and charged them with hypocrisy.60 While the critics themselves did not own slaves, he pointed out that they directly or indirectly profited from slavery and slave trading or consumed slave-made products. They were, as he said, “partakers” of slavery: “They may have their slaves at next step.” Edwards defended the traditional definition of slaves as those who were debtors, children of slaves, and war captives; for him, the trade in slaves born in North America remained legitimate. Here, however, Edwards’s argument took an unexpected turn. He asserted that condemning slave owning while ignoring the overseas slave trade, by which thousands were taken forcibly from Africa, was to condone “a far more cruel slavery than that which they object against in those that have slaves here.” Therefore, he opposed further incursions into Africa for new slaves, denying that “nations have any power or business to disfranchise all the nations of Africa.” If they did, this constituted “a greater encroachm[en]t on their liberties than even the opposers of this trade thems[elves] do suppose this trade.”61 Characteristi-
The first page of the manuscript of Edwards’s defense, c. 1741.

Courtesy of the Franklin Trask Library, Andover Newton Theological School,
Newton Centre, Mass.
cally, Edwards crafted a stance that avoided what he saw as the excesses of the extremes.

He was not alone in separating domestic slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. Through the course of the eighteenth century a growing number of people, not only in New England, came to defend American slavery as a necessary institution while criticizing the Atlantic trade as inhuman and unjust. Edwards, as his draft notes indicate, was as an early exponent of this view. Nonetheless, the position he carved out reflected and rationalized his social situation and slave owning. Often, apologists portrayed northern slavery as humane in comparison to the south and elsewhere. But this portrayal, as well as the emphasis on the external slave trade, obscured abusive aspects of New England servitude. For example, many married slave couples in New England were forced to live separately, and compulsory breeding, though rare, did occur. Slave families that did live together might be broken up at any time, such as when an owner died. Black children were often removed from the homes in which they were born so that masters could avoid the cost of their upbringing. In his classic study, Lorenzo Greene starkly described the attitudes of New England masters. Children, he wrote, "were sometimes taken from their parents and sold with as little restraint as one would sell a calf, pig, or colt." In addition, New England colonists actively enslaved Indians and shipped them into slavery in the southern colonies.62

As with previous and later defenders and opponents of slavery, Edwards gathered Scripture texts from both the Old and New Testaments to support his view. Certain texts undercut the Northfield brethren’s perspective and justified his own critique of the African slave trade.63 For example, he took exception to a narrow definition of “neighbor”—as in “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”—as limited only to those of the same religion and in close proximity, or to those identified typologically (and racially) as the new “children of Israel.” The provincial exceptionalism of his opponents, to Edwards’s way of thinking, gave license to God’s people to behave any way they wanted towards people of other nations and abrogated the moral law that believers, especially with the coming of Christ, were universally obliged to obey. For Edwards, this was a “blasphemous way of talking.” God may have given permission to the ancient Israelites to “borrow” from the Egyptians as a punishment for Egypt’s sins, but this could not be made into “an established rule in all cases.” “A special precept for a particular act,” Edwards asserted, “is not a rule.” Citing the Apostle Paul, Edwards stated that God “winked at” the ignorance of believers in “those times of darkness,” but, under the gospel, God “don’t wink at such things now.”64

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Furthermore, in his notes Edwards mentioned the “glorious times” when the church would enjoy an extended period of peace and prosperity before the Last Judgment. Doolittle’s critics apparently repeated claims that the revivals marked the beginning of these glorious times as an argument that slave owning was no longer tolerable. Edwards, more realistically, had to allow that “things” were not yet “settled in peace,” and so the fallen world’s order, which for him included slavery, was still in effect. All the same, he anticipated a time when “many of the Negroes and Indians will be divines, and . . . excellent books will be published in Africa, in Ethiopia, in Turkey.”

Edwards’s vision shows the extent to which the revivals, his heart’s desire during his most productive years, were a crucial formative framework for his position on the African slave trade. The transatlantic evangelical network contributed to this position insofar as it fed his hunger for news about revivals, compelling him to think about how best to promote them. Through this network, Edwards came to know international Protestant pro-revival figures, ranging from Massachusetts judge Paul Dudley to Gov. Jonathan Belcher to the Grand Itinerant George Whitefield; he also learned of John Wesley, Count Zinzendorf, and August Francke. Some of these men expressed ambivalence about slavery. For example, when considering the question of the legalization of slavery in Georgia in 1741, Belcher, a slave owner himself, wrote that “the Prohibition of Negroes and of Rum, will finally divert 100 ill Consequences.” Whitefield was similarly torn about slavery in Georgia, and—perhaps not surprisingly for a revivalist with an international perspective—in some respects his views on slavery and the slave trade paralleled Edwards’s. He admitted that slavery was a “trade not to be approved of” and preached the doctrine of Christian freedom, for which he came under attack after the New York “revolt.” Nonetheless, he condoned slavery and justified his position by emphasizing the religious benefits that slaves could enjoy, assuming they had conscientious and charitable masters. For Belcher as for Whitefield, there was a proper and an improper sort of slave owning; enlightened masters and apologists such as themselves approached individual slaves, as well as slavery as a whole, as opportunities for Christian benevolence, while others merely wreaked brutality in order to maximize gain.

Edwards apparently shared Belcher’s and Whitefield’s attitudes about proper slave owning and what it meant to be a Christian master. He inscribed one revealing statement on the topic in his biblical commentary. The entry is extremely unusual on two counts: it is written in the first-person and it deals with the treatment of “servants.” Pondering Job 31:13–14, Edwards began
by quoting the opening phrase but then subjectively paraphrased the rest of the passage:

If I despise the cause of my man or maidservant when they plead with me, and when they stand before me to be judged by me, what then shall I do when I come to stand before God to be judged by him? God may justly do by me as I do by my servant. If I despise my servant’s cause, how much more may God despise my cause? I am God’s servant as they are mine, and much more inferior to God than my servant is to me.70

Here Edwards laid out a moral code for the master-slave relationship in general. More intimately, he made a personal reflection on himself as a slave owner that acknowledged the problem of justice within that relationship.

Though Edwards strove to be what he defined as a just and Christian master, he did not widely criticize the moral and physical abuses that some slaves suffered at the hands of cruel masters. But neither could he keep totally silent about them. In the actions and motives of such slaveholders, he found sermonic material for describing the Devil himself, the ultimate “cruel master.” In addition, he portrayed benighted and oppressed slaves as types of those in thrall to Satan. Through these comparisons, Edwards not only illustrated the misery of the damned but also indicted slave owners who, contrary to law, ignored their slaves’ earthly comfort and spiritual improvement. Slaves, he pointed out, suffered from the “meanness” and “hardness of the service,” which came “without any peace” and “oftentimes [under] great temporal troubles.” The service was “destructive”—destructive to the body and “oftentimes destructive to their families.” All of this, however, only gratified “the basest dispositions” of the satanic master, “to please his pride, envy and malice.” Meanwhile, a cruel owner bestowed upon his slaves “neither food nor clothing” and kept them “naked and famishing.” Worse, he “keeps them from their true happiness,” the knowledge and worship of God, and this at a time “when they have a glorious offer of eternal blessedness.” Christ, on the other hand, provided the model of the “good master,” the kind of owner Belcher, Whitefield, and Edwards saw themselves to be. “The service he requires,” declared Edwards, “is noble and excellent. ‘Tis an easy and sweet service.”71

So, during the awakenings of the early 1740s, as Edwards pondered how people of other cultures and lands would accept the evangelical Christian message, his views on the African slave trade shifted. Wittingly or not, he moved toward Samuel Sewall’s earlier claim for the slave trade as a whole, that there could “be no great progress in Gospellizing till” it ended.72 Con-
trary to the argument that the African slave trade introduced so-called heathens to the gospel, Edwards, again like Sewall (and the Quaker George Keith and the Anglican Thomas Bray), came to feel that it thwarted foreign missions.

The documentary evidence hints that Edwards at least recognized that slavery prevented individuals from properly fulfilling their religious duties. At the very start of his preaching career in New York City, he delivered sermons that equated sin with slavery and presented servitude in terms of personal spiritual reformation.73 Although these strategies were typical in Puritan rhetoric, Edwards’s presence in a slave-trading center may have given them new meaning for him. In one sermon in particular, Christian Liberty, Edwards presented, as Wilson H. Kimnach described it, “the image of a Messiah literally freeing slaves as a radical abolitionist; there are no qualifiers,” no use of metaphors, at least at first. The very opening sentence, in fact, originally stated that when the Messiah came “he should proclaim a universal liberty to all servants, slaves, captives, vassals, [and] imprisoned [or] condemned persons.”74 Before Edwards actually delivered the sermon, he went back and, in an apparent tactical withdrawal, deleted the word “slave” from this litany. All the same, the Messiah was not yet come; the time of jubilee had not arrived, nor would it likely come for some time, and until then slavery was sanctioned.

Furthermore, in a sermon from late February 1741, in the midst of war with Spain—and, perhaps more to the point, at the start of the New York slave “revolt”—Edwards invoked the image of the Exodus. As scholars have shown, this image spoke intimately to African Americans, though whether Edwards knew this, through his interactions with his own slaves and with enslaved and free blacks in his own church and elsewhere, is a matter of speculation.75 On this occasion he noted that the “children of Israel could not serve God till they were gone from their old taskmasters.” “Pharaoh,” Edwards continued, “proposed that they should serve God and continue to serve the Egyptians too (Ex. 8:25). But Moses objected against complying with Pharaoh’s proposal in this matter, that the serving of God and sacrificing to him that which he required, and their continuing among the Egyptians in slavery to them, were inconsistent one with another; that the Egyptians their taskmasters would abhor that service that God required, and would not tolerate it, but would kill God’s worshipers.”76 Though we must bear in mind that the analogy here was primarily spiritual, Edwards very likely alluded to the widespread charge that many New England masters ignored their slaves’ religious well-being, and in this way, as he put it, acted as “Egyptians.”

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language closely resembles the rhetoric used later by abolitionists in their accusations that many slave owners impeded the spiritual progress and agency of enslaved Africans. Having pointed to the tension, however, Edwards did not offer a resolution beyond saying that God would help his servants in time of need. He could not reach the conclusion that future reformers would reach; as in his sermon nearly two decades earlier, he could only look to the future, to the “glorious times.”

The shift in Edwards’s thinking on slavery and the slave trade came as a residual effect of his consuming interest in furthering the international work of redemption. Given that he had purchased Venus from the captain of an African slave ship in the seaport that brought the most African slaves into New England, it seems safe to assume that, whether she arrived at Newport directly or indirectly, she originally came from Africa. Therefore, Edwards’s journey to Newport implies that in 1731 he had no qualms about the African slave trade. His notes a decade later, however, show that he had changed his mind about buying newly imported slaves. Nonetheless, he remained an unapologetic defender of slavery as an institution and continued owning slaves himself.

There is a final chapter to the Northfield story—a surprise ending. Before his death in 1748, Doolittle challenged both his opponents’ charges of greed and his slave-coveting colleagues in the clergy: he freed Abijah Prince and gave him a legacy and land in Northfield.77 Prince went on in 1756 to marry the poet and storyteller Lucy Terry, a slave living in Deerfield who later gained her manumission. The two eventually moved to Guilford, Vermont, to land given them by Samuel Field of Deerfield; Prince died in Guilford in 1794. We may never know whether the attacks prompted Doolittle to free Prince or whether Doolittle, intending to do so all along (possibly in recognition of Prince’s military service during King George’s War), found manumission a fortuitous way to silence his detractors.78 With the waning of the Great Awakening, however, religious contention ended in Northfield and the pastor remained there, living in relative quiet.79

As for Edwards, we may well suspect that from the day in 1741 when he penned his notes he secretly hoped he would never have to present his views publicly on such a delicate issue. If he did not, perhaps he had the opportunity to discuss them privately with Doolittle, either individually or in the presence of others. He may also have taken the opportunity to mention the responsibility he and his wife had assumed in late November 1740, when they co-
signed as “sureties,” or guarantors of financial support, for “Jethro Negro and his wife Ruth,” former slaves of Sarah’s late step-mother, who had manumitted them in her will. This was apparently not the only occasion in which the Edwardses oversaw the manumission of slaves. When they moved to Stockbridge in 1751 following Jonathan’s bitter dismissal, they brought with them a slave named Rose. She was married to another slave in Northampton named Joab Binney, owned by Jonathan Hunt, Jr. Tradition has it that Hunt, an inveterate opponent of Edwards, was so intent on ridding Northampton of its pastor that he “readily released his bondman to come with him.” Rose, who by 1771 was no longer a slave and had become a full member of the Stockbridge church, is not mentioned in Edwards’s will or in the inventory of his estate in 1758. We can only surmise that, in order to prevent the couple from being split up, Edwards freed her or that her husband purchased her freedom in early 1758, before the Edwardses moved to Princeton, where he was to take up his duties as the president of The College of New Jersey.

Despite step-mother Pierpont’s example and their charitable acts towards Jethro, Ruth, and presumably Rose, the Edwardses did not relent in their slave owning. Sarah, who as regulator of the domestic sphere was probably more directly concerned in the daily oversight of the family slaves than Jonathan, aggressively searched out potential slaves, which shows that women could take an active hand in the slave market. Contacting in 1746 a fellow minister who acted as an intermediary, Jonathan wrote, “My wife desires that the person you procure . . . to be her maid, be one that is a good hand at spinning fine linen.” In 1754 Sarah expressed (via her husband’s letter) an interest in purchasing Reverend Joseph Bellamy’s “Negro woman,” and again in 1757 she inquired about buying Harry, a slave who had belonged to her deceased son-in-law, Reverend Aaron Burr. Sarah died in Philadelphia from dysentery in October 1758, six months after her husband had succumbed to complications following a smallpox inoculation at Princeton. Her will, composed on her deathbed, made no provision for the manumission of the married slaves Joseph and Sue but rather divided her estate evenly among her children. In 1759 the couple was “sold, conveyed and in open market delivered” by Sarah’s designated executors of her last will and testament, her son Timothy and son-in-law Timothy Dwight.

Jonathan had made his will in 1753, apparently before Joseph, Sue, Joab, and Rose had become slaves of the Edwards family, so they are not mentioned. Nor did he provide for the freedom of a “Negro boy named Titus,” listed in the inventory of Jonathan’s estate under “Quick Stock” and valued
at £30. There is some evidence that he was the young son of Joab and Rose Binney, though, through a confusion of names, he could have been Joseph and Sue’s child. In either case, Titus’s continued slavery illustrates how easily free or enslaved blacks in New England could be separated from their children, even by masters who saw themselves as more Christian than others.

Our knowledge of the evolution of northern antislavery thought before the Revolutionary era is uneven at best. This is so because, aside from the efforts of the Quakers, we cannot point to any full-fledged movement arising at this time. Instead, we must depend on identifying sentiments reflecting ambivalence towards slavery that accumulated over time. Though Edwards’s position arose largely from evangelical concerns and served, coincidentally, to legitimate a hierarchical outlook, it reflected a distinction between slavery per se and the slave trade that would only become more pronounced through the Revolutionary and antebellum periods. Edwards’s abolitionist disciples, most notably Samuel Hopkins and Jonathan Edwards, Jr., would remain silent on the slaveholding of “Mentor.” At the same time, they amplified and radicalized Edwards’s thoughts, in ways he never intended, to criticize both slavery and the slave trade.

Edwards’s draft notes and the incidents surrounding them help us to see that discussions of and accusations against slave owning and the slave trade were inextricably bound up in the most complicated of social circumstances, in which the antagonists’ motives were mixed and their positions evolving. Edwards’s reconsideration of the slave trade was prompted in large part by revivalism and his millennialist hopes of global conversion; however, this same millennialist fervor energized the Northfield dissenters to promote the revivals locally by taking the radical step of opposing slave owning. Also, if we consider religious allegiance and status, the Doolittle case provides the outline for at least three intermediate or rationalized positions between, on the one hand, unquestioning acceptance of slavery and the slave trade and, on the other, antislavery immediatism. On the popular level, we have Captain Wright and company, who, out of a curious convergence of ideology and expediency, opposed local reliance upon slavery. On the elite level, we find two distinct incarnations. The moderate evangelical Edwards came to oppose the overseas slave trade because of his support for revivalism but defended slavery as an institution and did not free his remaining slaves. Conversely, the Old Light Doolittle opposed the revivals but did free his slave.
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Appendix

“Conversion of an African Woman”

The following document is reportedly a description of the conversion of Jonathan Edwards’s former slave, Rose Binney Salter, written by Dr. Stephen West, Edwards’s successor at Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The account is reprinted verbatim from the Jan.–Feb. 1797 issue of The Theological Magazine, or Synopsis of Modern Religious Sentiment on a New Plan, pp. 191–195.89

Mr. Editor,

If you shall be of opinion that the following Narrative of the Conversion of a poor African Woman will be entertaining, or useful, to your readers, you will be pleased to publish it.

This woman had, for some time, been a slave; but had now obtained her freedom, and was married to a freeman, of her own nation, who was apparently pious.90 They had children; but their children, one after another, were soon taken from them by death.91 At the funeral of the last, which I attended, she appeared so deeply afflicted, that I could not but hope that some unusual impressions were made upon her mind. With this hope, I soon visited her again; but discovered nothing beyond the strong workings of maternal affection. Not long after this, she came to see me, and proposed to be baptized, and to join the church. After conversing freely with her, upon the nature, importance, and solemnity of a public profession of religion, I dismissed her without giving a decided answer to her proposal; but told her, I would take opportunity for further conversation with her upon the subject. Accordingly I soon visited her again; and, after conversing freely, for some time, concluded, within myself, what the motives were which induced her to wish to be baptized, and to become a member of the church. On this, I observed to her, that I would tell her what the motives were which originated her proposal: at the same time mentioning, that if I did not describe them justly she must correct me; but if I did, she must acknowledge it. She readily promised that she would. I then told her, “that she found the God of heaven had a controversy with her—that, on some account it must be that he was angry with her; for, though he gave her children, yet he would not suffer them to live—that the strokes were repeated, one after another; and, what evil would come next, she knew not—that she felt there could be no living for her so—something must be done, in some way or another, to heal this awful controversy: and, that she
felt a hope that if she should be baptized, and join the church, this might in some measure heal the controversy, and avert future evils; and, for this reason, made the proposal." She, at once, acknowledged, with great frankness, that I had stated her case truly. On this I represented to her the great evil of a hypocritical profession, and the folly and wickedness of taking such measures to heal a controversy with the great and holy God, while she withheld her heart, and refused to comply with those terms, upon which the divine mercy and favour were freely offered to her. She appeared affected: And I left her. Very soon after this, which was either on the last of August, or the beginning of September, I had occasion to take a journey. On my return, was informed that this woman had been at my house, to see me. On the day after I came home, it being uncommonly rainy, I happened to cast my eye at the window, and saw her coming. She came into the house, dripping with water; and had no sooner entered the room where I sat, than she began with blessing me, and thanking me, which she did nearly twenty times, for not (to use her own words) telling her join the church:—“Such poor creature as I,” exclaiming again and again “join church! Such vile creature as I, baptized! Such poor, vile wretch, come into church!” In this manner she spent, perhaps, half an hour with me. Seeing the uncommon agitation and agony of her mind, I conversed, as well as I was capable, with her, for some time; rejoicing in the hope, that divine truth had made its way to her conscience.

After this I frequently visited her, and found, to my own apprehension, that her convictions increased. From this time forward she was a very constant attendant on the public worship; carrying in her countenance the marks of deep anguish and distress of mind. In this state she continued, until some time in November following; when, on a certain day, early in the week, I went to visit her. No sooner had I opened the door to her house than she looked up upon me with a serene countenance and a pleasant smile. Immediately apprehending that there must have been some alteration in the feelings of her mind, I said to her—(calling her by her name,) You feel better, I believe, than you did, don’t you? “Yes, Sir,” she replied. Well, come, said I take your chair, and sit down, and tell me how it is with you. Accordingly she did, and began thus: “When I came home from meeting, Sabday, I feel dreadfully—I tink I can’t live—I tink such poor, wicked creature as I certain must die, I can’t live, den I go right to destruction. Just so I feel, all time, till I go to bed. When I went to bed, I fraid go to sleep: I durst not go to sleep, for my life. I tink if I go sleep, I, certain, wake up in hell. So I lay most all night. May be, most day, I fall sleep without knowing it. I sleep little while; den I wake up, and see ’twas quite light. I scared: I jump right up in my bed! Den I tink what’s matter now! I
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don't feel as I did last night. Oh, dear! My conviction certain all gone. Den I put on my clothes, and go to de fire. I tink I make up little fire, but I cou'dn't stay, I want so to pray. So I go 'way by myself 'lone; but when I go to pray cou'dn't say one word, I cry so. Den I come in, take my pail, and go out milk my cow. Just when I sat down, and lean my pail forward, to milk my cow, sun rise and shine right into my pail. I look! I don't know, I can't tell what make my pail look so! I get up: I look at the sun! I don't know what's matter. Well, I neber did see sun shine so all my life! Den I look at clouds: dey look just so, too! Den I look at trees, dey all look just so too.” Here I interrupted her, and told her that I did not understand her.—“You say you never saw the sun shine so: you never saw the clouds look so; and you never saw the trees look so. I wish you to tell me how they appeared; and what it was you saw in them.” She replied, “O I don't know, Sir; only all full of God, ebyr where!”

Not long after this she made a public profession of religion, and conducted in such a manner as to gain the charity, esteem, and the affection, of the friends to vital piety. She lived to see a remarkable outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of the town; and a considerable number hopefully called into the kingdom of Christ. When this blessed work took place, she was greatly animated; and her heart appeared to be filled with joy and rejoicing in the Lord. By and by her health failed, and she sensibly declined. Being informed, at a certain time, that it was not probable she would continue many days, I went to visit her; and found her sitting up in her bed. I said to her, I think you are better; are you not? “Yes, Sir,” she replied. I do not know but you will be raised up, after all. “I don't know, Sir,” returned she, “but I shall.” I then asked her, what she thought about living; and, how she felt about getting well. She replied, “If I do get well, I hope I shall be content; but I had set my mind tudder way. I tink if I cou'd do any good in de world, I be quite willing get well. But such poor creature as I can't do any good 'tall, in 'e world. But God know what best: if it be God's will I get well again, I hope I be content.” In this calm and happy frame of mind I left her. This was the last conversation I ever had with her; for on the night following she expired; and, as I trust, through the merits of that divine Redeemer, whose power and grace had been so remarkably displayed upon her, was received into the arms of everlasting mercy. In how many ways are those words of our Saviour verified, which he so often repeated, “the first shall be last, and the last first!”

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Notes

This article had its origin five years ago in the discovery of a set of manuscript notes by Edwards on slavery and the slave trade in the collections of Andover Newton Theological School (Newton Centre, Mass.). Little time then remained to prepare the notes, much less to research their meaning, before they were published (in verbatim transcript form) by Kenneth P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade,” William and Mary Quarterly 54 (1997): 823–834, and (in edited form) in The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 16: Letters and Personal Writings, ed. George S. Claghnorn (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 71–76. (The ongoing multivolume series The Works of Jonathan Edwards will be cited hereafter as WJE with volume and page numbers only.) Readers of this piece may want to consult the full text of Edwards’s draft in either of these places. David Brion Davis and Jon Sensbach made helpful comments on a version of this article that was read at the Organization of American Historians’ Conference, St. Louis, Missouri, April 2000. Thanks, too, to Ava Chamberlain, Patricia Bonomi, Christopher Grasso, Gerald McDermott, Stephen J. Stein, Mark Valeri, and David Wills for their suggestions.

1. I have reconstructed the likely appearances of these gentleman seamen from reproductions of period portraits in Alexander B. Hawes, Off Soundings: Aspects of the Maritime History of Rhode Island (Providence, R.I., 1999), and Yale University Portrait Index, 1701–1951 (New Haven, Conn., 1951).


4. For example, the case of Hartford’s Capt. Joseph Wadsworth, who in 1702 harbored a fugitive slave named Abda and assisted him in bringing suit against his master (Bernard C. Steiner, History of Slavery in Connecticut [Baltimore, Md., 1893], 18); or the anecdote about a Quaker named Thomas Hazard, from South Kingstown, Rhode Island, who in 1742 was surprised to hear a New London, Connecticut, deacon exclaim that Quakers “are not Christian People. They hold their fellow men in slavery!” (Caroline Hazard, Thomas Hazard son of Robt call’d College Town: A Study of Life in Narragansett in the XVIIth Century [Boston, Mass., 1893], 42–44); or candlemaker Nathaniel Appleton, Jr.’s pamphlet Considerations on Slav-
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ery, published in Boston in 1767 but written "some years before." The only recent scholarly investigation of antislavery sentiment on the community level is that on Samuel Sewall and the small Boston circle of slavery critics by Mark A. Peterson in this volume.

5. See John A. Stoughton, Windsor Farmes: A Glimpse of an Old Parish (Hartford, Conn., 1883), 91–92; and Timothy Edwards, MS Account Book, 1715–1750, Edwards Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

6. For Africans and Indians in Northampton, see Baptismal Records and Catalogue of Members, in MS Church Records, Bk. 1, First Church of Northampton, Massachusetts; and below, n. 49. On class and kinship ties in slave owning, see Jackson T. Main, Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut (Princeton, N.J., 1985).


8. Rhode Island traders sold slaves in the Caribbean and purchased molasses, which they brought home to make rum. In addition, from 1714 to 1739 at least nine cargoes of slaves, each usually consisting of about 20 or 30 individuals, were sold in Newport alone. Coughtry, The Notorious Triangle, 10, 25, 34, 167.


10. "Receipt for Slave Venus," in A Jonathan Edwards Reader, ed. John E. Smith et al. (New Haven, Conn., 1995), 296–297. Edwards later cut up the receipt and used the pieces in constructing sermon notebooks. The pieces of the receipt are found in Edwards Collection, Box 14, f. 1156, and in the MS sermons on Ezek. 44:9, dated 1749, and Is. 30:20–21, dated March 1750, at the Beinecke Library.

11. Perkins, Cranston, and Martin were members of Trinity Church (Church of England) in Newport. George C. Mason, Annals of Trinity Church, Newport, Rhode Island, 1698–1821 (Newport, R.I., 1890), 61, 63, 65. Martin was clerk of the Vestry and church warden.

12. This is not to imply that soldiers could not be fervently pious, as seen in studies of Cromwell's New Model Army and in the membership of The Ancient and Honorable Artillery Compa Louise Breen, "Religious Radicalism in the Puritan Officer Corps: Antinomianism, the Artillery Company, and Cultural Integration in Seventeenth-Century Boston," The New England Quarterly 68 (1995): 3–43. See also the account of pro-revival soldiers who opposed their Old Light minister, discussed below.


15. Boston Newsletter, Oct. 10–Nov. 2, 1732, as cited in Coughtry, The Notorious Triangle, 151. Perkins's origins are uncertain. He may have been a member of the
Perkins family of the New London-Norwich area, or he could have come from Ipswich or Topsfield, Massachusetts (where a Richard Perkins was born in 1694). See New England Historical and Genealogical Register 10 (1858): 213; and James Savage, Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England (Boston, 1860–1862), 3:397. Venus may have been one of his “privilege slaves”—slaves that ships’ officers were entitled to keep as part of their pay. On May 14, 1733, Newport’s Trinity Church voted “that Captain Richard Perkins’s legacy to the Church be appropriated for the purchase of a flagon for the communion table.” Mason, Annals of Trinity Church, 61.

16. Martin was born c. 1691 in Houston, Devonshire County, England. Shortly after arriving in Newport, he married Philena Coggeshall in May 1729, then Elizabeth Gardner in April 1732, and then Esther Lillibrige in 1735. He died in 1746. Vital Records of Rhode Island, 1636–1850 (Providence, R.I., 1893), 1st ser., vol. 4, pt. 2, 459; James MacSparran, A Letter Book and Abstract of Out Services, Written during the Years 1743–1751 (Boston, Mass., 1899), 89. For Martin as a ship owner, see Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation (Providence, R.I., 1859), 4:421, 481; and Howard M. Chapin, Rhode Island Privateers in King George’s War, 1739–1748 (Providence, R.I., 1926), 178.

17. See, for example, The Diary of Joshua Hempstead (New London, Conn., 1901), 66, entry for May 10, 1717: “2 sloops of force belong[ing] to R Island have been seeking Pirates Come in for harbour ... Capt Cranston & Capt Almy went out in Quest of ye pirates.” See also Hawes, Off Soundings, 50, 54, 79.

18. Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 4:17, 57, 568; Chapin, Rhode Island Privateers, 187; Howard M. Chapin, The Tartar: The Armed Sloop of the Colony of Rhode Island in King George’s War (Providence, R.I., 1922), 1n., 3. Cranston died in 1760.


23. Stephen Williams, Diary (typed transcript), June 18, 1730, vol. II, 189, Storrs Library, Longmeadow, Mass. Hampshire County ministers known to have owned slaves: Ebenezer Devotion of Suffield was given £20 in 1726 to purchase a slave; Noah Merrick of Wilbraham had three (Oronoke, Scipio, and Luke); Stephen Williams, in his diary, mentions Stanford, Saunders, Cato, Tom, Phillis, Scipio, and
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Tobiah (bap. 1747); Nehemiah Bull of Westfield owned Phillis from 1732 to 1741; David Parsons of Amherst owned Pompey, who was married in 1748 and joined the church in 1758; and Robert Breck of Springfield had Sylvia (1774). Catalog File, “Slavery,” Suffield and Wilbraham, Connecticut Valley Historical Museum Library, Springfield, Massachusetts; Joseph Carvalho, Black Families in Hampden County, Massachusetts, 1650–1855 (Westfield, Mass., 1984), 144, 154–155, 158, 160.


27. Besides Venus, the only other of Edwards’s slaves for whom we have purchase information are Joseph and Sue, obtained from Hezekiah Griswold of Windsor, Connecticut. William Fowler, “The Historical Status of the Negro in Connecticut,” Historical Magazine, 3d ser., vol. 3 (1874): 16. On Leah’s church membership, see below, n. 48.

28. Edwards’s desk is in Jonathan Edwards College, Yale University; a photograph of it is the frontispiece to vol. 13 of WJE and also appears in Jon Butler, Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776 (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 132.

29. I base my dating of the manuscript on ink and handwriting comparisons between the notes on slavery, dated sermons and letters, and notebook entries, all found at the Beinecke Library. I have also found some content parallels. Entry no. 873 of the “Miscellanies” (Edwards’s private theological notebooks), written during the summer of 1741 (certainly before October), has language similar to the notes in which Edwards mentions that a “precise example of former times is not a rule . . . according to the different times and circumstances of the church.” In addition, in the MS Sermon on Acts 17:30, dated August 1741, Edwards states that the Jews of Jesus’ day “had very great and loud calls of the word of God. Before, their ignorance was winked at,” which echoes the point in the notes about God’s “winking at” the early Christians’ ignorance. Finally, a piece of circumstantial evidence for dating is that the deleted notes on one side of one of the sheets used to draft the notes on slavery pertains to a crisis in his father’s church that ended in the summer of 1741, after which Edwards may have felt free to use the other side of the sheet.
See Roger Wolcott, “A Narrative of the Troubles in the Second Church in Windsor, from the Year 1735 to the Year 1741,” Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Conn.

30. WJE, 4:153.


33. Doolittle had brought Abijah Prince, born about 1706, from Wallingford. I am grateful to Kevin Sweeney of Amherst College and David Proper, former librarian of Historic Deerfield, for alerting me to the issue of slave owning in the Doolittle case. For the documents enumerating the charges against Doolittle, see Edwards Collection, f. 1730–1739.5 and f. 1741.5, Andover Newton Theological School. See also George Sheldon, “Negro Slavery in Old Deerfield,” New England Magazine 8 (1893): 20; Kevin M. Sweeney, “River Gods and Related Minor Deities: The Williams Family and the Connecticut River Valley, 1637–1790” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1986); and David R. Proper, Lucy Terry Prince: Singer of History (Deerfield, Mass., 1997), 20.

34. One bill in his papers records receiving the handsome sum of £230 from the king for caring for “Canada soldiers.” Franklin B. Dexter, Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College (New York, 1885), 1:151. Also, one of the charges against Doolittle, in a memorandum drawn up by Eliezer Wright, protests “the use of the £100,” a sum allotted to Doolittle by the church or town. J. H. Temple and George Sheldon, A History of the Town of Northfield, Massachusetts (Albany, N.Y., 1875), 230.


36. The names of the disaffected appear in memoranda between them and Doolittle and in petitions presented to the Hampshire Association, now among Edwards’s papers at Andover Newton Theological School (see n. 33). Benjamin Wright was born in 1660 and died in 1743; Holton died in 1749; Mattoon’s dates are 1689–1767; and Eliezer Wright’s, 1668–1753. Other “opposers” included Jonathan Janes (1696–1776), whose parents and three siblings were killed by Indians at Pascomuck in 1704; Joseph Stebbins (1697–1782), who came to Northfield in 1726; Deacon Samuel Smith (1705–1799), a blacksmith who also came to Northfield in 1726; Capt. Daniel Shattuck (1692–1760), who settled in 1724 and built a fort on the outskirts of town; and the family of Theophilus Merriman, who was killed by Indians in 1723. Temple and Sheldon, A History of the Town of Northfield, 460, 475, 492, 534, 536, 541, 568–569; James R. Trumbull, “Northampton Genealogies,” typescript, p. 221, Forbes Library, Northampton; Herbert C. Parsons, A Puritan Outpost: A History of the Town and People of Northfield, Massachusetts (New York, 1937), 111, 125.

37. Edwards made arguments similar to those set out by Samuel Sewall in The Selling of Joseph and The Athenian Oracle and by the writer of “A Letter to the Gentlemen
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Merchants in the Guinea Trade,” *Gentlemen’s Magazine* 10 (1740): 314. The letter, in response to the objection that if “you deal in Linnen Checks, or Cotton Goods, or any thing else sent abroad, . . . you are an Encourager of the Guinea Trade,” stated that they might as well object to drinking wine or ale merely because some few people abuse them. This strategy compares to Edwards’s reductio ad absurdum regarding abstaining from “eating and drinking” because they “tend to sin.” Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade,” 832. We know from his “Catalogue of Reading” (L. 6v.) that Edwards read publications such as *The London Magazine* going back to 1736 (Beinecke Library). On economic turmoil and criticisms of slave ownership, → James J. Allegro, “Increasing and Strengthening the Country’: Law Politics, and the Antislavery Movement in Early-Eighteenth Massachusetts Bay,” *The New England Quarterly* 75 (2002): 5–11.

38. For a contemporary account of the trials and executions, in which 13 Africans were burned at the stake and 16 more, along with 4 Englishmen, hanged, see Daniel Horsmanden, *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for burning the city of New-York in America, and Murdering the Inhabitants* (New York, 1744). Boston newspapers carried regular updates of the New York trials. See issues of the *Boston Weekly News-Letter* from May 7 to Oct. 1 and of the *Boston Gazette* from May 4 to Aug. 24 postscript.

39. See Cotton’s letter to Cadwalader Colden, which was published anonymously in the *Boston News-letter*, in “Account of the Cotton Family, 1727–1756,” MS AM1165, 320–24, Houghton Library, Harvard University. (I am indebted to Douglas Winiarski of the University of Richmond for telling me about this letter and for supplying me with his transcript of it.)


41. *Boston Gazette*, Sept. 28–Oct. 5, 1741. The boatswain, belonging to John Garneir, and Kate, belonging to Francis Varambaut, were accused of setting fire to the home of a Mrs. Snowden, with the intention of burning the town. See Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 161.

42. Allegro, “Increasing and Strengthening the Country,’” 13.

43. A tabulation of the 62 Northfield landholders taken in 1732 reveals that average acreage was 262, with 42 individuals each owning less than 300 acres. Doolittle had the seventh largest holdings, totaling 636 acres. Only one of his opposers, Eliezer Wright, had more land (702 acres); the remainder were middling sorts, having from 300 to 500 acres. Field, however, owned 981 acres, as well as a slave named Caesar. Temple and Sheldon, *A History of the Town of Northfield*, 221, 104.


45. “Extract of a letter from a British Planter . . . to his Friend still residing on his


49. Of the 11 blacks baptized by Edwards in Northampton from 1735 to 1741, 2 did not become full members, 2 others apparently died in infancy, and 7 went on to become full members. Of the 10 admitted to full membership, 1 joined in 1728; 2 in 1729; 6, including Leah, another of Edwards’s slaves, in 1736; and 1 after 1740. MS Northampton Church Records, Book 1, First Church, Northampton. On admission of blacks into churches during the Great Awakening, see William D. Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture* (Amherst, Mass., 1988), 69–75. Churches in other parts of Massachusetts evidence the same trend as Northampton. For example, the Reading church, founded in 1648, did not admit its first black to membership until 1736, and from that date until 1744 admitted 13, with a significant drop-off thereafter; the Revere Church did not baptize or admit blacks until 1744–1745, with no more appearing through the next quarter century. “Church Records of the Old Town of Reading,” typescript, Reading Public Library; MS, “Rumny-marish Church-book, 1715,” New England Historical and Genealogical Society, Boston, Mass.


53. For example, in a MS sermon on Matt. 7:13–14 (Beinecke Library) preached in January 1751, Edwards asserted the doctrine that “All mankind of all nations, white and black, young and old, are going in one or the other of these paths, either in the way that leads to life or the way that leads to destruction.” On “degrees of glory,” see *WJE*, 13:437–439, 467–468, 482, and 19:609–627.

54. If Prince was converted during the Connecticut Valley revivals, the moral urgency
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of his fellow evangelicals to come to his aid would only have been stronger. The fact that Lucy Terry, Prince's wife, was admitted to the Deerfield church during the Great Awakening and that Lemuel Haynes delivered her funeral oration suggests that she and possibly her husband were—ironically for the liberal Doolittle—adherents of the Edwardsean New Divinity. Proper, Lucy Terry Prince, 15, 36.


56. See n. 33.

57. See A Letter to the Author of the Pamphlet Called An Answer to the Hampshire Narrative, in WJE, 12:91–163, and 12:581, on the case of Reverend Grindall Rawson, for which JE was the scribe and states that he has "the original papers now by me."


59. See above, n. 24.

60. For a closer examination of key passages in the draft, see Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 826–829.

61. Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 831. On Edwards's defense of slavery, see his MS “Miscellaneous Observations on the Holy Scriptures” (otherwise known as the “Blank Bible” or “Interleaved Bible,” in Beinecke Library) on II Peter 2:19, which reads, “For of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought into bondage.” In this verse, Edwards observed, “The Apostle alludes to the law of nations, by which ‘tis lawful to make slaves of those that are overcome and taken in war.”


63. See Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," 827n., for a sample of the literature on this topic.


65. WJE, 9:480.

67. On these and other late-17th- and early-18th-century figures involved in debating slavery, see Rosalind J. Beiler, “The Transatlantic World of Caspar Wistar: From Germany to America in the Eighteenth Century” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1994); and Peterson, “The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Anti-Slavery, and the Protestant International, 1689-1733.” For Edwards's admiration for Francke, see his letter to Josiah Willard, June 1, 1740, and for his negative opinion of Wesley and Zinzendorf (whose followers Edwards lumped together as guilty of the same “follies”), see Edwards to John Erskine, July 5, 1750, in WJE, 16:83, 349.


70. Note on Job 31:13–14, “Blank Bible,” Beinecke Library. The entry, judging from ink and handwriting, was probably written in the early 1730s, around the time he acquired Venus. See also the following note, on Job 31:15, in which Edwards essentially expands on the same point, adding, “We are made of the same human race, and [God] has given us the same human nature, which more clearly shows the reason why Job should not despise and abuse his servant. In these two things are contained the most forceable reasons against the master’s abuse of his servant, viz. that both have one Maker, and that their Maker made ‘em alike or with the same nature.”


74. WJE, 10:619, 621.


76. MS Sermon on Rev. 7:1–2, Feb. 26, 1741, Beinecke Library.

77. There is no mention of Prince in Doolittle’s will (Northampton, Mass., Registry of Probate Books, v. 7, 1745–1752, 182, Connecticut Valley Historical Museum) or inventory of his estate (pp. 231–232), and he is listed among the proprietors of Northfield common lands beginning in 1751. Prince lived and worked in Deerfield for some time, until his wife was freed; the two were in Guilford, Vermont, by 1785. Proper, Lucy Terry Prince, 20, 25.

78. See Proper, Lucy Terry Prince, 20–21. Prince is listed on a Deerfield military roll from 1748 to 1749. George Sheldon, A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts (Deer-
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field, Mass., 1896), 1:567.
79. As if finally to reveal his religious sentiments, Doolittle published an anti-revival treatise in 1743 entitled *An Enquiry into Enthusiasm.*
81. Electa F. Jones, *Stockbridge, Past and Present; or, Records of an Old Mission Station* (Springfield, Mass., 1854), 238 (I am grateful to Ava Chamberlain for providing this reference). MS “Records of the Church of Christ in Stockbridge, from June 1759 until August 1819, taken primarily from manuscripts left by Dr. Stephen West,” p. 18, Stockbridge Library Association, Stockbridge, Mass., and *An Historical Sketch of the Congregational Church in Stockbridge* (Stockbridge, Mass., 1874), 26, list “Rose, wife of Joab Binney, colored,” as having joined the church in 1771. She outlived Joab, who died c. 1783, and apparently married a second time to a man named Salter. Dr. Stephen West, Edwards’s successor at Stockbridge, published an account of what is reputed to be Rose’s spiritual experience in *The Theological Magazine* of 1797, which is reproduced in the Appendix, above. There is, however, some contradictory evidence as to the year of her death: West, who never gives the name of his subject, states that she died before his published account, but the list of deaths in the Stockbridge, Mass., Congregational Church Records, vol. 1, p. 177, records Rose Salter as dying in 1822 at the age of 78. Barbara Allen of the Stockbridge Library Association assisted me in finding information about Joab, Rose, and Titus. Emilie S. Piper of the Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, shared her extensive research on African Americans in colonial western Massachusetts and kindly supplied me with copies of original documents.
84. William Allen, *An Address Delivered at Northampton, Mass., ... in Commemoration of the Close of the Second Century Since the Settlement of the Town* (Northampton, Mass., 1855), 52, states that Titus was Joab and Rose’s son, though he also incorrectly states that Rose was Edward’s first slave. Titus, later freed by the Edwards’s oldest son Timothy, served in the Revolution in 1780, purchased land in Lenox in 1772 and 1784 and in Pittsfield in 1806, and may have been given land by Timothy Edwards in Tioga County, New York, around 1800. Allen, *An Address,* 52; Grantee Index, 1761–1830, Middle District, Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, Mass.; *Free Black Heads of Households in the New York State Federal Census, 1790–1830* (Detroit, Mich., 1981), 264; Knurw Collection, v. 33, p. 341, Berkshire Athenaeum.
He apparently died in 1822 in Pittsfield between the ages of 65 and 70. Pittsfield Church Records, Berkshire Athenaeum. Emilie S. Piper researched and provided these references.


87. I have found no instance in which New Divinity figures who espoused immediate emancipation publicly raised the issue that Edwards had owned slaves. A likely, apologetic allusion can be found in Jonathan Edwards, Jr.’s 1791 address, *Injustice and Impolity of the Slave Trade, and of Slavery*, in which he asserts that slavery was a greater crime than “fornication, theft or robbery,” which “seems to bear hardly [i.e. reflect badly] on the characters of our pious fathers, who held slaves. But they did it ignorantly and in unbelief of the truth. . . . As to domestic slavery our fathers lived in a time of ignorance which God winked at; but now he commandeth all men everywhere to repent of this wickedness, and to break off this sin by righteousness, and this iniquity by shewing mercy to the poor, if it may be a lengthening out of their tranquility.” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, D.D.* (1842; New York, 1987), 2:91.


89. In *Stockbridge, Past and Present*, Electa F. Jones provided the only background for the document: “After the death of President Edwards, if not before, Joab and his wife settled in the South part of the town, where he labored as a blacksmith. He was a man of good sense and steady, christian deportment. After the birth and death of several infants, Rose came to Dr. West to request admission to the church, thinking that God had slain her children in anger, because of her neglect of this duty. The instructions of Dr. West upon the subject, not only led her to see her unfitness for church membership, but the real alienation of her heart from God, and were blessed to her conversion. She united with the church, and ever after adorned her profession. After her death, Dr. West published an account of her christian life and experience in the ‘Theological Magazine’” (238). Rose was admitted to the Stockbridge church in 1771, so West’s account was more than two decades old by the time he
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published it.


91. From c. 1761 to 1771, Rose and Joab Binney had five daughters baptised at Stockbridge, all of whom but one, Tamar, died in infancy. “Records of the Church of Christ in Stockbridge,” 68. A sixth daughter, Clamira, is recorded as having been baptised in 1782. [Stephen West], MS, “Records of the Church in Stockbridge from 1776 until 1819,” p. 6, Stockbridge Library Association. Both Tamar and Clamira, as well as their mother Rose, are mentioned in Joab’s will, dated Nov. 10, 1783. Local History Department, Berkshire Athenaeum, copy courtesy of Emilie S. Piper.