1995

The Primus Papers: An Introduction to Hartford's Nineteenth Century Black Community

Barbara J. Beeching

Trinity College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/hartford_papers

Part of the Race and Ethnicity Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/hartford_papers/8
TRINITY COLLEGE

Thesis

THE PRIMUS PAPERS: AN INTRODUCTION
TO HARTFORD’S NINETEENTH CENTURY BLACK COMMUNITY

Submitted by

Barbara Jean Beeching
(B.J. University of Missouri, 1950)

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
1995

Unauthorized reproduction prohibited by copyright law
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

CHAPTER I. BLACK HARTFORD IN 1860. .............................. 7

The City of Hartford
  Background on Hartford's Black Community
    Beginnings
      Black Governors
      Black Churches
      Education
      Issues
  Demographics of Black Hartford
    Real Estate Ownership
    Black Households
    Residency Patterns
    Occupations

CHAPTER II. ADDIE BROWN ................................................. 53

  Addie and Rebecca
  Boarding Out and Living In
  Addie's Work Life
  Addie's Style
  Addie's Social Life
    Church-Going
    Addie's Views
    Color and Class
  A Last Look at Addie

CHAPTER III. NELSON ...................................................... 88

  A Life in Art
    Nelson in Boston
    Nelson and The Family Circle
    Nelson's Appetite
    Hartford at a Distance
    Nelson's Views
    Beyond the Letters
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Native and Foreign Population in Hartford 1860 ................. 10
2. Population of Selected Cities 1860 .................................. 35
3. Hartford Non-White Population by Age and Sex. ............... 36
5. Black Households, Hartford 1860 Census ......................... 44
6. Hartford Population by Wards ...................................... 47
7. Occupations of Blacks in Hartford ............................... 49

MAP

Black Residential Distribution in Hartford 1860 ........ following p. 48
INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston objected to the "arrogance of whites assuming that black lives are only defense reactions to white actions."

In 1884 when Hartford's "most noted black citizen" Holdridge Primus died, his estate was valued at $3,924. His major holding was a two-story frame house on a 41-foot lot on Wadsworth Street. The probate inventory lists furnishings typical of a middle-class home: in the parlor, a "carpet, arm chair, 5 small chairs, 10 pictures, a looking glass, window shades, a piano and stool, and books." The sitting room had a "carpet and a rug, book case, spring chair, office chair, 3 cane chairs, a stove, a bookcase, glass, clock, curtains." Similar listings were given for a sewing room, front and back chambers, and a hall room. There were silver teaspoons, plated knives and forks, blankets, napkins, 12 sheets, pillows, a table and extension table. Although no savings were listed, the estate included a lot in Branford and two outstanding notes, representing loans to a son-in-law and a nephew.

For a non-professional, uneducated black man in 1860, Holdridge Primus had done extraordinarily well for himself and his family. One of the aims of this paper will be to account for this prosperity and examine the life of the

---


family that achieved it.

Reportedly born in Guilford, Holdridge Primus came to Hartford and worked “in his earlier days” for the family of William Ellsworth, who was later Governor of the state. Primus was supposedly taken along to Washington when Ellsworth served in Congress, 1829 to 1833. If the census is correct that he was 43 in 1860, he was in Hartford earning his living by the time he was 12 years old.

For most of his working life, some 47 years, Primus was employed as porter in a grocery firm successively known as Nichols and Co., Humphrey and Seyms, and Seyms and Co. Active in church affairs and an officer of the black Masons, he was widely known among black and white citizens as a genial and dependable friend and a pillar of church and community.3 The most remarkable adventure of his life was a trip to California in 1849 with John Warburton’s Hartford-based mining and trading company. Young Mr. Humphrey, whose father was an owner of Humphrey and Seyms, was allowed to join the expedition only, we are told, because Holdridge Primus went with him. Accompanying the party as company cook, Primus left his wife and four small children at home.

Newspaper accounts differ as to the success of the venture, but eventually all returned to Hartford and resumed their former lives. Primus was said to have turned down the opportunity to open his own restaurant in

---
California when the mining company disbanded. Instead he went to work for the Adams express company in Sacramento, and upon leaving was awarded a gold watch, chain, and medal in recognition of faithful service. He must have been an outstanding employee to merit such a tribute in just three years' time.

Mehitable Primus, his wife, enjoyed a place of importance in the community in her own right. She was a granddaughter of Jeremiah Jacobs, according to a newspaper account the patriarch of the first family of blacks to settle in Hartford.

Mehitable worked at home as a dressmaker, a skilled occupation. From information in the letters it appears that she in effect ran a sewing business, handing on jobs to other women in addition to the work she did herself. She and Holdridge also provided an informal employment service, matching employers looking for domestics or seamstresses, with young black women who wanted work.

In the 1860s, the period covered by this study, the Primuses' eldest

---

4Biographical information on Holdridge Primus from obituaries in the Hartford Evening Post May 9, 1884, p. 4 col. 2; and an unidentified clipping in the Connecticut Historical Society Mary Morris Scrapbook V.3 p. 53; and “Colored People,” Courant, Oct. 24, 1915.

5“Colored People,” Courant Oct. 24, 1915. I interpret the statement in the article to mean the first free Black family to choose to settle in Hartford. Records of the First Church and other documents show blacks as slaves in Hartford as early as 1639.

6Mrs. Jacob Newcomb, Waterbury, to Mrs. Primus, Hartford, July 15, 1867, letter “looking for a girl 13 or 14 to take care of baby and wash dishes for $1 a week.” Wants the girl for a year. “I have had Irish girls but prefer colored if I can get a good one,” Primus Papers, CHS. Also references in Rebecca's letters to her mother placing Southern girls in jobs in Hartford: Feb. 23, 1867; May 11, 1867; June 1, 1867. The Evening Post obituary attributes this service to Holdridge.
child, Rebecca, taught school, although no information is available on where she taught. In 1865, at the age of 30, she volunteered in response to a call for teachers, and went to Royal Oak, Maryland, where she founded a school under the auspices of the Freedmen's Aid Society. She conducted day and evening classes for as many as 75 students, and provided Sunday School instruction as well.

Nelson, the family's only son, was six years younger than Rebecca. In 1864 he married and moved to Boston to pursue a career as a portrait artist. Two other daughters, Henrietta and Isabel, lived in Hartford during the 1860s, working at various jobs-mostly sewing and domestic service.

The Primus family, to their lasting credit, preserved a box of family documents now available on microfilm at the Connecticut Historical Society. The papers include letters written in the 1860s by Rebecca, Nelson, and Addie Brown, a lively young woman from New York City who as Rebecca's confidante became virtually a member of the Primus family.

The great value of the Primus Papers is in admitting us to the writers' lives. Public documents provide facts about Holdridge Primus, but Addie Brown can show us the man, waiting at the railroad station on Asylum Street in the January cold, watching passengers climb down off the train, and turning away disappointed when his wife and daughter do not appear.7 The City Directory makes clear that the Primuses were members of the Talcott Street Congregational church, but Rebecca spells out the nature of her

---

7Addie Brown to Rebecca Primus Jan. 9, 1867; In her letter of Jan. 14, Addie reports that they have yet to arrive.
religious faith: “I do not think the people ought to be alarmed for my safety here . . . I hope they'll all lay aside their fears and feel that I am in the hands of the same Supreme Being that has the charge of us all everywhere.”

In another vignette we see Nelson, caught between the degradation inflicted by the white world and the need for money. He takes the high road: “the man that I was painting the house for did not amount to much. he thought I was going to work for nothing because I were colored. We could not come to terms, in consequence we parted.”

One purpose of this study is to discover the nature of Hartford's black community in the 1860s, using both quantitative and non-quantitative data. I have begun with a sketch of the city, and then focused specifically on its black residents. The U.S. Census of 1860 is the basis of the description, with additional information from city directories, newspapers, land and probate records.

Then, taking each of the Primus letter-writers in turn, I have examined three views of the Hartford community, and tried to note where they confirm, expand, and illuminate data from other sources.

The information available both in public and private documents concerns middle class blacks and their leaders. No black upper class existed, no blacks achieved wealth comparable to that of Samuel Colt or the Cheney

---

8Rebecca Primus to family at home Dec. 1, 1866, Primus Papers CHS.
9Nelson Primus to family at home Oct. 27, 1867, Primus Papers CHS.
Brothers.

The *Primus* letters name community leaders, show how they interacted, what was important to them, how they viewed their world, and how they spent their days. Because the only male correspondent, Nelson, is not living or writing at home, Hartford’s black male society is not elucidated as fully as the female. And because letter writers take much for granted when writing to close friends and family members, it has been necessary to guess at some meanings.

I have tried to stick close to the text in evaluating the material, and have drawn comparisons with black communities in other urban centers, or with the comparable white population where possible.

The *Primus* letters portray a busy, engaged, and larger than expected middle class society. In spite of rivalries and occasional disagreements, the impression is of a hopeful, aware, and highly civil community, its sights on justice, equality, franchise, and full citizenship.

But beyond sociology, the most striking quality of the letters, as I stated above, is their startling authenticity. They give us the privilege of acquaintance with real people living real lives.
CHAPTER I
BLACK HARTFORD IN 1860

The City of Hartford

Then as now dwarfed by Boston to the north and New York to the south, Hartford in 1860 nevertheless believed itself a city destined to expand and flourish, a cultivated, forward-looking urban center. Insurance, manufacturing, and transportation were providing jobs and livelihood for a fast-growing population. The city boundaries, expanded in 1859, encompassed an area three and a half miles in length and two miles east to west along the banks of the Connecticut River, which was still a major avenue for trade and travel. Some farms remained within the city limits, but land was increasingly given over to homes and factories, and in the older areas, slums.

Because of the proddings of the city’s esteemed leader Horace Bushnell, in the 1860s the dumps, shanties and pigsties along the Park River downtown would be replaced by the “spacious ornamental ground” of Bushnell Park, one of the nation’s earliest planned public urban parks.1

The 1860 Hartford City Directory listed 15 insurance companies, 18 banks, 16 printers, six book publishers, 18 hotels. Colonel Samuel Colt’s

---
arms factory was prospering on the banks of the Connecticut River. Inventor of the “gun that won the west” Colt is also credited with advancing such concepts as ‘interchangeable parts, the production line, and incentive compensation.’ His carefully designed manufacturing plant was protected from flooding by a dike planted with willow trees to stabilize the earthworks. The quintessential Yankee, Colt had recruited German craftsmen to make furniture of the willow tree branches. His company housing included several city blocks of “Swiss Chalet” houses for these transplanted natives of Potsdam. His own estate, Armsmear, was set in a baronial parkland, complete with picturesque vistas and wild animals.

Across town on Rifle Lane, now Capitol Avenue, Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company spread over several city blocks. The Cheney Brothers had added a Hartford operation to its Manchester silk weaving venture, and in the spirit of the times the entrepreneur James Goodwin, with $247,000 in real estate holdings and $800,000 in personal property, announced his occupation to the 1860 census taker as ‘capitalist.”

A sampling of the landmarks of that time remain today in downtown Hartford: the stone arch bridge that spanned the Park River near its mouth has been incorporated into the public library building, and now spans the Conlon Highway. Charles Bulfinch’s State House on Main Street was sixty-four years old in 1860; the Wadsworth Atheneum eighteen, the Stackpole

---

2Data on listings from Geer’s Hartford City Directory 1860-61; industrial history from Gregory E. Andrews and David F. Ransom, Structures and Styles: Guided Tours of Hartford Architecture (Hartford, Conn.; CHS and Connecticut Architecture Foundation, 1988) p.52 (on Samuel Colt) and p.129 (Sharps Rifles).
Moore Tryon Building on Asylum Street just five. Center Church, established by city founder Thomas Hooker, had been rebuilt in 1807 with baroque improvements on the puritan meeting house model. In Gothic Revival contrast, Christ Church Cathedral stood a few blocks north. The Butler-McCook homestead on Main Street, built in 1792, is today's lone surviving private home downtown. The garden behind the house was laid out in 1865 by Jacob Weidenmann, designer and superintendent of Bushnell Park. In 1860 more stately mansions were under construction on Washington Street, and Hartford's well-to-do were looking at sites still farther out, seeking spacious grounds, exclusivity and respite from an increasingly crowded downtown.3

The city prided itself on its diverse and liberal cultural life. Concerts, lectures, plays, operas, dance recitals, and performances by magicians and jugglers were presented in half a dozen halls and auditoriums. The city's churches scheduled speakers on a range of issues, including some that were wholly secular. Clubs were formed by devotees of books, sailing, gardening, German and French culture.

Among Hartford's assets was a splendid system of public transit. Horse trolleys ran from State Street to the railway station, out Main Street to North Cemetery, to Wethersfield and West Hartford, across the river to East Hartford and beyond. Stages made frequent—in some cases daily—runs to a dozen surrounding towns. Two rail lines served the city: the Hartford

---

3Andrews and Ransom: data on downtown Hartford buildings 6, 7, 8, 17; 23; on residential development 207-208.
New Haven and Springfield Rail Road, and the Hartford Providence and Fishkill, giving access to destinations throughout the East.

The Connecticut River still churned with passenger and freight lines. The steamboats Granite State and the City of Hartford departed three times a week for New York, with others serving Greenport and Sag Harbor. Schooners carried passengers to Boston, Fall River and Providence, to Philadelphia, New York, and Elizabethtown, with stops at Middletown, East Haddam, and Saybrook.

Figure 1.

NATIVE AND FOREIGN POPULATION IN HARTFORD IN 1860

Total Hartford Population: 29,154

Foreign-born 8,775

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>6,432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German States</td>
<td>1,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British America</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hartford's population had grown along with its expectations. In ten years the number of city residents more than doubled, from 13,555 in 1850 to 29,154 in 1860. More than half the newcomers, 56 percent, were immigrants. Looked at another way, 30 percent-close to a third-of

---

Hartford’s inhabitants in 1860 were foreign-born. (See Fig. 1.) The newcomers stretched the resources of the city, as well as the patience of longtime residents. Immigrants, particularly the Irish, were viewed with contempt. However great the need for their hands and energies, the newcomers were not immediately welcomed into American society.

The above is the traditional view of nineteenth century Hartford, typically ending with the note that the advances of industry and the optimism of the age were somewhat tempered by problems of rapid growth and a volatile economy.

What has been omitted in such accounts is the concurrent history of Hartford’s black residents. This paper attempts to fill that gap. It is particularly fitting to do so for the decade of the 1860s because at that time, black and white interests seemed to converge in the struggle over the future of slavery and the preservation of the Union.

**Background on Hartford’s Black Community**

Government canvassers in Hartford entered Henrietta Primus twice in the 1860 census. She is listed, age 21, no occupation given, in the household of her father, Holdridge. She is also listed in another part of town as a 20-year-old “domestic” in the household of Henry Ferre, a white man and “seed grower.”

---

5Mr. Fen-e’s seed company, now Comstock-Ferre, operates still, in the neighboring town of Wethersfield.
This bit of confusion serves as a caution to researchers, but it also provides clues to the social and economic milieu Henrietta inhabited. Although she belonged to a prominent and respected family, for a black woman this was not enough to provide a life of ease, or even a job above servile status.

**Beginnings**

The role of New England colonial maritime interests in the so-called triangle trade dictated that as early as the seventeenth century some of the human cargo would find its way to the homes of New London, Middletown, and Hartford. In fact, slavery was common if not widespread in Hartford’s early history.6 The historian Lorenzo Greene states that “on the eve of the Revolutionary War, Connecticut contained more Negroes than any other New England Colony.”7 The Reverend Thomas Hooker, Amos Bull, Jesse Boot, Governor Joseph Talcott, Daniel Wadsworth, and George Wyllys, longtime Secretary of the State, were among the town’s eighteenth century slaveholders.

When a Hartford master of that era took his slave to church to be baptized, he publicly “ingaged to bring her [or him] up in the Christian faith.” On this basis, some slaves were taught to read the Bible, encouraged to attend church, and partake, from the gallery, in services. The struggle of

---

6 The First Census (1790) shows that blacks made up 2.3 percent of the state population and that 3.8 percent of Connecticut families owned slaves.

conscience over whether a converted slave could be held in bondage was troublesome enough, ironically, to generate sermons specifically directed at slaves, stressing their duty to be submissive to their masters. The issue, though philosophical, was a real one in the eighteenth century, when freedom became a burning issue. But the massive force of custom combined with reluctance to part with "legal property," and conscience lost out. Slavery lasted into the nineteenth century in Connecticut.

Unlike their Southern counterparts, many of whom maintained large plantations, Northern slaveholders tended to have only one or two slaves. Unlike plantation owners, northern masters worked side by side with their slaves, particularly on farms, performing the same kinds of work. In some cases there appeared to be confusion about the difference in status of slaves and servants: in a famous passage Madam Knight complained of black slaves eating at the same table from the same dish as their owners.8

Because virtually all blacks were brought to this country as slaves, they came to be viewed exclusively as menial workers. Classified as "property" they were denied their humanity.

The First U.S. Census in 1790 recorded householders by name, numbers

---

8 In the Kingsbury Negro Census of Hartford 1805, Manuscript, in the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center Library, Hartford, the "former master" and "present master" of each individual were listed. In many cases the "former master" had been an owner; the "present master" was an employer, but the terminology was the same. Madam Knight wrote, "... and they generally lived very well and comfortably in their families. But too indulgent (especially ye farmers) to their slaves: suffering too great familiarity from them, permitting ym to sit at table and eat with them, (as they say to save time,) and into the dish goes the black hoof as freely as the white hand." From The Journal of Madam Knight, Sarah Kemble Knight (Boston: David R. Godine, 1972. Copyright 1971 Massachusetts Historical Society), 20.
of free white males 16 years and upward; free white males under 16 years; and free white females without age distinction. Blacks and Indians were entered simply as Others, without data. The totals for Hartford were 79 Free Others and 47 Slaves, a total of 126.

Almost certainly blacks were underreported. The 1800 Census records 149 Free Blacks and Others and 18 slaves, a total of 167. According to the locally instituted Kingsbury Negro Census, only five years later, in 1805, there were 238 blacks in Hartford. Only a portion of the Kingsbury manuscript survives. It contains 107 individuals; of these 69 claim no “present master,” and are unquestionably free.9 Because the rest of the document has been lost, no accurate slave/free count is available, only the total entered on the cover sheet.

Blacks in Connecticut had some rights in law, but nothing approaching equality. The longterm effect was the creation of "caste."10 De Tocqueville observed,

If I were called upon to predict the future, I should say that the abolition of slavery in the South will, in the common course of things, increase the

---

9The Kingsbury document provides names not found in the Census. Furthermore, it gives Age, Former Master, Former Place of Abode, Length of Residence in Hartford, Name of Present Master, and a final column headed “Character.” It is difficult to interpret the data. For example, some individuals give no former master but are listed as “Free” in that column (possibly they were born free), but they do name a “present” master. Master seems to mean either owner or employer.

repugnance of the white population for the blacks. I base this opinion upon the analogous observation I have already made in the North. I have remarked that the white inhabitants of the North avoid the Negroes with increasing care in proportion as the legal barriers of separation are removed by the legislature.\footnote{de Tocqueville, I, 375. My emphasis.}

As usual, de Tocqueville was right, and as time went by, another of his observations was also confirmed:

In the North everything facilitated the emancipation of the slaves, and slavery was abolished without rendering the free Negroes formidable, since their number was too small for them ever to claim their rights.\footnote{De Tocqueville, I, 378.}

Those who are ostracized, however, have a powerful issue to rally around. Blacks may not have demanded their rights, but neither did they renounce their claims. As we will see, they found ways to work for the causes of abolition and universal suffrage.

Black Governors

As early as 1730, black citizens held mock elections in Connecticut and elsewhere in New England. Imitating or perhaps parodying white elections, these involved members of the black community--slaves for the most part--casting votes for one of their number, to be named "Governor" and accorded a position of honor. Ceremonies typically included a parade featuring finery, horses and carriages lent by the winning candidate's master, and a banquet.
in a public hall, apparently funded by the master of the newly-elected “Governor.” Accounts of Black Governors in Hartford allude to the possibility that they wielded some real power, appointing “Sheriffs” and “Justices of the Peace” to assist them, and in at least one case determining or administering punishment to miscreants. As fanciful as some accounts appear to be, the existence of several Black Governors is confirmed in census and other documents. These include Peleg Nott, Neptune, and Boston, who was also known by his master’s name, Nichols.

Whether these elections were, as authors have variously suggested, preparation for eventual citizenship, spoofs of the ways of the white world, or simply a means of allowing a holiday for the servants, remains a question. But the events required planning and organization, a certain level of communication in the black community, and some sophistication as well—in short, a community. They also required the acquiescence of the whites.

According to Stuart the custom began before the American Revolution and lasted “nearly to 1820 and perhaps a little later.” The longevity of the custom meant that Connecticut and Hartford blacks had eighty to a hundred years to hone communal skills.

Black elections mirrored the situation of African Americans in early Hartford: a measure of freedom and even license was afforded by the whites,

---

but separation of the races was an ironclad given.

Black Churches

Whenever [black] have[ been part of the Congregational tradition, they're basically middle class.14

Boston historians Horton and Horton point out that in order to find solace in Christianity, black preachers and congregations had to shape its message to fit their own experience. Sermons on submission to one's master did not draw either slaves or freedmen into church in large numbers. What did appeal to them was identification with Old Testament Hebrews as people oppressed by a paternalistic society.15 By the beginning of the nineteenth century, many blacks were Christians and church goers.

Leonard Curry found that “American blacks had first to perceive the existence of their ethnic community and then establish and foster the black church as an instrument of further community development.” 16 In 1819 a group of Hartford blacks expressed that sense of community by founding their own society for worship. A “Brief Historical Sketch” of the Talcott


Street Church, written in 1944, gives the following account:

This Church had its beginning in November 1819 when the people of colour, tiring of the custom of being assigned seats in the galleries of the white churches, began to worship by themselves. They assembled on the Sabbath in the Conference Room of the First Church of Christ (Center Congregational) with the Rev. Asa Goldsbrough, a person of colour and of the Baptist persuasion serving them as Preacher.17

In the following year at the request of black citizens a separate Sunday School was set up by the Hartford Sunday School Union. Subsequently the congregation held services in Sunday School rooms provided by the Union, and in 1826 constituted itself as the African Religious Society in order to seek formal church affiliation. It was, according to its historian, the third Negro Congregational Church in America. In studying black populations in fifteen urban centers (not including Hartford) up to 1850, Leonard Curry determined that Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian were the denominations most frequently chosen by emerging black congregations.

That Hartford blacks chose Congregationalism is an indication of their own identification with the New England white middle class culture around them.

For perspective, the first independent black churches in the North were in Philadelphia, where in 1794, Absalom Jones and a group of defectors from St. George Methodist Church founded the African Church of St. Thomas, Methodist. In the same year Richard Allen formed Philadelphia’s Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Boston’s first black church, founded in

17Mortgage Burning of the Talcott Street Congregational Church, Talcott and Market Streets, Hartford, Conn, Thursday, October 19, 1944, memorial booklet, 1.
1805, was Baptist. New Haven’s first black church, like Hartford’s, was Congregational, but was founded by a white man, Simeon S. Jocelyn, around 1820.18

The pamphlet outlining the early history of the Talcott Street church lists the first officers and building committee members. Some of the names recur in subsequent chapters of this study. They are Prince Swan, Moderator, Mason Freeman, Clerk, Joseph Cooke, Prince Swan, William Mason, Society committee. The Building Committee, appointed in the same year, consisted of Joseph Cooke, William Mason, Ishmael Magira, Prince Swan, and the following, all whites: Stephen Spencer, Cyprian Nichols, Joseph Gilbert, Deacon L. J. Brown, Deacon Seth Terry, and Rev. Mr. Davis. Other black members were Aaron Jacobs, T. W. Skeen, Primus Babcock, Jere Asher, Henry Foster, John Black&on, Thomas Wells, George Garrison, William W. Daniels, Edmund Swere, Windsor Gardener.19 The presence of white men on the list indicates amiability on the part of the white community towards the venture.

In 1833 the church was “duly organized and recognized as a Church of Christ according to the faith and order of the Congregational Churches.”20

From the beginning, Hartford’s black community was able to attract energetic and capable leaders. Two early Hartford churchmen, Amos Gerry

---

18Church history: Philadelphia from Curry, 176,177; Boston from Horton and Horton, 40; New Haven from Warner, 46.
19“Mortgage Burning of the Talcott Street Congregational Church,” 2, 3.
20Ibid., 3.
Beman and James W. C. Pennington, are examples. Both were educated under what Robert Austin Warner described as the “double influences” of “encouragement and opposition”--reflecting the wave of abolitionist sentiment abroad in the 1830s and the counter-current of agitation it aroused.21 Beman, whose career is described below in the section on Education, served during the 1830s as the first teacher in Hartford’s African School.

The Reverend J. W. C. Pennington became a national figure because of his dramatic history and his own dedication. Born a slave in Maryland, he escaped and made his way north by way of the Underground Railroad. In Hartford he was sheltered, according to the Talcott Street Church history, near the Hooker property on Forest Street. His freedom was later purchased by John Hooker, a brother-in-law of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Pennington obtained his education by sitting in on classes at Yale Seminary, having been refused formal admission. He became pastor of the Talcott Street Church in 1840, and his leadership kept Hartford in the forefront of developments in the Abolitionist and human rights movements for the next ten years.22

A meeting held during his ministry in Hartford sent the first missionaries to Africa, and more importantly, resulted in the formation of the American Missionary Society. Pennington himself made three trips to

---


22"Mortgage Burning of the Talcott Street Church," 3.
Europe in the 1840s. His reputation as a speaker and agitator for human rights was recognized by an honorary degree from Heidelberg University. A tireless activist, in 1847 he joined with Amos G. Beman in publishing a persuasive but unsuccessful plea that Connecticut extend to blacks the right to vote. Later, in the mid-1850s in New York, he worked for the Anti-Slavery Society, and joined in a protest against segregated seating for blacks on city omnibuses. His activism brought him national recognition, and during his pastorate at the Presbyterian Church in New York he was elected moderator of the Third Presbytery in New York.23

The first meeting house for the black congregation in Hartford, built with donations from both blacks and whites, was a plain brick building on Talcott Street. It served in all senses as a community center. School was held there, religious services and Sunday school, fairs, banquets, and public meetings. As early as 1833 Arnold Buffam, former president of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, spoke on slavery at the church, and in the years that followed the roster of speakers included Henry Highland Garnet and William Lloyd Garrison. The interest in abolition was more than superficial: thirty-two members of the congregation joined the Union Army during the Civil War.24

It may seem curious that a small community in a small city like

---

23Biographical information on Pennington at Yale and Heidelberg degree, Warner, 83; on American Anti-Slavery Society, Curry, 224; on New York omnibus protest, Curzy, 90; on New York Presbytery, Curry 188; other information from Talcott Street Church “Mortgage Burning” booklet, 3-4.

24“Mortgage Burning of the Talcott Street Church,” 4.
Hartford was able to attract leaders of national stature. The reason seems to be with the community itself, a cohesive group of active, literate, and interested men and women. David White points out that when Pennington came to Hartford in 1840, he found “that several members of his congregation were actively working in antislavery and self-improvement programs.” The best known was the tailor, William Saunders, “whose shop was near the church.” Saunders was the first agent in Connecticut for William Lloyd Garrison’s Liberator.25

James Mars was another Hartfordite who contributed to the energy and activism of the community. His autobiography, published in 1864, traces his life from slavery to freedom to protest.26 He came to Hartford from the northwestern section of the state as a free man. By the late 1830s he owned property in town, and became a Deacon of the Talcott Street Church. The Emancipator of June 12, 1840, reported a Convention of Colored People to secure equal rights, held at the Talcott Street Church May 8, 1840, with James Mars as chairman. Peter Johnson was Secretary, and others present included the Rev. Pennington, Henry Foster, Isaac Cross, Amos Beman, George L. Seymour, Alfred Plato and Luman Pelom.


26James Mars, Life of James Mars. a Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut (Hartford: Case Lockwood, 1864).
It is interesting to note that the Rev. Asa Goldsborough, first minister of the Talcott Street Congregation, was a Baptist. The Rev. Pennington held both Congregational and Presbyterian ministries. Differences over theology and religious style did occur but seemed to cause no animosity in Hartford's black community. Under the leadership of the Reverend Hosea Easton, who had been pastor of the Talcott Street Church, a group of members left in 1836 to establish the Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. This was just three years after the Congregational affiliation was formalized. According to the historian of the Faith Congregational Church, disagreement over style of worship caused the split. The dissenting group, she said, preferred freer, somewhat emotional services, while in keeping with their Puritan heritage, the congregationalists were more reserved. These disagreements did not prevent individual church members from attending one another's services and supporting one another's social and cultural functions.

Education

Because it was against the law in the South to teach slaves to read, and because of doubts among whites of the educability of blacks, literacy took on great symbolic significance for African Americans. Along with its substantive value and practical uses, it was a sign of ambition and proof of ability—it supported the quest for equality.

Naturally the black residents of Hartford sought education for their

---

27 Leslie Jackson, Historian, Faith Congregational Church, Hartford, CT, interview by author Nov. 29, 1994, Hartford. Mrs. Jackson prepared the historical materials for the 175th Anniversary of the founding of the (Talcott Street) church.
children. David White, writing on Hartford’s black schools between 1830 and 1868, quoted James Mars’ testimony that when he was young (he was born in 1790) his master kept him home to work on the farm so often that his schooling was “broken and unsteady.” White goes on to note that when blacks were allowed to attend district schools they met with prejudice and discrimination. He cites the experience of Erastus Boston, the only black student in the Rocky Hill district in 1817. Boston was made to sit apart from the white students, and when girls in the class merited punishment, they had to sit in the row with Erastus.28

Blacks in Hartford asked for their own separate school in 1830, according to White, who suggests that exclusion of blacks from white district schools, or ill-treatment of those who were allowed to attend, are possible causes.29

Hartford’s first black school was conducted in the church of the African Religious Society (later the Talcott Street Church) by Amos Gerry Beman, who represented the third generation of preachers and activists in his family.

Cesar Beman of Colchester, his grandfather, was a slave who gained freedom by joining the American forces in the Revolutionary War. His son, Jehiel Beman, shoemaker and later pastor of the A.M.E. Zion church in Middletown, was an active abolitionist who supported suffrage for blacks.


29David O. White, “Hartford’s African Schools” p. 47-53. White’s article is the source of the information and quotes in this discussion.
more open hiring practices, and the temperance movement. Jehiel was President of the Connecticut State Convention of Colored Men held in 1849 to urge that black men be given the vote.

Amos Gerry Beman, born in 1812, was the second of Jehiel’s seven children. He studied briefly at Wesleyan, and left Middletown because of a “threat of violence.” He spent four years teaching in Hartford’s black school, and in 1838 was one of nineteen Hartford delegates to a statewide Anti-Slavery Society Convention in New Haven. In 1839 he was named pastor of New Haven’s Temple Street Church, and later served as an officer in the statewide black Temperance Society founded in New Haven.

By 1844 Hartford had a second black district school, which met at the Methodist Episcopal Zion, on Pearl Street. The teachers’ names add to the impression that Hartford’s black community attracted high caliber leadership. As noted above, Amos G. Beman, taught at the Talcott Street school in the 1830s. He was followed in the 1840’s by the Rev. Pennington and his wife. Little is known about Mrs. Pennington, but it would appear that she was one of the capable women of the time whose silent contributions feminist historians would like to promulgate. Augustus Washington, former Dartmouth student and daguerreotypist, taught in 1844 and 1845 at

---

30 For Beman family, Rose and Brown, 124126; for education of Beman and Pennington, Warner: 83; for Temperance Society affiliation, Warner, 90.

31 Addie Brown in her letter of April 9, 1867, records the death of Mrs. Pennington, indicating among other things that she was someone the community kept track of, even some twenty years after she and the Rev. Pennington had left Hartford. Addie notes on May 5, 1867 that Dr. Pennington was returning to Portland, and had stopped in Boston.
the First District School. He later emigrated to Liberia.

In 1844 the newly-formed Second District School was directed by Ann Plato, presumed to be the Ann Plato who in 1841 published a volume of Essays: Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry. Her meditations on religion, education, death, the proper use of time, employ formal language and classical allusions. The tone is conventionally prim; she urges perseverance and quiet bravery in the face of pain, discouragement, death. Her life remains a mystery, but her book, recently reprinted by the Schomburg Library, was used much as Phillis Wheatley’s poems were earlier—as proof of the capability of African Americans to create literature.

Selah Africanus, a New York City native, taught at the Talcott Street school from 1847 to 1849, during Ann Plato’s tenure at the Elm Street location. Another activist in the pre-Civil War period, Africanus helped organize the 1849 Connecticut State Convention of Colored Men, along with Jehiel Beman, who served as President. A quote from his address indicates the views of Hartford and Connecticut blacks at the time. Well aware of the injustices they suffered, they were determined that change should come:

We are wronged; and our wrongs are matter of daily and humiliating experience. We are disfranchised. Our manhood and Citizenship, thus are assailed at a vital point. . .

---


Under the direction of black teachers, the schools were organized and funded, on paper at least, much the same as white schools. As early as 1846, however, the Reverend James W. C. Pennington protested to the white school committee about conditions in the black schools. White comments that during the 1850s and 1860s dissatisfaction grew. Blacks had no proper school buildings of their own, “their teachers were poorly paid, and they received little help from the white community.” In 1852, the city funded a new school building for black students on Pearl Street, and the two schools were consolidated into one facility. However White observes that “In 1855, there was an average of 82 students attending out of an enrollment of 136 pupils, indicating that parents developed new thoughts about segregated education.”

In 1860, according to the Census, only 54 percent of Hartford’s black school age children attended school, while Boston’s rate was thirteen points higher: 67.6 percent. The difficulties outlined by David White in the funding, equipping, and staffing explain why at least some blacks had lost confidence in their school. At the same time black students were not always allowed to attend the white schools.

Confrontation seemed imminent as white Hartford declared its determination to maintain separate schools for the races “so that no colored

---

35Horton and Horton, 135.
children should attend the **district Schools.**\(^36\)

In 1868, the State of Connecticut would put an end to the controversy bypassing a law that required children to enroll in schools of the districts in which they lived.

The importance placed on schooling and the Yankee heritage may be joint causes for the fact that in spite of the obstacles to schooling, the 1860 Census shows only eight illiterate black individuals in Hartford, four men and four women--none of them mulatto. Boston’s illiteracy rate was 7.6 percent, significantly higher than Hartford’s 1.1 percent. I would suggest that the discrepancy is connected to the fact that nearly three quarters of Hartford’s blacks were Connecticut-born, while only 39 percent of Boston blacks were Massachusetts-born. This is discussed below in the section on demographics.

On this subject in general, Horton and Horton caution that

> It would be misleading to assume that literacy in the mid-nineteenth century meant anything more than a rudimentary knowledge of reading and writing. Many of those judged literate were, in fact, functional illiterates, able to write little more than their names and, in some cases, unable to read and comprehend a newspaper.\(^37\)

A sidelight on the status of blacks in Hartford is found in the job prospects for former teachers. **In** 1860, one of the black schools had closed, and the teacher of the other had resigned. The teachers of record for the

\(^{36}\)White, "Hartford's African Schools," quote on new thoughts and Hartford attitude, both on 53.

\(^{37}\)Horton and Horton.\(^13\)
1859-1860 school year were Nathaniel Stubbs and Betsy Fish. In the 1860 census Nathaniel Stubbs appears as a waiter; Betsy Fish as a washer woman.

Issues

Writing about the black population of Philadelphia, Nash refers to increasing bitterness over “the unfulfilled promise of a racially equal and harmonious society. By the 1820’s,” he reports, “such hopes were collapsing. Thereafter racial conflict and discrimination intensified”38 Nash’s statement appears to resonate in the so-called riot of 1834 in Hartford. This incident involved an attack by white “boys” on a black man who was returning from church on a Sunday evening. To escape his attackers he ran into the home of a friend, Jack Blackson, on Talcott Street.39 When he came out, he met the men again on Front Street and “fired a charge of buckshot into them, hitting four.” The crowd, “swelled by raftsmen from New Hampshire and Vermont who had come down with lumber” pulled down Blackson’s two-story house. “The next night the rioters came. . . again and pulled down a number of small houses occupied by colored people in what is now termed Pigville.” The account is hazy as to the numbers involved and


39The booklet “Mortgage Burning of the Takott Street Congregational Church 1826-1944” lists a John Blackston as one of the original members of the Talcott Street Church at it 1826 founding. It is possible that this is the same man who apparently owned a two-story house on Talcott Street. Spellings vary greatly in records of this era.
the extent of damage, but on the third night peace was restored. It seems worth noting the out-of-town element in the incident, the lumbermen from up north who likely spent some time in saloons prior to joining in the vandalism.

Two incidents that occurred in Connecticut in the first half of the nineteenth century stirred controversy throughout the state and beyond. The first involved a white school mistress, Prudence Crandall, who gained notoriety by admitting a black woman to her school in Canterbury, Connecticut in 1832. The angry reaction in the community led her to announce that her school would be exclusively for young black women. This in turn resulted in legislation against such a school and a series of trials. Prudence Crandall was eventually vindicated, but she left the state and lived the rest of her life in Illinois. Because of the furor over the case, we must assume that it generated discussion among Hartford's black population.

The second incident is known as the Amistad affair. In 1841 a group of slaves being transported from Sierra Leone revolted and took over their ship, the Amistad, and wound up in New Haven harbor. The cause of the Mendi tribesmen who had declared their independence echoed a prized American belief. The matter went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court before the Mendi were declared free men.

By 1848, when all Connecticut slaves were finally free, slavery and
race-related topics were demanding national attention. As each new state sought admission to the Union, controversy erupted over the spread or containment of slavery. Abolition was a divisive issue in the white community; colonization a point of contention among blacks. Although the idea of moving to another country (or an unsettled area of this one) seems not to have appealed to many in Hartford, the subject was connected to a troubling fact. Slavery was ending, however slowly, in the North, but there was no sign of the progress towards full citizenship for blacks that was to have accompanied this change.

Although Hartford experienced what were called race riots in 1824, 1334, and 1835, the city did not experience the degree of racial tension found in Philadelphia, Boston and the more cosmopolitan cities. Still, discrimination and segregation were present and constant. The idea of emigration was discussed and debated everywhere. Henry Highland Garnet, a nationally known advocate of black rights, opposed it at first, but by 1850 “recommended emigration to those Negroes who despaired of ever improving their position in the U.S.”43 The movement found few takers in Hartford. As noted above, the black schools, and presumably the church society, preached against it.

Between 1850 and 1860, fewer than a thousand blacks emigrated from the U.S. to Africa—an average of 400 a year.44 According to James Rose and

---

44 Population of the U.S., compiled by Kennedy, ix.
race-related topics. were demanding national attention. As each new state sought admission to the Union, controversy erupted over the spread or containment of slavery. Abolition was a divisive issue in the white community; colonization a point of contention among blacks. Although the idea of moving to another country (or an unsettled area of this one) seems not to have appealed to many in Hartford, the subject was connected to a troubling fact. Slavery was ending, however slowly, in the North, but there was no sign of the progress towards full citizenship for blacks that was to have accompanied this change.

Although Hartford experienced what were called race riots in 1824, 1834, and 1835, the city did not experience the degree of racial tension found in Philadelphia, Boston and the more cosmopolitan cities. Still, discrimination and segregation were present and constant. The idea of emigration was discussed and debated everywhere. Henry Highland Garnet, a nationally known advocate of black rights, opposed it at first, but by 1850 “recommended emigration to those Negroes who despaired of ever improving their position in the U.S.”43 The movement found few takers in Hartford. As noted above, the black schools, and presumably the church society, preached against it.

Between 1850 and 1860, fewer than a thousand blacks emigrated from the U.S. to Africa—an average of 400 a year.44 According to James Rose and

44 Population of the U.S., compiled by Kennedy, ix.
Barbara Brown, “In the twenty years from 1830 to 1850, only ten blacks removed from Connecticut to Liberia. “45

One of them was Betsy Mars, sister of James Mars. She made the trip in 1832. According to an article by historian Randall K. Burkett, she was born in the state in 1807 and raised in Hartford in the home of Thomas H. Gallaudet, founder of the Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb. She was sent to Philadelphia for her education and while there became interested in colonization. Arrangements had been made for her to go to Liberia as a teacher under the auspices of the Society of Friends when, in 1830, she married William Johnson. He was a student at the African Mission School conducted for about three years at Hartford’s Washington College (now Trinity College), and also bound for Liberia. After considerable delay, the Johnsons made the journey in 1832. Unfortunately both William Johnson and the couple’s infant son died within two weeks of their arrival.

Betsy Mars Johnson stayed on, married again, was widowed again, and ran a mission school until her death in 1864. Burkett writes that she became known as a leader in education in Liberia, and achieved prominence as a woman on her own, a remarkable feat for the time. She returned to the

United States only once, in 1845, to visit her brother.46

Augustus Washington, a talented and ambitious black daguerreotypist, was another emigre known to the Hartford community.

He had come to the city in 1844 to earn money so that he could continue his education. Along with teaching in the African School for two years, he operated Daguerrean studios downtown off and on until the early 1850’s. David White has recorded his discouragement with the prospects for blacks in this country, an opinion which led to his emigrating to Liberia in 1854.47 Four years later in a letter home he wrote:

I think if you inform my Hartford friends who have been so anxious to hear from me, of what I am doing... some may decide to come and try their fortune. I can assure them, whatever I can, I will most heartily do to advise, encourage and help them. Such men as Holdridge Primus and Mr. Champion, could not fail to succeed. I am quite certain that they cannot do worse here than they are doing in America.48

Rose and Brown state that in leaving the country Augustus Washington followed George Seymour of Hartford, who emigrated to Monrovia and became a member of the Liberian legislature.49

46Randall K. Burkett, “Elizabeth Mars Johnson Thomson (1807-1864): A Research Note,” Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 55 (Mar. 1986): 21-30. As a sidelight, Burkett notes that it was a letter written by Mrs. Lydia H. Sigourney and published in the African Repository in July, 1830 that identified Mrs. Johnson as Betsy Mars and connected her with the Talcott Street Church in Hartford.


48Courant Sept. 27, 1858, “Mr. Champion,” Henry, was married to Mehitable Primus’ sister Bathsheba, who in the family letters was called “Aunt Bash.”

49Rose and Brown, 42.
We have no data on the discussions generated among blacks in Hartford by the colonization movement, only the consensus in favor of staying in the states. The rationale for rejection as outlined by Horton and Horton is twofold. Free blacks believed that in leaving the country they would be abandoning those still enslaved, who needed their help. Furthermore there was the sense that their grandfathers and fathers had fought in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812: blacks had a part in the building of the United States and felt entitled to inhabit it in peace under the protection of its laws.50

Demographics of Black Hartford, 1860

While the total population of Hartford had more than doubled between 1850 and 1860, the non-white segment had grown about 60 percent, from 443 to 707.51

A word about distinctions of color: the Hartford non-white population was 89 percent black (627 individuals), and 11 percent mulatto (80) in 1860.52 Because I have found little direct evidence of either friction or discrimination between blacks and mulattoes in Hartford in the sources examined, I am using the term black throughout this paper in referring to the non-white or African-American population.

50Horton and Horton, 90.

51By my count the number is 716, but the difference in percentages is negligible. I have used 716 in instances where I have developed my own counts.

52Population of the U.S. compiled by Kennedy, ix.
Irish immigrants outnumbered blacks in Hartford ninefold; as for other newcomers, there were half again more Germans than African-Americans, a roughly equal number of Britons, and in all, 12 times as many foreign-born residents as blacks.

Regarding the impact of the European immigrants on black populations Leonard Curry says:

Certainly the foreign born appear to have been among those who confronted black urbanites most directly in the competition for housing and employment. Such competition, though present, seems to have been of very limited importance before 1850.53

Figure 2.

POPULATION OF SELECTED CITIES 186054

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Total Pop.</th>
<th>Black Pop.</th>
<th>% Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hartford</td>
<td>29,152</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Haven</td>
<td>39,267</td>
<td>1,488</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>177,800</td>
<td>2,261</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>805,658</td>
<td>12,472</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>266,661</td>
<td>4,313</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>565,529</td>
<td>22,185</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>212,418</td>
<td>27,898</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td>161,044</td>
<td>3,737</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>56,776</td>
<td>1,176</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the percentage of blacks in Hartford (see Figure 2) is lower than

53Curry, xvii.


55Black total includes 2,218 slaves.
that of New Haven and Philadelphia, higher than that of Boston, New York, or Brooklyn, it seems to be in line generally with other cities of the region.

The profile of Hartford blacks conforms with regional figures for both black and white population segments in showing a slight preponderance of females, and a largely youthful population (See Figure 3). The median age of Hartford blacks in 1860 was 24, with the largest segment the 21-to-30 group, young adults most likely to be starting families, needing jobs and homes. Of the three couples that had married within the year (1860), five partners were in their twenties; one was 35. The average age for marriage for that small sample was 24.6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-70</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71-80</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81-90</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>716</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.

HARTFORD NON-WHITE POPULATION BY AGE AND SEX, 1860

56 According to the Statistics of the United States (Including Mortality, Property, etc.) in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns and Being the final Exhibit of the Eighth Census Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior. (Washington D.C. GPO. 1866), the ratio of men to women in District I, New England-and New York, was 34:38; In Hartford it was 34:37.
The ranks of the living thinned dramatically after the age of 50; to live past 70 was remarkable. At the same time the whole population was threatened constantly by diseases and conditions no longer considered dangerous. Analyzing 1860 census findings on mortality, the writer of the Department of the Interior volume commented:

In the State registries of Rhode Island and Connecticut, where the distinction of color has been specified, the yearly deaths of the blacks and mulattoes have generally, though not uniformly, exceeded the yearly births—a high rate of mortality chiefly ascribed to consumption and other diseases of the respiratory system.57

What strikes me as significant in trying to analyze the Hartford black community is the real number. Seven hundred men, women and children constitute a small enough group that all members of the black population could know, at least by sight, all the others.

A look at the origins of Hartford blacks suggests another basis for community. In 1860, 73 percent were natives of Connecticut, and a full 90 percent had been born in Northern states. For contrast, in Boston, 39 percent of blacks were natives of Massachusetts, and 59 percent had been born in Northern states (See Figure 4). This commonality of birth means that blacks in Hartford shared not only their physical surroundings, but schooling, church-going, social and recreational activities, and general background. They had grown up together.

This largely hometown Yankee identity along with relatively small
numbers would have the effect of **unifying** the society. Some families had been in Hartford for generations: the surnames Boston, Nott, Freeman, Magira, Jacobs, and Nichols—all in the 1860 census—had persisted in city records since the eighteenth century.58
**Figure 4.**

**NATIVITY** of Hartford non-white population in 1860:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>% of Hartford non-white Pop.</th>
<th>Comparable % for Boston</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NORTHERN STATES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>80.5%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NORTHERN STATES</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOUTH STATES</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-South:</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dist. of Columbia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep South:</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER COUNTRIES</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buena Vista</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

59 From U.S. Eighth Census, 1860.
60 Horton and Horton, 7.
Real Estate Ownership

Thirty-five Hartford blacks were listed in the 1860 Census as owners of real estate. This was nearly five percent (4.9) of the total black population.61

In discussing property holding in Boston, Horton and Horton propose that the significant measurement is the percentage of black single adults and family heads. The total of single adults (age 21 or older) and heads of families in Hartford in 1860 was 321. Hartford’s 35 property owners make up nearly eleven percent (10.9) of that number, while the comparable figure for Boston was less than half that, 4.5 percent.62

This degree of difference is not readily explained. Leonard Curry, speaking of black property ownership called it “a monument to the energy, enterprise, and frugality of the free persons of color.”63 No doubt true. An examination of Hartford’s 35 landholders provides clues, but no answers to any number of questions. Nine of the 35 were women, 26 were men. Four were mulatto, 31 were black. As for age, the median falls squarely in the mid-40’s range.64 Occupation does not appear to have been a decisive factor. Eight landholders held jobs that might command salaries above the ordinary.

61The 35 individuals who owned real estate were also 31 percent of the 111 black householders; or eight percent of the 413 blacks over 21 years of age.

62Horton and Horton, 10.

63Curry, 40.

64Fourteen are in their forties, eight are in their thirties, another eight in their fifties, two are age 28 and three are over 60.
one steward, one burnisher, two clergymen, two shoemakers, two saloon keepers. The rest are porters and waiters (four of each), laborers (three), farm hands (two), and one each in a number of unskilled and low-paying jobs—mariner, carman, mariner, domestic, etc.

Hartford's record, I would suggest, may be related to the fact that the black population was largely "Yankee," while Boston's was more diverse.72 Seven hundred individuals set apart by color; nine out of ten of them born in the North, three out of four born in Connecticut, shared from birth the New England culture that surrounded them. It was a culture that valued property ownership as well as perseverance, thrift, and hard work. Connecticut has long considered itself the Land of Steady Habits.

Even with such a background, for a black man or woman to manage a purchase of real estate required enormous determination and, one would guess, family cooperation. It was common for black women to work after marriage (and before), common to take in boarders, common for young adults to live at home and pay board-in order simply to make a decent living. Men were known to work at more than one job. Bearing in mind that most blacks were restricted to poorly paid menial jobs, and that such jobs were the least stable in a changing economy, it must have taken constant sacrifice to save money in any amount.

Holdridge Primus paid $1250 for his house and lot on Wadsworth Street in 1849. Although his wife worked, at that time his children were 13, 12, 7.

---

65Horton and Horton report that 39 percent of Boston blacks were born in Massachusetts (p. 7), compared with 73 percent of Hartford blacks born in Connecticut.
and 6 years old and could hardly have contributed to the family income. Interestingly, three years earlier he and Edwin Asher had jointly bought a parcel of land on Cooper’s Lane for $1300. Possibly Edwin Asher bought Primus out, since there is no other record of Asher buying real estate and he is among the 1860 land holders. As for where the money came from for the first purchase, one can speculate that perhaps the Ellsworth family had been generous to the young man who served them in his youth, or possibly the management of Humphrey and Seyms paid Primus more generously than his title would suggest. As stated above the national norm was $1.15 per day for day labor.66 There is also the possibility that the white clientele of the store tipped him handsomely for his services.

Another 1860 landholder was Peter Nott, almost certainly an heir of the Peleg Nott that Jeremiah Wadsworth freed in 1792.67 In 1805 Peter Nott and Joseph Gilbert together purchased a lot on Front Street for $450. The following year they paid $250 for another lot on Wethersfield Lane, adjoining land of Jeremiah Wadsworth’s heirs.68 Pooling resources was one way to achieve a home of one’s own.

In 1783 James Nichols, a white man, conveyed a parcel of land 54 by 22 feet on a corner of his own lot and “the building thereon” to Boston, a “free negro” for the sum of five pounds—surely a token payment. Nichols had

---

67 Hartford Land Records Vol. 19 p. 405. Greene says Peleg Nott, who was one of the Negro Governors, “drove a provision cart in the American Revolution,” p. 252.
68 Hartford Land Records vol. 24, p. 551; vol 26, p. 64; vol. 29, pp. 340-341.
freed Boston and his wife Bose in 1774.69 In the 1860 census there is one black Nichols family. E.D. Nichols is a Connecticut-born 41-year-old whitewasher who declares holdings of $125 in real estate, and $1200 in personal property. It seems possible that he may have been a descendant of the Boston and Bose who received the land from James Nichols. The amounts given are difficult to explain; one suspects that either the canvasser or the subject misunderstood the terms.

Black Households

The 1860 Census recorded 111 black households in Hartford, averaging 5.12 occupants each. In the same year Boston households averaged 3.7.70 Available data suggest to me no clear explanation for the discrepancy. The number in both cases is indicative less of family size than of the practice of doubling up. Fewer than half of Hartford households consisted of a nuclear family or such a family and one elderly parent or in-law; the remainder included relatives or others who boarded.

In their study of Boston in 1850 and 1860, Horton and Horton noted boarders in 40 percent of Boston black households, and commented that the practice "probably stemmed from both custom and economic and social

---

69 Real estate transfer in Hartford land records vol. 16, p. 113; manumission recorded in Hartford Land records vol. 16, p. 317. Stuart 4.0 reports the same facts, adding that Boston “was one of the black govern&s that he “lived on Cole Street [now Governor Street] and was a genuine African” who died before 1820 and was “buried with his cocked hat and sword on his coffin.”

70 Hartford figure from Eighth U. S. Census; for Boston from Horton and Horton, 131.
necessity." As for necessity, virtually the same conditions prevailed for blacks in Hartford as in Boston: jobs available to them were low-paid, and the many European immigrants who had come into Hartford during the 1850s had been competition not only for the same jobs, but for the same housing that blacks would have been able to afford.

Figure 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Hsehod</th>
<th># of Hsehld</th>
<th>Male Hsehldr</th>
<th>Female Hsehldr</th>
<th># individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>569</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*two households include total of four white individuals

Clearly the male-headed household was the standard. Households were headed by 83 men and 28 women, for a ratio of 3:1. Four black individuals, one man and three women, lived alone. To do so in Puritan New England had been considered abnormal and suspect; in the nineteenth century it was still rare, possibly because few could afford it.

Thirty-seven couples and families, and 119 individual men and women

---

71Horton and Horton, 16.
boarded with their own or other families in Hartford. Among the single black boarders, women outnumbered men 65 to 54. Overall, single men were more likely than women to live at their workplace.

In all, eighteen percent of Hartford blacks, nearly a fifth, lived where they worked, in most cases as waiters in white-owned hotels. In this group, males outnumbered females 83 to 47. Both men and women lived in white households as servants, and some live-in servants were as young as nine years old, not all with their mothers in the same household. About half of non-whites under the age of 15 living in white households attended school.

Only two black men appear to have resided in a hotel as paying guests, in both instances the National on Asylum Street. Other hotels appear to have catered to white guests only.

There were few instances of white residents in black households. Susan Randall’s was one of these. Her household consisted of herself (black) and one-year-old Charles Randall, a mulatto. Three of the remaining six residents were white.

It was only slightly less unusual for blacks to live in white households as residents rather than live-in servants. Ann Morrison, a white woman, had a household, no doubt a boarding house, with 23 residents, 20 of them black. The seven members of the Jeremiah Jacobs family-relatives of the Primuses-are among them.

There were no black children in the city orphanage, and just one black

---

72Geer’s Hartford City Directory, 1860-1861 is the source of addresses, which were not given in the Census.
pupil among the 222 in the Deaf and Dumb Asylum that Gallaudet had founded in 1817. A number of children lived with householders of different names than their own. Girls of 13 and 14 or older living with a family of a different name were most likely doing child care and housework in exchange for board and room.

Certainly some youngsters were taken in and cared for in a spirit of charity: one black household contained seven children, all with different last names. Charles Holden, nine months old, lived in the Richard Seymour household, and in the same neighborhood there was an Oliver Holden family with five youngsters, ages 2, 5, 7, 9, 11. It seems not safe to guess that Mrs. Elizabeth Holden needed help and got it. The parents, Oliver and Elizabeth Holden, were illiterate, but their three older children attended school. In some cases children who appear to be boarders were actually related to the host family. For example, two Magira children-Charles, 12, and George, 8—lived with the Isaac Scott family. The census cannot inform us that Mrs. Scott was the boys’ mother, widow of Edward Magira who had died in 1856. Isaac Scott was her second husband.73

Residency Patterns

Hartford’s black homes were spread widely over the city, with a major cluster along Pine Street in the second ward, north of the center of the city. There was a lesser concentration in the neighborhood around Talcott Street,

site of the city’s first black church. Elsewhere, black households were scattered in white neighborhoods: the Primuses and Sands were the only black residents of Wadsworth Street.

Figure 6

HARTFORD POPULATION BY WARDS74

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>White M</th>
<th>White F</th>
<th>White Total</th>
<th>Non-white M</th>
<th>Non-white F</th>
<th>Non-white Total</th>
<th>Aggregate M</th>
<th>Aggregate F</th>
<th>Aggregate Total</th>
<th>% Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>4,171</td>
<td>4,160</td>
<td>8,331</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>8,507 (29%)</td>
<td>8507</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>8,683 (29%)</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>5,456</td>
<td>5,629</td>
<td>11,085</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>433 (39%)</td>
<td>11518</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>11,730 (39%)</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>4,407</td>
<td>4,620</td>
<td>9,027</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100 (14%)</td>
<td>9127</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9,727 (14%)</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>28,443</td>
<td>28,463</td>
<td>56,906</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>29,152</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One reason for examining the population by wards is to determine the degree of segregation. Judgment is difficult, given the incomplete data we have and the small number of blacks in the city. The chart showing population in the three wards may be misleading. There were far more blacks in the second ward—now known as the North End—and a higher percentage of the population was black than in other wards; but there were also more whites in that ward. It was the most populous area of the city, and probably not the most desirable. The well-to-do appeared to live predominantly in the first and third wards.

The Index of Dissimilarity, “the most popular index of residential...
segregation,” according to Nathan Kantrowitz, is based on the concept that if there were no segregation, the housing pattern would show equal percentages of the different races in each ward. The Index measures the amount of movement that would be necessary to achieve an unsegregated pattern. Lower numbers, obviously, indicate less segregation. Here is a list of U.S. Cities in 1860 with their Indices, as determined by Kantrowitz:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hartford</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>35.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Haven</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>40.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hartford’s figure is remarkable. Noting the indices of other major cities at the time, it is arguable that in the arena of housing Hartford was not heavily segregated in 1860. There were very few instances of a single black home standing alone. The pattern appeared to be for two or three black householders to settle in near one another. (See map following.) Notions of otherness and division were at work without doubt, but it appears that segregation was, at least in 1860, less evident in Hartford than in other Northern cities.

---

75 All the information on this subject, including the list of cities, comes from Nathan Kantrowitz. “The Index of Dissimilarity: A Measure of Residential Segregation for Historical Analysis.” Historical Methods Newsletter 7 (1974: 285-289). Kantrowitz points out that the index is an abstract figure; it is “insensitive to the actual numbers of people involved” since it converts numbers to percentages and then averages the percentages.
Occupations

Jobs held by black men and women in Hartford were discouragingly menial. The census gives occupations of 302 of Hartford’s black citizens in 1860. Eighty-five percent, 256 of them were unskilled or semi-skilled--domestics, waiters, servants, porters, washer women.

I have divided the data into the three categories suggested by Horton and Horton in their work on Boston: Professional, Skilled and entrepreneurial, and Unskilled\(^7\) (See Figure 7). The results define the limits of working possibilities for blacks in the city of Hartford.

Figure 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATIONS OF BLACKS IN HARTFORD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CENSUS 1860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi and Unskilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For comparison, I have also shown totals from the City Directory of 1860.

\(^7\) Horton and Horton, 129-130.
Occupations

Jobs held by black men and women in Hartford were discouragingly menial. The census gives occupations of 302 of Hartford’s black citizens in 1860. Eighty-five percent, 256 of them were unskilled or semi-skilled—domestics, waiters, servants, porters, washer women.

I have divided the data into the three categories suggested by Horton and Horton in their work on Boston: Professional, Skilled and entrepreneurial, and Unskilled (See Figure 7). The results define the limits of working possibilities for blacks in the city of Hartford.

Figure 7.

OCCUPATIONS OF BLACKS IN HARTFORD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CENSUS 1860</th>
<th>CITY DIR 1860</th>
<th>CITY DIR 1867</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>1.30%</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>14.00%</td>
<td>22.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi and Unskilled</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>85.00%</td>
<td>77.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For comparison, I have also shown totals from the City Directory of 1860

76 Horton and Horton, 129-130.
and 1867. These support the census data, and seem to reflect little change in the eight-year time span Horton and Horton cite a number of northern cities, including Boston, New York and Brooklyn, in which "68 percent to 81 percent of black workers were in the lowest occupational categories." True as well of Hartford.

One indication of variation with regard to mulattoes appears in the data on occupations. While mulattoes represented 10 percent of total workers in the 1860 census, they constituted proportionally more of the skilled-entrepreneurial workforce, 16.6 percent; and less of the unskilled group, 8 percent. None of the four professionals listed, however, were mulattoes.

The professionals were three clergymen and one school teacher, Rebecca Primus, Greensbury Offley, a Methodist Clergyman according to the census, appears as a laborer in the City Directory for 1860. Moonlighting seemed to be common at all occupational levels. Holdridge Primus worked days at the grocery store, hired out to help at banquets and weddings, and served as sexton at the First Congregational Church.

Among the skilled-entrepreneurial group were 11 females: five dressmakers, five seamstresses, one milliner. The men included six bootmakers, four saloon operators, three butchers, two barbers, one tailor. The unexpected entries in this category are one burnisher, an electro-typist.

77Geer, Hartford City Directory 1860, 262-265; Geer's Hartford City Directory 1867, 301-307.

78Horton and Horton, 10.

and two paper box makers—occupations for which blacks were not generally hired. Traditionally African Americans performed personal service jobs as servants, cleaners, drivers, barbers, tailors, cooks. Only one apprentice is listed, Nelson Primus, at 18 an apprentice painter, clearly with a better position in mind than porter, his father's job description.

Because the job market for blacks was so limited, standards other than occupation, income, or housing arrangements determined an individual’s influence in the black community. Holdridge Primus’ job was menial by all descriptions: he greeted customers to the store, took orders, delivered goods, and provided the kind of service that reinforced racial and class distinctions, to the satisfaction of store patrons. Yet his importance was recognized by both blacks and whites. A longtime member of the Society of the Talcott Street Church, an officer in his Masonic Lodge, he was sought out for advice and assistance by a wide acquaintanceship. A secure job was a mark of prestige in the black community, and Holdridge Primus kept his through several changes of store ownership.

This sketch of Hartford’s black community in Hartford is weighted in favor of a group of active and successful individuals-middleclass citizens who expressed religious, patriotic and political opinions that conformed largely to mainstream nineteenth century thinking. Although they partook of New England attitudes and manners and showed no hesitancy about adopting the ways of the white people, they were well aware that the
separation of races in Hartford as elsewhere was rigid, complete, and taken for granted.

What private doubts, frustrations, sorrows, and hopes they may have held we have no way of knowing. Their public stance was accommodating in spite of the discrimination encoded in all areas of life, possibly because they had before them the hope of justice, equality, and the end of what they politely called degradation.

The letters of the Primus Papers offer a closer look at their society.
CHAPTER II

ADDIE BROWN

The letter that Henrietta Primus was writing to her sister in Maryland changed course abruptly when Addie Brown burst into the room and began to dictate:

... ["tell] her that I am well an send my love don't tell her that I have got the headache and it seems like months instead of two weeks["], and hopes that you will answer her letter I believe before you get it. Her tongue runs so I can't make out anything about it. When she writes you will get a newspaper full to judge by the way her tongue is flying.1

Addie and Rebecca

When Rebecca Primus left Hartford in the fall of 1865 to go south and teach the freedmen, she carried with her the high hopes of a loving family and a proud community, and she left behind a desolate friend. Addie Brown wept day and night, at home and away, even when out for the evening with her gentleman friend. Mr. Tines told Aunt Em (Emily Sands, Mrs. Primus's sister) that Addie cried for Rebecca when she was with him and if she did it again he would send her back home.2

Addie poured out her feelings in an avalanche of letters to Rebecca, mixing news, comment, and gossip with heartfelt laments that gradually

1Henrietta to Rebecca Nov. 15, 1865.
2Ibid.
lightened as her outlook matured. One hundred twenty of her letters in the *Primus* Papers cover a ten-year period, beginning in 1859 when she was seventeen years old.

The letters suggest that Addie may at some time have attended Rebecca's school; in 1862, from New York; she wrote:

> I have been thinking of you and wondering what you are about... I... imagine [you] with your pupils around you... giving them good instructions. I guess by this time they [are] all very fond of you. I sometime wish that I was a school girl again for this one reason so that I could be under your charge...3

The constant theme of Addie's letters was the friendship between the two women. The early letters were particularly sentimental. Addie repeatedly mentioned missing Rebecca's kisses and caresses: "I did miss you last night. I did not have anyone to hug me and to kiss."4 Even more intimately, she wrote:

> ...My Dear I dreampt of you last night. I don't sleep good I am so cold I miss you very much and also your feather bed. I took a hot iron and warm the bed all over jump right into I kept [a] little warm by that means. I wish that we could sleep together this winter I would like it very much would you not Stella.5

She signed herself *Perthena* at the close of the letter. The intensity of

---

3*Addie* Jan. 10, 1862.

4*Addie* Aug. 30, 1859.

5*Addie* Dec. 9, 1862.
their friendship is evidenced by the use of pet names, the erotic content of some of the letters, and a defining incident Addie related in her letter of January 21, 1866. Stopping at the Primus home, she found a Mr. Jones visiting with Mrs. Primus and Isabelle, and there ensued a discussion of Addie's protracted mourning over Rebecca’s departure. Mrs. Primus acknowledged the strength of the attachment between them, saying that if either Rebecca or Addie was a “gent” they would marry. Mr. Jones declared that when Addie did fall in love with a man she would throw Rebecca “over her shoulder.” Mrs. Primus disagreed, saying “that would never be.” Three months before, in fact, Addie had written that she would be happy to address Rebecca as “My Husband.”

If we base an assessment of the relationship on Mrs. Primus's openness in discussing the tie between Rebecca and Addie, and indeed defending it, we would say intimacy between women friends was not necessarily suspect or even out of the ordinary. However, her remark surprised even Addie. In addition, Mr. Tines and others did find Addie's attachment to Rebecca extraordinary, as noted above. Henrietta thought her crying for Rebecca while with Mr. Tines was unusual, and Aunt Em’s response was to intervene, cautioning Addie that Mr. Tines would think she loved Rebecca more than she did him. Typically, Addie replied “It would be the truth and much else.”

Much earlier, in 1862, there had been a hint of objection from Holdridge

---

6Addie Nov. 16, 1865.

7Henrietta Nov. 15, 1865; Aunt Em’s caution, Addie Nov. 8, 1865.
Rebecca Mrs. Nott wanted to know if you was not going to [spend] any more nights [here] the ans I made I did not know she think your father has prevent you from staying she has spoke of it several time . . .

Our conclusion must be that this was indeed an intense relationship, even for the nineteenth century, when attachments between women were common. At the same time it did not stop either from maintaining friendships with other women and with men. Roth wrote of marrying, and Addie declared in a letter that she did love Mr. Tines--her patient and persistent suitor--“but not passionately.” Joseph Tines was a resident of Philadelphia who worked, possibly as a waiter, on the steamship The Granite State, which shuttled between New York and Hartford three times a week. He appears to have been an agreeable and completely devoted suitor.

Addie and Rebecca both eventually married “gents,” but more than sixty years later when Rebecca died in 1932, Addie’s letters were there, preserved among the family memorabilia. The love between the two had been strong and lasting.

---

8Addie Dec. 9, 1862.

9For a perceptive and convincing analysis of the relationship between Addie and Rebecca, see, “’No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship Between Two African-American Women During the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” by Karen V. Hansen of Brandeis University. The article will be published in July, 1995 by Gender and History.

10Addie Oct. 28, 1866.
SAMPLE LETTER

Hartford Jan 21 1866

My Dearest & Loving Sister

I wish that I could exchange pen & paper for a seat by your side & reclining in your arm as I have in days gone by. Dear Rebecca for the first time since you have been gone I attended Sunday School. Mr. Cross seem to be much please to see me he said he was glad to see so many out Misses Bundy. Babcock. Mason Powers the lesson was Cha 13 of St John first to the 15 verses [next?] Sunday Mat 5 first to the 13 and wish all the classes commit to memory. Aunt Emily just inform me that it would S.S. concert We had a new minister his text was Luke 5 [interlined] 9.10 ver I like his sermon very much. he was very short Church was poorly attended Dear Sister in your last letter that I rec on thursday P.M. you wanted to know how many Sunday [unreadable] I have remain at home five Sundays one cause Mr Sands was sick two was stormy one very cold indeed the last I was not very well Mrs Jones also attend church this P.M. for the first her Husband got her a very handsome dress purple & black the skirt is trimmed with black velvet. Dear Rebecca I am sorry to say that [Mrs. Jones?] is a little story teller Bell & Bell Sands & my self has found her in two or three. She tries to be quite sociable with Mr. Aldridge She goes so far as to call him Mr she told Bell she thought a great deal of him Mr. Jones has been out but once with her that was over to Levina I think she is as much to blame as her husband if you was at home I dont think you would care much for her. Thomas is quite sick has the Dr. every other day his sickness is private I suppose if we was married we would know Madam Jones just come in to ask if1 would Bell & her to church I decline for I have my promise myself to write to my absence Sister every Sunday eve nothing will prevent but sickness for the present.

Tomorrow eve there will be a debating at Talcot st church Mr Fred Cross & Mr G Robinson Miss A Cross read Mrs Mary Randle has composition if nothing happens I must attend.

Yesterday AM. Mr Asher ask me if1 would go to Allyn hall I did not go for they has the minstrels.

Eliza call to see me Friday. P.M. I have not see her for somtime before week ago last Sunday she fel down the back step and hurt her self very much indeed she send a great deal of love to you and also a kiss I wish I was near you to give it.
Dear Rebecca I have been in little trouble this week I broke Aunt Emily butter dish and I know felt very sorry about she did not say much or I either went on so for two days so this AM. she say if I did not want to speak to her I need not for she did not want any one to speak if they didn't wish too she also she judge people by that way she made feel very bad for she ought to know by this time that I think a great [unreadable] her we are good friends now I shall try and keep so for the future. last Thursday AM I went to see Bell I was speaking of you so Bell says come up stairs I will give you Beccas letter so when got up their I did not notice how B ask for the letter I know your mother was not incline to let her have it so she went in the bed room I told Bell I would not read if she got it. I thought it was very funny for she always wanted me to read her letters and even took the pains to bring them in to me for to peruse Your Mother brought it I would not take it at first the reason she would not give it to Bell she spoke impudent to her she had to insist upon me taking it at the mean time Mr. Jones came up and wanted to know if it was a gentleman letter I hesitate to peruse she said or no she said I thought as much of you if you was a gentleman she also said if either one of us was a gent we would marry I was quite surprise at the remark Mr Jones & I had quite a little arguement he says when I find [interlined] some one to love I will throw you over my shoulder I told him never Your Mother also agreed with me [written above in pencil is “I have unshaken confidence in your love. I do sincerely believe”] What do you think of that he has no Idea that some one is now paying their [distress] [respects?] to me I have not heard them for a week

Dear Rebecca I must peruse your letter again You say I neglect one thing for my life I cant remember it is. I have been thinking ever since I see the letter what it is You ask what has become of Mr Steward he is around he goes with Julia yet. I am very much please with Nelsons Painting

Madam rumor says that Emma and her husband is parted we dont know how true it is she goes home once in a while I believe she is still at Mrs Carters I dont know what to think of your dream I have thought of it quite often

Dearest friend & only Sister I will never doubt your love for me again You say you put my picture under your pillow I wish I had the pleasure laying along side of you

I am delighted to think you are still pleas with your boarding place Dear sister I am very much delighted to hear you say that you like Mr Tines if I should marry him I hope to have some pleasure and comforts for he likes you very much. I thank you kindly for informing me about your school I hope you will speak of your school quite often I
would like to hear well

You tell me who is Emily

When we was going to S.S. we stoped in No. 20 I had a nice time with Jim he growes finely, he is so fat. My Darling Sister I must tell you my dream I had last Wedn I thought I had to marry Mrs. Jackson she was determine that & I did not know what I should do I did not wanted to get to Mr Tines ears I was dress in black I had my back hair curl and front as I always wear it we went church I forgot pure white [unreadable] on it [more unreadable] that was tied around my head Mrs J. and I in one carriage and my step father in the other and when we got in church it was crowded when we came out I got in the carriage I did not know anything untill home I found myself on the lounge with my dress on fasten then I commence cry continued until I awoke I was very glad it was all a dream I also dreampt of you two night one night I was standing and seeing you caress another lady and not me how bad I did feel

Now My Dear Sister I think I have pen you all that will be of any interest The Methodist SS. had their festival last friday eve I heard it was crowded they all seem to enjoyed themselves very much

Bell P & Bell Sands & Addie has learnt a new song from Mrs. Jones coll

I am lonely to night

In My Sad little Chamber

That is true for I am lonely every night will be untill you return The family send there love I rec a letter yesterday

Tillie Cummings her brother in NY lost a little baby and brought the corpse to New Haven on Christmas day. Now My dear I must bid you good night from your loving little adopted Sister Addie

---

11Emily was a servant at the Thomas household in Royal Oak, Maryland.
All we know about Addie comes from the letters; she does not appear either in the U.S. Census or in any city directories. Porn December 21, 1841, she spent her childhood in Philadelphia and New York City. In 1859 she wrote to Rebecca from Waterbury where she was in domestic service. In 1861 she wrote from New York, where her own family lived, saying that her father's restaurant was “not doing anything” and that her mother was worried. Later she wrote that her mother had two boarders, one of whom was in love with her. She worked, sewing until late at night, and helped care for her younger brothers and sisters. She mentioned an aunt, and told of doing some writing for "grandma." Why or when she had first gone to Hartford and met the Primus family is not known. In October of 1862 Addie referred to a grievance against her own mother that may explain her permanent removal from New York...

... I could never find anyone would be able to walk in your old shoes look at that one that I called Mother has she been a true friend to me no took a stranger to her bosom and even love him more than she did her own husband that lie in under the sods for her. I hope I never be the means of killing anyone.

---

12Birth date given in Rebecca's letter Dec. N.D. 1865; year in Addie's letter June 3, 1866: "0 Rebecca only to think I am only 24 years old..."; Philadelphia: Addie Sept 30, 1867, visited people she “had not seen in 9 years”; New York: spends time with her family in their home there in 1861-1862.

13Addie July 22, 1861.

14Addie July 11, 1861; Sept. 25, 1861.

15Addie April 4, 1861, aunt reference; April 16, 1861 for grandma.

16Addie Oct. 25, 1862; She wrote the letter in Hartford.
headache I had to give up and tie my head up tight and go and lye down.” 19
When she was sick she was cared for either by a friend or her current employer. She mentioned especially Mrs. Primus, “so gentle and so motherly” 20 and later Miss Porter, the school mistress in Farmington, who won her admiration by calling in a doctor, assigning a staff member to look after her, and visiting in person three times to make sure she was recovering. 21 The fact that Addie died in 1870 at the age of 28, puts a poignant edge on her many ailments.

**Boarding Out and Living In**

Addie's gypsy existence would explain far worse complaints than headache. In the years covered by the letters she lived in Waterbury, New York, Farmington, and at half a dozen different addresses in Hartford. Her residence depended on her employment and her connections. In December of 1662 she had returned to Hartford from New York, and was living and working at 9 Franklin Court with the Nott family, one of the names that crop up frequently in the correspondence. 22 Henry Nott, like Holdridge Primus, was employed as a porter, and along with Holdridge Primus and Jeremiah Jacobs was an officer of the “Colored Free Masons.” 23

---

19 Addie Feb. 18, 1866.
20 Addie May 14, 1866.
22 Addie Dec. 9, 1862.
23 Geer's City Directory 1860-1861, 440.
Between the end of 1862 and November of 1865 there is only one letter from Addie to Rebecca. This could mean that both were in Hartford and no letters were exchanged, but in fact several of the 1862 letters were written from Addie in Hartford to Rebecca in Hartford. It seems more likely that letters written during that time were lost.

The correspondence resumed in the fall of 1865, when Rebecca left home to go to Baltimore for assignment to her future school site. Addie had directed her to address her next letter to 12 Wadsworth, she was moving to the Sands’ home, two doors down from Primus’s. Although there was no known blood or marriage tie between Addie and the Primuses and Sands, both families treated her as a virtual relative, taking her in when she needed a place, providing support and friendship. Addie called Rebecca her adopted sister, and referred to “Aunt Em” in the tradition of adoptive kin. She was more formal with the heads of the two families, calling them “Mr. Primus” or “your father,” and “Mr. Sands.” She appeared to be somewhat in awe of “Mrs. Primus,” never using kinship terms for her either. Mrs. Primus’s response to Isabelle’s “impudence” (see the letter of January 21, 1866) helps to explain the awe.

Addie was a boarder rather than a guest at the Sands’:

Aunt Em only take $2.00 a week from me she said if provision was not so high she would not take any thing. Henrietta $2.50 don’t mention it for Aunt Em don’t want her to know it don’t you think she is kind...

---

24 Addie Nov. 16, 1665.
Addie shared a bed with Henrietta, whom she describes as hard to get along with, and later with Sarah, the Sands' daughter. Henrietta seems seldom to have lived at her own home for reasons never explained. Perhaps Addie was accurate in assessing her congeniality quotient.

Regarding living arrangements in general, Robert Austin Warner offers the following description of white middle class life:

During this generation [the 1860s] many city-dwelling, working-class Americans improved their family living conditions, except in the most rapidly growing and overcrowded cities. They valued their homes highly and considered the essentials of decent living to be a house with a parlor, half a bedroom for each person, and a yard for flower and vegetable gardens.

Although Warner pointedly contrasts this picture with the living conditions of blacks in New Haven at the time, the Primus household—and most likely the Sands’—fits the description remarkably well. It is my impression from the letters that many of the key black Hartford families, particularly those that owned real estate, lived similarly well.

Addie's position in these households, however, was that of boarder. Horton and Horton, writing about Boston's black community in the 1850s and 1860s, state that "Boarding was especially common for young single adults... About half of the female single adults... were boarders."

---

25In the U.S. Census for 1850 as well as 1860 Henrietta is found in two different households.

26Warner, 27.

27Horton and Horton, 17.
Chapter I shows, boarding out was common also in Hartford's black community. According to data in the 1860 census, fifty-eight percent of black single females boarded. Addie did indeed conform to a pattern, both in boarding with a family and in sharing a bed.

Addie's Work Life

On November 11, 1865, Addie wrote delightedly to Rebecca that she was working at the Dye House, where she did sewing, mending, and cleaning work. Not only was she making an unprecedented $19 a month, but Mr. Smith, the white owner, addressed her as Miss Brown, and "he seem to be quite please with my work." By the first of December she had been let go for lack of business. The unpredictability of work, particularly for someone relatively unskilled, made for anxiety and depression:

You say don't allow myself to indulge in glumy forebodings for the future. How can I help it? I can't get any work. I have no money, and I stand to live out to service long at the time. That all I can aspire in this place.

After she left the Dye House, Addie was once again living hand to mouth. "Monday" she wrote, "I expect to go to Mrs. Saunders to sew," and she was to work one or two days a week with Mrs. Douglas. The widowed Roxanna Saunders, according to the Census owned $3000 worth of real estate.

Saunders brothers' tailoring firm had been one of the few to be owned and

---

Addie Nov. 11 and Nov. 16, 1865. An ad in the Courant, Nov. 22, 1865, announced that Smith's Dye House, 37 Wells Street, dyes silks (all colors) on Tuesday, black woolens on Wednesday, all other colors Thursday. "Gentlemen's garments dyed or cleansed without ripping; and repaired by good workmen."

Addie Jan. 16, 1866.
operated by blacks in nineteenth century Hartford. The Douglas family lived on Franklin Court near the center of town. Chauncey Douglas, a coachman, was not a land owner, but was significant as a trustee and Treasurer of the Zion Methodist Church.

Addie had further support from a Mrs. Swan, who agreed to “intercede” for her in finding work. Mrs. Primus also did her part: Your mother gave me six pairs of draws to make for a lady.*31 By December 13 Addie’s spirits had revived and she wrote of a plan to make seventeen dollars to buy a new coat that Bell Primus wanted to sell.

Addie’s next address was 15 Clinton Street at the corner of Elm with the family of the Reverend John T. Huntington, Professor of Greek at Trinity College. Friction among the servants over wages was one of the reasons Addie gave for being unhappy there.

Rebecca I have been working for nothing comparatively. speaking now I have come to a decided stand that people shall pay me for my work I don’t care colored or white.*32

Regarding wages, Nell Painter’s statement about conditions after 1877 no doubt applied at this time as well: “For the same work, northern workers made more than southerners, whites made more than blacks, men made

---

30Addie Dec. 1, 1865. Mrs. Swan is not listed in the Census but appears in the City Directory 1861-1867, living at 41 High Street.

31Addie Dec. 10, 1865.

32Addie Feb. 26, 1866.
more than women." According to the U.S. Census the average daily wage to a day laborer without board in 1860 was $1.15; weekly wage to female domestic workers with board included was $1.50. Addie stood up to Rev. Huntington to demand $2.50 per week as a live-in servant, and in one letter she said she was charging seventy-five cents a day for sewing and wanted to increase that to a dollar.

She left the Huntington’s in April of 1866 and went back to day work sewing for Miss Mary Goodwin, a white woman on High Street, and Mrs. Saunders. On June 1 she went to live with the Crowell family, for whom she had previously done child care on a day-work basis. Now she appeared to be content. She also appeared to have a good deal of freedom. Her letters in this period were devoted more to news of social engagements than work.

A year later, in May of 1867, she left the Crowells and went to Farmington to work at Miss Porter’s school for young ladies, along with Raphael Sands, who was employed there as a cook, and Henrietta Primus. Emily Sands also worked at the school from time to time. Addie’s job consisted of housekeeping duties and helping Mr. Sands in the kitchen. Porter impressed Addie as a true lady; “her housekeeper can’t step in her

---


35 Addie May 4, 1866.

36 Addie May 29, 1866.
shoe for all she is a cousin to her."37

Addie watched the “young ladies” closely and commented on their clothes, their schedules, and their dancing (“not many of them graceful.”)38 The term “lady” connoted desirable qualities of style, breeding, and elegance. In the letters Addie repeatedly described Rebecca as a "lady" and passed on compliments from others who agreed.39

When school ended in July, Addie went to Philadelphia to visit Mr. Tines’ family, returning to Miss Porter’s in October of 1867. She earned $12 a month at the school, twice what she had made at Crowell’s, and she continued to do sewing on the side for Mrs. Primus, possibly to make money for a trousseau.40 She was to-and in fact did-marry Mr. Tines in the spring of 1868, and moved to his home in Philadelphia.

Addie’s Style

Addie’s letters have the feel of transcribed speech: they are, as she must have been, bright, headlong, engaging, full of enthusiasm, highly amusing. Because she is so intent on her immediate surroundings, the letters merit minute examination by researchers interested in daily life during this period.

In the matter of literary style, Addie’s letters are a battleground where her own Black English clashes with Rebecca’s influence in the form of

37Addie May 12, 1867.
38Addie May 5, 1867.
39One example: Addie wrote that Mr. Sands called Rebecca “the best one of the family and a lady” in a letter of May 5, 1867.
40Addie June 12, 1867 for statement on earnings.
nineteenth century literary prose. One example already cited is the opening of the letter of October 1, 1866: “despondency reign.” Here are others.

. . . I enjoy those Doughnuts very much I was little hungre when Bell brought them . . Mrs. Nott is getting for bed so I will bring my missive to a close . . .

My Dear Sister,

It has been raining very hard all day. has not subsided yet My feelings has correspond with the weather. it rather a disagreeable evening for the Mason Banquet . . . I called to see your Mother yesterday I found her quite well Bell was up to Mrs. Saunders sewing . . .

Linguistics is outside the range of this paper, but a note from an expert may be enlightening. J. L. Dillard, authority on Black English, writes of examples of Black speech transcribed in Massachusetts, Nova Scotia, and the New York City area as early as the eighteenth century, and theorizes that Black English came to be identified with the South only because it died out in the North as blacks responded to “greater opportunities for assimilation.” The assimilation referred to is in speech rather than society. Dillard continues, “But some indications of varieties of Black English spoken well into the nineteenth century remain in the Northern states.” Addie’s letters qualify as a case in point. One characteristic of Black English evident in her writing is, in Dillard’s description, “the ‘loss’ of final -s for the third person singular present tense,” as in Addie’s “despondency reign” or “she think.” Another is

---

41Addie Sept. 18, 1862; Sept. 26, 1866

the *be* usage, as in the letter of October 25, 1862: “I hope I never be the means of killing any one.”

As noted above, *Addie* began her letters with an awareness that she was writing to a teacher, *an* authority on form, grammar, and punctuation, but before long her interest in what she was describing would take over. As an example of her high-impact descriptive style, this scene at church is a marvel of economy:

In church last evening Julia braided Mr. Freeman’s hair and it stood out. . . set the choir to smiling all suppress their smile but Ella Heney. Mrs Clara Mitchell after said she would give $5 to have choir broke up. Bell told her before the $5 came out of her pocket it would screel.

More gems of brevity:

. . . Saturday eve . . . on our way home we came across the Park and [Mr. Tines] heard the boat whistles he bid me good night I look around and could not see anything but his coat tail . . .

Miss Mary Butler, teacher from New Haven went South to teach, her health miserable, came home and presented her mother with a grandchild . . . a new method of teaching.

President Johnson to visit Hartford wish someone would present him with a ball through his head.

---

**Addie’s Social Life**


44Addie Nov. 3, 1866.

45Addie Dec. 1, 1865; March 3, 1867, June 23, 1867.
In spite of her dejection at Rebecca's departure, and persistent worries about making a living, Addie Brown maintained a blistering social pace. Her letters, rich with sidelights, outline a succession of visits, balls, banquets, festivals, performances, lectures, and musical evenings that depict a busy, active, and not unhappy life.

Friday eve . . . two of the girls from the shops came down to the house. I took . . . them in No. 20 [Wadsworth Street] several was in there while I was enjoying the sweet notes there came a knock at the door. . . Eliza [Smith from Middletown] with Miss Ward from New Haven spend an hour--Nov. 19, 1865.

Mr. Thomas and wife and I are invited to a candy pull to Mrs. McQuire . . . not going until 9 p.m . . . Mr. Sands and wife and I are invited over to Mrs. Mitchell-Jan. 1, 1866.

The Methodists held a festival . . . fighting broke out with four being taken to the watch house--Jan. 7, 1866.

. . . attended Masons Banquet with Bell. Had a new dress and white flowers in her hair. Danced some . . went to church and hear Mr. Offly preach.--Jan. 16, 1866

. . . surprise party held at Mrs. Swans--March 4, 1866.

I went to the Lyceum last Monday night debate if the Black man will have any rights that the white man are bound to respect.-March 25, 1866.

. . . heard the maquerade [sic] Ball last Wed. was for G. Daniels. . . John Francis fell over the banisters pick him up for dead. Chas. Jackson was so high that they had to carry home--April 1, 1866.

. . . visited Primuses-Miss [Josephine] Booth and Sand also came. Went with Bell to see Mrs. Saunders. Played guitar at Primuses-April 15, 1866.

Mrs. Nott dead. Laid her in ice house . . .--May 6, 1866.

. . . went to the festival with Bell . . . the minister took different ladies and promenade around the Hall . . . even got your mother and Aunt Emily
Mrs. Saunders sent for me to come up Sunday. I went there in eve what do you suppose she wanted . . . to have me make it my home with her for company--Sept. 26, 1866.

Yesterday AM. I went out with [Sarah Cummings] and made three calls then I came back and got dinner and whent [sic] up to Jennie Sturms where Sarah was to see James Nott-Oct. 16, 1866.

Mrs. Crowell gave me a ticket for the Concert at the Allyn Hall friday so Bell and I went . . . I think Camilla played better than she did the first time . . . Dress circle was full we was the only colored up there.--Oct. 28, 1866.

Mr. Asher took me to the Allyn Hall friday eve. Carter Duven Troupe . . quite a number of colored there.-Nov. 11, 1866

Prayer meetings held Tuesday eve at Mrs. Patterson’s and at Mrs. Clegget’s. [the Reverend] Mr. Harmon to one & [the Reverend] Mr] Snell to the other so everyone can attend. -Jan. 14, 1867

Went to Sun[day] S[chool] concert with Mr. Tines and Miss Puller Large crowd . . some trying to see who could repeat the most [Bible verses]--April 9, 1867

. . . spent Thur. P.M. with Mrs. Champion and Emily. The baby fell in love with me . . . Visited the graves of Mr. and Mrs. Nott. . . I miss you Rebecca whenever I take tea to your Aunt you always seem there too.--April 28, 1867.

Word of mouth was the method of transmitting news within the community, and “calls” or “visits” were the way to keep in touch. Making the rounds much the way Edith Wharton’s New Yorkers did, and for many of the same reasons, blacks (and whites) in Hartford learned of births, marriages, deaths, scandals, parties, and very importantly, work available. On a personal level visiting was a way to give and receive comfort, comradeship, amusement, and entertainment.
Addie seems to have gone visiting nearly every day, often with Bell (Isabelle) Primus, Rebecca’s youngest sister, and sometimes with Henrietta. On one occasion she set out with Bell Primus and Bell Sands (wife of Thomas Sands) at about one o’clock and made ten calls on five streets.46 This was during a period when Addie was between jobs, and the visits were the most efficient way for her to look for work. Among those she called on was Mrs. Crowell, a white woman she had worked for in the past. This was clearly a business call; one imagines that the visit to a white household was conducted much differently from one to a black home: more formal in style and more confined as to subjects discussed.

Evening visits had a more recreational character; married couples and unmarried men and women gathered and socialized in one another’s homes. Addie’s descriptions of these ran to flirtations among her friends, although she occasionally came home from evening visits with new work assignments, meaning that the network operated as needed.

Addie spent many evenings at the Primus home, where the piano provided “sweet music.” Her love of music is apparent throughout the letters, although she names only two specific pieces: General Smith March, introduced by a visitor to the Crowell’s, and a “new piece from Mrs. Jones collection.”47 She mentions “fine singing” one evening at Harriet Mitchell’s; certainly the customs of the time would make singing a likely part of the

---

46Addie Feb. 1, 1866.
musical evenings. Remarks in Rebecca’s letters lead to the belief that both Bell and Mrs. Primus, as well as Rebecca herself, played the piano. The probate listing shows that the Primus family owned an instrument, and the Sands bought one in 1867. Addie mentioned Mr. Tines fixing her guitar and wrote of practicing playing the guitar with Bell.

Charitable work was a social responsibility that went with membership in the black middle class. Addie wrote of helping Aunt Em with “sewing she has from the society” which would have been charitable work. This was during her unpleasant stay at Huntington’s. Henrietta, in her letter of Nov. 15, 1865 to Rebecca, referred to a sewing society meeting that evening.

Travel was not out of the question, even for someone like Addie with limited means. During the time Addie worked for Mrs. Crowell, she was able to leave for several weeks at the end of the year to visit her friend Mrs. Cummings in New Haven, and from there went on to New York.

Although Addie was less literary than Rebecca, she attended cultural

---

48 Addie Nov. 18, 1866.

49 "... I would like to hear you play... would give all that I possess to hear some music." Addie from New York April 4, 1861; “Does Miss Kempton play yet I suppose you’ll get her to play for you while you’re away. I’ve no doubt she will, for you accommodated her several Sabbaths last Summer,” Rebecca to her mother and sister from Royal Oak Dec. 14, 1866; in Rebecca’s school report, April 1866, she states that singing is taught in school; it seems certain that she read music.

50 Mrs. Primus wrote to Rebecca Nov. 10, 1867 that “Sarah has got her Piano 160 dollars it looks nice round corners stands in the sitting room.” In her letter of Dec. 10 1865, Addie reported a visit from Mr. Tines and Mr. Carter, a guitarist, during which Mr. Tines fixed her guitar.

51 Addie Feb. 6, 1866.

52 Addie Dec. 24, 1866; Jan. 9, 1867.
events—programs of music and dance—with some frequency, sometimes with tickets supplied by Mrs. Crowell. In New York Addie on one occasion attended a lecture at the Cooper Institute, and with Mr. Tines visited the Barnum Museum, an “educational” collection of curiosities which she wrote she enjoyed.\textsuperscript{53} As for reading, she mentioned items from newspapers, one of which reminded her of a scene in \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, a few books, and a sermon of Henry Ward Beecher.

\textbf{Church-Going}

I went to church yesterday P.M. Mr. Hammond [\textbf{Harmon}] was out of town the Minister they had spoke very well I have forgotten what chap. his text was. I will tell you the words and you will know where to find I dare say in John (Jesus wept) there was no meeting in the eve. A Mr. Fairbanks spoke to the Methodist and the \textbf{Talcott} St. Church congregation was invited over their. I also except of the invitations. He was in prison for 17 years for freeing some slaves. he was very interesting indeed and quite amusing at times he went to Oberlin in 1837 and received his diploma 1844. . . . his statements about his life while [in prison] made a deep impression on the people hearts. after he got through they took up a collection for him he received $16.00 and some cents which he seem to be very much please. He will speak tomorrow eve at the Methodist. Sarah came here yesterday and dine with me . . .\textsuperscript{54}

Early in the correspondence when she was in Waterbury and desperately lonely, Addie wrote about attending a prayer meeting and declared she had “found a friend . . . Jesus.”\textsuperscript{55} This was the only instance of

\textsuperscript{53}\textit{Cooper} lecture: \textbf{Addie} n.d. 1862; Barnum: \textbf{Addie} Jan. 9, 1867,

\textsuperscript{54}\textbf{Addie} Oct. 1, 1866.

\textsuperscript{55}\textbf{Addie} Feb. 16, 1860| “Jesus wept” is a gag line used by preachers. \textbf{Addie} was pretending that her forgetfulness would cause Christ grief.
Addie writing directly about religious belief, or about participating in evangelical church services. It may be that Rebecca registered disapproval of such revival meetings, since they were outside of Congregational Church practice. It had been after all the “emotionalism” of evangelical forms of worship that had caused the creation of a second black church in Hartford. It might also be that the solace Addie found at the meeting only temporarily relieved the heartache of being separated from Rebecca.

In Hartford Addie was a member of the Talcott Street congregation, but sometimes attended Methodist meetings, often with Joseph Tines when he was in town. Relations between the two congregations were friendly, although Addie noted one exception when she and her friend Ellen Harris were turned away from a Methodist Sunday School Festival because they were not members. Addie points out that several other Talcott Street people were admitted to the festival, and adds "everybody here this faints."57

The Mr. Fairbanks Addie heard in 1866 at the Methodist Church was a white man. Although the Civil War had been over for a year and the slaves had been free for three years, but slavery and the suffering it caused were still matters of grave concern to the black community.

In 1867 Addie attended a lecture by another white man at the Methodist Church. This was Col. Trimble, who spoke on “[The] Colored Man[s] Capacity.” She says the turnout was disappointing, since he had wanted to

---

56 On Feb. 1, 1866 Addie wrote to Rebecca: “I do my Dear occupy your seat and Henrietta attend occasional I also use your Hymn Book...”

57 Addie Oct. 1, 1866
speak to as many whites as possible, but that he spoke very well. He was,
she said,

raised in the south with all the prejudices of the southerners was against
the colored race he did not think them fit for any thing but servitude or
capable of any great mental or moral improvement. Since the war his
opinions has changed he thinks they are the equal with the white he also
spoke of Garnett Douglass and other distinguished men the day would
come when state would allow every man vote he also said that he was
going back to Tennessee and take two blackest men one on each arm
and go up to the ballot line. . .

The attention of blacks by then was being directed to a specific issue:
the right to vote; and the church as usual provided the venue for discussion.
The importance of the church--both churches--to the black community was
enormous. Pastors were not only spiritual guides but also sources of advice
and direction on public issues. The churches brought in lecturers who spoke
on topics not covered by those speakers who addressed audiences at the
public halls. In the discussions of emancipation, colonization, and the right to
vote, it was the black churches that brought the issues to their people.

Addie kept Rebecca up to date on spiritual, political and social events at
both churches. She may have been filtering the facts to accommodate
Rebecca’s viewpoint when she wrote, “Methodist revivals do not get many
converts.” A year later, the revivals were going strong and she listed four
converts, including Mary Champion, Rebecca’s nine-year old niece. 58

Along with serving as the focal point for black opinion and action, the

58Addie Feb. 18, 1866; Mar. 3, 1867. Mary’s mother was Bathsheba Jacobs
Champion, sister of Mehitable Primus and Emily Sands.
church was the single black organization accepted and recognized by the white community. In the ten years covered by the Primus Papers, one of the most important social events for black citizens of Hartford was the fair to raise money for Rebecca's school building in Royal Oak, Maryland. Held in February of 1867, it was attended by whites as well as blacks. Many friends came from out of town, and the whole affair merited an exhaustive description in Addie's letters. As a sample:

Table tenders were Misses Champion and Sands. Harden Mason Hamer Bell & Julia Addie Mrs. Andrew Mitchell... Your Aunt Mrs. Champion look very pretty indeed. Mrs. C. Freeman made the cream, last 2 nights Mrs. Hamer made it - better than Mrs. Freeman's... Eliza Smith & Miss Daniels up from Middletown and Ben Mr. Loyd... your mother... was the most prominent person... Rev. Mr. Burton wife was at the fair & their son... Gertrude [Plato] was out one night... assisted at the refreshment table...

In the same letter, Addie wrote that according to "Miss Margaret" Crowell, her white employer, the fair cleared $203.30.

Addie's Views

In her letters, Addie provides information that corrects at least one erroneous impression from other sources. An examination of the Census leads to the conclusion that no blacks were admitted to the poor house, but Addie wrote, "old Mrs. Epps died she has been sick a long time been two deaths at the Poor House within two weeks I did not hear how old she was."

---

59Addie Feb. 16, 1867. See also footnote 64.
60Addie Mar. 4, 1866.
Addie's sketches also help flesh out the facts contained in the census and city directories. Gertrude Plato for example, appears regularly in Addie's chronicles. Twenty-four years old in 1860, and therefore Rebecca’s exact contemporary, she belonged to a distinguished family which owned $4000 in real estate. By 1863, Gertrude and her siblings had inherited the family estate, and we learn that she relished her standing as a wealthy woman. In Addie's account of Oct. 28, 1866, Gertrude was going to Boston with her brother and his wife “Perhaps she is looking for a husband”; on Jan. 14, 1867, Addie wrote that she showed up in church wearing a new dress—in Addie's view an occasion for comment—and announcing that she was going again to Boston; on Mar. 25, 1867 Addie reported that “her ladyship” would be unable to attend a party being planned. Gertrude Plato emerges as a slightly pompous presence in Hartford black society.

Dan Patterson, on the other hand, must have been a disappointment to relatives and friends. Member of a large family that owned a home on Pine Street, he was a shoemaker like his father, and thus one of a select group of skilled black workers. But on March 31, 1867, Addie wrote of the 24-year-old:

Dan Paterson fought with a white man and cut him with a razor. Now he is hiding... will cost him several hundred dollars or prison, where he ought to go perhaps he will behave himself.

A scion of the Nott family was the subject of one memorable paragraph. Jim Nott and a number of other individuals who appear in Addie's letters
seem bent on demonstrating the need for the temperance societies that had by the 1860's become common throughout the states:

I understand they had a ball thanksgiving night Lydia Jackson and her husband was there and both inebriated. Jim Nott was there and fell down three pairs of stairs and never hurt him he laid so quite that they suppose he was dead some of them afraid to go down to him some one pick up courage first thing he ask for his umbrella and that his Mother gave it to him and did not wish to lose it Mr. Harris inform Bell and I of it as we was going home it very strange that he dont kill himself. It would break my heart if I had a dear friend like James Nott.61

The letters are filled with details that gradually build a picture of individuals in the community, how they lived and interacted:

I don’t rest very good at night Sarah is my bedfellow and awful one at that she is not satisfied at kicking she [grind] her teeth it makes me very nervous to hear her . . .

. . . until yesterday I thought Mrs. Beulah was with her husband he is out of the Asylum and wanted his wife to bring the family and to live with him again she is afraid to live with him again so Mary Daniels has the boy and the girl is in N[ew] H[aven] she has not told any one where she is so they won’t have to tell a falsehood about unless she is sick he went to NH to try to get work no one will employ him he is little ways out of NH.62

Color and Class

While the news in Addie's letters concerned mostly the black society to which the Primuses and Addie belonged, some attention was paid to news of the white world as well:

61Addie Dec. 1, 1865.

62Addie Feb. 1, 1866. Sarah, 11, is the daughter of Emily and Rafael Sands.
I saw in last Thursday paper Miss Bell Colt Marriage to Mr. Prank Dewolfof New York her dress was white velvet trimmed with point lace and set of pearls three bridesmaids they are living in Bristol. R.I.

I understand this is a regular baby year Mrs. Primus inform me ten ladies in Washington [Street] that expecting to be confine. . .

. . . great excitement with the whites . . . arrest and trial of Chas. Puller for taking funds from the Hfd. bank.

They talk of building a church on the corner of Clinton & College Sts I see they have commenced pulling down the house great objection to it.63

At the fair in Hartford to raise money for Rebecca’s school in Maryland, Addie wrote at length about the black participants, but also took note of the white women who attended: White people was very friendly indeed . . . Mrs. Crowell . . . spent 12 cents . . . [and] won a ring cake . . . .64

Early in the correspondence, when she was in New York with her family, Addie—then 19—wrote about race. She was watching a group of people playing and dancing across the street from her home:

. . . quite a mob gathering around them it is no wonder that our race is so degraded since I’ve been in New York and get to thinking and see these returns of our people I wish that I did not belong to their race but it can’t be help now so I will have to make the best of it.65

By this time Addie was a fervent admirer of Rebecca. One suspects

63Addie Oct. 1, 1866; Oct. 16, 1866; March 31, 1867; Oct. 1, 1866.
64Addie Feb. 16, 1867. Addie’s account has remarkable parallels in a church fair Pauline E. Hopkins describes in Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South. The novel, set in Boston, was published in 1900 and reissued in 1988 as part of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers.
65Addie Sept. 7, 1861.
that she was anxious to imitate Rebecca's educated elegance and identify with the Primus family's solid way of life. One also wonders whether she is not echoing some of Rebecca's ideas about class, and applying them to race. This is the only instance of Addie writing in this vein, but as we will see, both Nelson and Rebecca wrote disparagingly of lower class blacks.

Addie did frequently comment on matters of race and class. In her own view she was Rebecca's inferior in learning and in social status. As for race, what she wrote indicated that she was intent, as was Rebecca, on achieving recognition and acceptance of blacks by whites. In the meantime, she kept track of progress. Attending the theatre, at the opening of a milliner's shop, even visiting the jail, she recorded how many black people she saw. In January of 1866 she visited the State Prison with Mr. Thomas and his wife, and wrote, "Out of 184 there was 17 blacks."66

Most of Addie's references to white-black relations were simply statements, but occasionally she elaborated. In a letter late in 1866 she combined news with applications to her own immediate world:

I see in Boston that the Republicans have nominated a colored man for the legislature no one but Mr. Charles L. Mitchell I am delighted our color will be a people yet a few more states like Mass. Mrs. Mitchell smiles more than ever perhaps Peter Nott thinks he will be nominated too . . . I expect it will hurt the Irish feelings very much to hear of that its the theme of people conversation now . . .67

66 In his autobiography, Arthur Ashe said: "I am almost always aware of race, alert to its power as an idea, sensitive to its nuances in the world. Like many other blacks, when I find myself in a new public situation, I will count. I always count. I count the number of black and brown faces present . . ." Arthur Ashe and Arnold Rampersad, Days of Grace: A Memoir (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) 131.

67 Addie Nov. 4, 1866.
Charles Mitchell, a son of one of the leading families of Hartford, had lost a leg in a Civil War battle, and went on to a career in government and journalism in Boston. Peter Nott was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Nott, whom Addie lived with in the early 1860s. In Addie’s view he put on airs and drank too much. Her reference to the Irish reflects the views common at the time and also hints at the rivalry Curry described between blacks (and whites) and immigrants.68

Addie reported instances of “insults” and disparaging treatment by whites, often without comment. Of the day the all-black twenty-ninth and thirty-first regiments were welcomed back to Hartford, she wrote this:

... I went up to meeting with Aunt Em, every other person we met had niggur in his or her mouth. They was so mad to think the white was compel to make a fuss over them. On our return home some of them said niggur to us. Aunt Emily ask them if that [was] what they had for their supper. If they did [they] could not of relish it. ... Henrietta ask Mr. Smith [at the dye house where she and Addie worked] if we could go out to see them he said of course. We was gone from 9 to 12. 69

Writing about a visit to Colt’s willow factory, she noted that she and the Thomases “were insulted in one of the rooms.”70

On another aspect of race relations she wrote, ‘Yesterday AM. Mr. Asher ask me if I would go to Allyn hall I did not go for they has the

68 See Chapter I, section on Demographics, footnote 53.
69 Addie Nov. 19, 1865.
70 Addie Jan. 7, 1866.
minstrels." While "blackface" entertainment appears not to have troubled Mr. Asher, Addie found it objectionable. In Farmington at Miss Porter's school, she made note of two other instances of discrimination and prejudice:

...attend church [in Farmington] . . not any more. Seats for colored people. It is a pleasant church.

Young ladies had masquerade ball. One girl came as Topsy and Mr. Sands was quite angry about. . .

In both accounts she is uncharacteristically reticent about her own reaction. To add "It is a pleasant church" to the account of unacceptable seating practices at the Farmington Congregational meeting house seems not to be sarcasm--a tool Addie did not use--but perhaps a case of her compartmentalizing the racism. Giving Mr. Sands' opinion of the Topsy incident without her own implies agreement rather than disagreement, and again lets her stand outside the emotional reaction that such incidents would provoke.

Several incidents in Farmington evoked comments on issues of race and class from Addie. When one of the white chamber maids wanted to sleep with

---

71 Addie Jan. 21, 1866.
72 Addie May 19, 1867; Dec. 1, 1867.
73 Another instance of Addie "compartmentalizing" her feelings is in her letter of March 1, 1867. She wrote that an ambitious and well-attended surprise party was given but she did not go "for it was at Mrs. Epps and you know I do not visit there. I heard it came off very nicely." On Nov. 18, 1866 she had written that she was "on the outs" with Emma Epps but did not explain the disagreement.
Addie, she wrote, “I am not very fond of white[s] I can assure you.”

The “young ladies” who were students at Miss Porter’s school were both white and upper class. They commanded respect as members of a group that valued education, fine arts, elegance in dress and manners—the sort of world that Rebecca also admired. Addie watched the girls, took note of their activities and behavior, and had occasional conversation with them. Sometimes for warmth they congregated where she was in the school kitchen, and must have been charmed by Addie, as were most of those who met her. They asked her to teach them to dance. The fact that Addie reported this to Rebecca suggests ambivalent impulses on her part. She may have thought the friendly contact with the upper class white girls might impress her mentor/friend, and might also provoke a pang of jealousy.

Although she always deferred to Rebecca as her social and intellectual superior, Addie had enough spunk to occasionally throw her a challenge of this sort. Many of the apologies and conciliatory passages in her letters result, we assume, from these impulses.

A Last Look at Addie

Addie’s zest for life and her attention to detail gave her letters an immediacy for which the reader can only be grateful. She has supplied countless specifics on the texture of life in her time. At the end of a paragraph about her state of health she wrote, “company came today,” an

74Addie Oct. 20, 1867.
75Addie Dec. 1, 1867.
announced women still make to one another.76 Among the many deaths she reported was that of Mrs. Pennington, wife of the internationally known "fugitive blacksmith" who had been pastor of the Talcott Street Church in the 1840's.77

Another letter reported what appears to be an instance of crib death: "Clara Mitchell wrote to her family last week informing them that Mrs. Jones baby was dead that it was smother to death. ."78

She wrote about collecting photographs, and was proud of the album she bought in Jersey City: "I took my Album to show them [the Primuses] You ma think it a very nice one. she also put her picture in it which I was very much please I have five of the family now."79

She accompanied Harriet Mitchell to the dentist and wrote this account of the state of dentistry and the healing powers of shopping:

she took gas it was a very hard tooth and the effect of the Gas past off before they could get it out and H] felt it very much we went in. . on our way home to look at some cotton cloth it has come down I got a piece it was 28 cts yd. it had 42.yd in a piece. I paid $22.20 cts. . .80

In so closely detailing her own life, Addie showed us the organization and

76Addie Oct. 1, 1866.
77Addie April 9, 1867.
78Addie Nov. 4, 1866.
79Addie reported album purchase May 29, 1866; reported taking it to Primuses Sept. 26, 1866.
80Addie Nov. 25, 1866.
functioning of the black community in Hartford. Her own place in it was determined by her connection with the Primus and Sands families. Through them she had access to the homes, the social life, and the concern of the most influential members of the community. It is clear from the letters that although she treated Rebecca’s friends with some deference, she thought of them as her friends as well, and felt free to mingle with them on her own. Her letters mention scores of names, most of them members of the community leadership group that owned real estate and participated in church and civic affairs.

She herself brought to the community a strong personality, an irresistible manner, the willingness to work hard and to take part in all aspects of the life of the community. Prickly and opinionated she may have been, but her charm transcended her faults. Indeed as we will see in examining other letters, eccentricity was no hindrance to acceptance in Addie’s Hartford.

In turn Hartford’s black community gave Addie a home. When she needed a place to stay or a job, friendship or advice, it was forthcoming. The difficulty of finding work the certainty of low pay, the omnipresence of disease and death, all made the network a necessity for her as it was for all those excluded from white society and its support systems. The response of black citizens had been to build their own community, which proved a godsend for Addie.
CHAPTER III
NELSON

The Civil War was over and Lincoln dead less than two weeks when the twenty-three year old artist-to-be Nelson Primus wrote home to his mother from Boston:

I would like for you to send the rest of the things on as soon as you can. . . it will be cheaper for me to keep house then for me to board. . . Please caussion them at the office not to brake the crockery in those two bbl. . .

I am glad to hear that you all took so much interest in our late deceased President. I am pleased to hear that those old flags of mine did something for there country. The baby has got quite used to the children now, one of the boy's is trying to spoil her by rocking her all the time so that she wakes up in the night and cries and will not stop until she is rocked to sleep. . . Ret has got her three sheets and cases done we did not get 12 cts. cotton cloth for it was not quite wide enough for sheets we had to pay 23 cts. i got 15 yds and some of the 12 cts for Pillow cases . . .

I heard one of the finest things that you ever heard, last Sunday after noon as i was crossing common through the flour garden all of church bells commenced to sing for church, one fine large magnificent church stood on the west side of the common where all of the big bugs live and go to church. no one is aloud to bye land there unless he sayes that he will put up a house not costing less than $50,000. . . . this church commenced to charms hym's i had to stop still and look. it charmed several familia[?] airs which i have often heard sung, it was beautiful, i never heard its equal and rearly it also charmed me also . . .

Ret and the baby is well and wishes to be remembered to you all . . . I am a goin to paint a skeleton for the good semeritons for $10.00 I am a getting along finely with Banester.
Caught between youth and new responsibilities he closed, “I still remain your true son, Nelson A. Primus," with a looping flourish under the signature.

The letter is stiff. The writer was trying very hard to reassure himself and his parents that everything was well taken care of. Nelson had left the home circle that both nurtures and stifles in order to take the first major step toward his life goal. Considering the rest of his life story, one might guess that he had been anxious to leave Hartford and the home circle.

Almost no information exists about his early life, but from the testimonies in the letters and all the evidence we have, he was reared in a home that by any standards a good one. Surely he was sent to school and to church on regular basis. Holdridge Primus may have been chagrined to find that his only son was intent on entering a field where the most gifted, fortunate, and well-connected white man could scarcely hope to make a living, but his support and that of the family were constant and dependable.

One question that comes to mind regarding a 23-year old American male in 1865 regards military service. Nelson’s name does not appear in the listings of Connecticut’s black regiments, and there is no mention in the other letters of his having served: I assume he chose not to fight in the Civil War. Although his reference to Lincoln in the letter quoted above is patriotic in tone, he never mentions either the war itself or the part any of his friends played in it. As I have pointed out, Hartford was a small town, especially for

---

1Nelson to Mrs. Primus Apr. 25, 1865. Ret is Amoretta, his wife; Banester is the painter, E. M. Bannister, with whom he was studying in Boston.
blacks, and he must have known his local contemporaries who enlisted.  

A look at what we do know of his life shows him to have been a strong individualist. Perhaps he was so intent on a career in art that he opted not to participate in the most riveting contest a black of the time could imagine.

Nelson's considerable artistic talent was identified and recognized while he was quite young, with the result that he seemed to take special treatment for granted. At the age of nine, in 1851, he received a "diploma for sketches" at the Hartford County Fair. Exhibiting at the fair again in 1859, he won a medal for drawing.  

His teacher in Hartford was Mrs. Elizabeth Gilbert Jerome, a white artist who had trained at Springley Institute in New York, as well as at the National Academy, where her work was exhibited. One speculates that Mrs. Jerome had assessed his talent and believed he needed training beyond what she could provide. In the nineteenth century the consensus in the art world held that proper technique could be obtained only by study abroad. Furthermore it was known that blacks did not suffer the discrimination in Britain and Europe that they did in the United States. No doubt Nelson was sensitive to the impediments white society put in his way.

---

2 The Mitchell brothers served, as did both John and Justin Francis (mentioned in Addie's letters), and Charles Magira, among many others.

3 Primus Papers, publicity release by Charles O. Bierkan, Curator, Hartford State House, dated July 31, 1969. Artists as well as farmers competed for prizes at the Hartford agricultural fair, and in fact prizes were given both for original works and for copies. The Hartford Courant Sept. 28, 1859 reports that Nelson Primus, 16 years of age, was displaying an "oil painting on wood of dogs, birds, etc."

4 H. W. French, Art and Artists in Connecticut (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1879; reprint New York Kennedy Graphics, Inc. Da Capo Press, 1970) 167. The following is on the same page: "Mrs. Jerome was married when thirty-two and has necessarily carried on her art under some difficulties since then, but has not deserted it."
Meanwhile, perhaps at the insistence of his father, Nelson had been apprenticed to a carriage painter, presumably to learn a trade related to his gift. At twenty-three, married to Amoretta Prime and the father of baby Leila, he was impatient to be on his way to a career in art.

Just twenty-four of Nelson's Boston letters, written between April 25, 1865 and March 7, 1868, survive in the Primus Papers. Twelve were addressed to his sister Bell, ten to his mother, and two to his father. He wrote about his reactions to Boston, a city larger and more cosmopolitan--and more segregated--than Hartford; told about his jobs and his family, and described paintings he was working on. Constant themes were his determination to become an artist and his desire to study abroad. "Oh i wishe that i had money so i could go to Europe to study a couple of years . . ." He mentioned Hartford friends who were living or visiting in Boston, and noticed political events from time to time. The letters are not particularly introspective, but bit by bit they show Nelson discovering that his parents were wise and loving providers, that his upbringing had been better than most, and that the world unfortunately was not his oyster.

**A Life in Art**

Throughout his life, Nelson's dedication to art as his life work remained steadfast. He moved to Boston in 1865 with an arrangement to study art under a Mr. "Banes&." This was Edward M. Bannister, cited by Horton and Horton as an exception to the general rule that occupational mobility was

---

5 Nelson to Mrs. Primus Mar. 22, 1867.
nonexistent in Boston of the 1850s and 1860s. A native of New Brunswick, Bannister was a freeborn mulatto who came to Boston in the 1850s. Working at various jobs, he saved his money and opened a barber shop and hair salon. After marrying an older and wealthier woman, he was able to complete his art training and went on to a successful career. He moved to Providence in 1870 and made a reputation as a landscape artist of the Barbizon school.

Although Nelson expressed satisfaction with Bannister in April of 1865, by July he had this to say:

Mr. Banister i think is a little Jealous of me he says that i have got good tast in art. But does not try very hard to get me any work. The Colored people here think he could get me work if he was a mind to. . . . If he does not interest himself any more than he has I think i shall go to England, for i am a bound to learn Artist, if there is any such a thing. Mr. Banister has got in with the white people here and they think a great deal of him.

With instruction or without, Nelson continued to paint. Writing to his father on January 28, he described two pictures he was copying, “Alone in the World” and “His Only Pair.” He wrote that the latter had appeared in “the paper called chimney corner a few weeks since.” Nelson was doing copy work, a practice common at the time by which unknown artists could earn money while gaining experience, and at the same time make “original” art.

---

6 Horton and Horton, 9.


8 Nelson to Mrs. Primus July 10, 1865.
works available to people of modest means.

On July 31, 1866 he wrote 'I have got the picture of the women done.” On January 27, 1867, he asked to have the measurements for five of his pictures that were awaiting sale in Hartford, so that he could look for frames. These were titled, “The Head,” “Sunset, Italian Scene,” “Boston Boot Blacks,” “Christ,” and ‘Madonna.” On February 3, 1867, he mentioned his paintings of “N.Y. boots blacks, a little girl up to michief, both small, 8x10, want to sell them for $15 each.” Nelson was trying everything-portraits, landscapes, religious subjects, and genre paintings.

In September of 1866 Nelson was planning to take ‘a few lessons with a German Artist,” and the following February he mentioned working or studying with a Mr. Stetfield.9

Following a period in which he tried to make his living as an artist, he wrote "I am wirking at my old traid again carriage painting, No. 40 Union St. i have given portrait painting up for a while."10 But not entirely; in October of 1867 he wrote that within the week

i am going to start Mrs. Fairwell’s picture has she been in there since or said any thing more about painting it, so that the boy’s whole forme will show, i will paint the one that she ordered first & than if i have time i will paint the other does the little boy come over and play with Leila . . .11

---

9Nelson to Mrs. Primus Sept. 2, 1866; to Mrs. Primua Feb. 3, 1867.

10Nelson to Mrs. Primus April 28, 1867.

11Nelson to Mrs. Primus Oct. 27, 1867; Mrs. Farwell appears to have been a neighbor possibly a white woman.
On November 30 he had “finished Mrs. Fairwell’s picture it is a good likeness of the boy. I think that she will be suited with it. I have also finished my fruit boy that I commenced in Hartford.”

Nelson wrote nothing about technique, styles of painting or theories of beauty. He never mentioned Ruskin, Whistler, the Barbizon or Hudson River painters, or any current art topics. The only artist he named in the letters was Admonia Lewis, the black sculptress who had been an associate of Edward Bannister. On February 3, 1867 he wrote that he had seen the model of the Lincoln monument she designed, adding that she had left Boston “last fall and went to Europe to finish studying”--his own fondest wish.

The one painting by Nelson Primus that is available to the public in the Hartford area now is a portrait of Lizzie Mae Ulmer, a white actress, which the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) acquired in 1967. It is a larger than life-size oil on canvas, in the original wood frame, thought to have been done in Boston in 1876. Cognizant viewers agree that it is the work of a competent artist of obvious talent. That the artist had formal training is evidenced by the vignetting of the likeness—it consists of head and shoulders only—and the treatment of her skin and hair, as well as the lace trim and satin rose on her gown.

Without the means to further his studies, Nelson nevertheless continued to paint. In assessing his career it would be helpful to know more about the break with Bannister. Nelson may have shared with Henrietta what I would guess to be an independent turn of mind and a disinclination to follow orders.
In any case, Nelson was faithful to his calling.

Life in Boston

Nelson and Amoretta lived at first in a single room; he pointedly described it as a rooming house, from his line about the boys rocking the baby, it was in a rooming house where tenants who were at home during the day helped one another, amusing the baby and possibly sharing other tasks.

Although Nelson displayed the Primus family dedication to hard work, the news he reported home was more often than not discouraging. On July 10, 1865 he wrote that he had been to Worcester to do a job that paid three dollars and his fare.

In the same letter he explained, “The reason why i did not write where i was a liveing is because i, did not want my house to be the depot for all the colored people from Hartford. . . . I am keeping house on No. 6 Milton Ct in the house of Mr. Hawkings.” Nelson was in no position to treat guests as they would have been treated at 20 Wadsworth Street. Possibly he preferred not to have it known in Hartford that he was boarding his family in another man’s house. This remark is also the first of a series of negative references to blacks that appear in the letters.

In May of 1866, things had improved. Nelson wrote to his father that he “had all that i could do this spring painting signs.” In addition he had made $25 doing all the painting for the shop that Henry Jones was opening at the corner of Hanover and Richmond Streets. Henry, a friend from Hartford, had moved in nearby with his wife Sylvie and baby Pinkie, and the two families
spend a good deal of time together.\textsuperscript{12} Possibly in a celebratory mood over a season of steady work, Nelson had played the guitar until midnight the night before, accompanying his friend Mr. Tredwell on the flute. Like the rest of the family he enjoyed making music.

By September of 1866 he was sounding somewhat confident, “I shall soon send home a few specimens then you can say if i have improved since last fall when i painted Bell & my little picture . . .”\textsuperscript{13}

In January of 1667 the Nelson \textit{Primuses} were at No. 5 Poplar Court. He wrote on October 27 that he had spent a week painting signs for Steamburg & \textit{Tredwell--possibly} the flautist Tredwell mentioned earlier—but was disappointed about the house painting job referred to in the introduction to this paper.

\textsuperscript{12}One speculates that this might be the Mr. Jones who set off the discussion on Jan. 21, 1866, of the nature and quality of the relationship between Addie and Rebecca.

\textsuperscript{13}Nelson to Mrs. Primus Sept. 2, 1866.
SAMPLE LETTER

No. 5 Poplar CT. Boston
Sunday AM. Apr 28th, 1867

Dear Mother,

Your very welcome & interesting epistle was received in due season & it found us enjoying a good degree of health. I was glad to here that yourself & family were in possession of good health, & when this comes to hand I hope it may find you all enjoying the same blessing.

We are having delightful weather for the present, which I am pleased to see. I recd a letter from Rebecca last week, stating that she had received one from you on the 13th & says that Leila is very happy with you and attracts much attention, & thinks that I had better let her remain in Hartford during the hot weather. Please tell Bell to fetch her on one week from Wednesday on the eight. I would like much to see her, she need not stay any longer than you can spare her. I will let Leila go back with her when she returns & remain until I come on. We miss her very much, but finding & knowing it will be to her physical benefit to remain longer than I proposed I think I'll not regret the deprivation in the end. I am glad to hear she pleases you all so shell be greatly missed when she leaves you.

I am willing for her to remain on Bell's account, I thought if she were there she would devote Bell's leisure time & make her think less of the beau's I am pleased to here that she stays in more nights & out taking the clear air in the day. I most sincerely hope that she will be restored back to her former health again. If by letting Leila stay, would do it, I would always let her remain. I hope that she will take my advice & let the young men slide, & never get married her condition cannot never be bettered. I will do all I can to help her & all of you when I get a start, my mind & thoughts are ever turned homeward Bound. I often feel grateful to see how I have been trained up different from most of our poor low colored people, I can see now since I have been away from home & grown to maturity, what I could not see when a stripling, you cannot blame me I had never been around any where nor seen any thing, if I then known as much as I do now I would lived a different life kind & good to every body. since I have been in the city of B. I have met with misfortune, bad luck, every thing seems to go against me, but I have kept father's last words of advice to me when I left Hartford to keep out of bad company, not to have many associates, & not take to drinking. I mean to stick to it through life. I am very glad to know that union of spirit & feeling once more reign in our family. for it has long been a grief to me & my only wish for the future is, that peace, quietude & happiness may thus continue until we are all done with the turmoils of life, & rest quietly in our graves. It is true what you say, the only essential qualifications, we all now need is a christian spirit in our hearts to guide us through all the difficult paths of life & to carry us safely beyond the shores of time into that eternal haven of rest. &
happiness where sorrows are unknown. I have been thinking of it some time, but when i see so many hypocritical people that profess to be followers of Crist & are not it makes me mad. all that Mr. Grimes is for money i see so much of it that i get provoked. Ret & i attend the white episcople church, i like there way of worshipping god. if i could understand them i think that i would like to join them i donot throughly understand. the Revivals are being brought to a close. I understand there has been quite an extensive revival in Hartford during the winter. i hope there has been much from it. I hope that Benajah will continue firm & set a good example to the world. he seems to very much interest i received letter from him last week, he may be the means of doing much good. he say's that he is coming to Boston this summer again. I suppose Mr. Ed. Freeman he feels very badly & i really pitty him & his three little children. their loss is doubtless her gain, she'd been ill a long time much, i presume her mother will take charge of his house & children for him now. Hetty & husband has returned to Hartford, when i first saw them their great cry to to leave H. to get away from the copper head, the state has gone democratic so that it's politics &c are not improved. there must be some other excuse now.

Jim Nott i think has been quite prosperous has either one of his children got a cruched eye or leggs. I. presume that he feels so rejoiced over his prize that he cannot keep sober, untill all of his money is gone. I am glad to hear that Henrietta has got so good a man for a husbal[nd]. I wish them a life time happiness. i would like to tast one of her short cakes & one of Bell & your courent pies. i think that they would go pretty well. I am wirking at my old traid again carriage painting, No. 40 Union St. i have given portrait painting up for a while. Please tell Bell & Leila that i will answer there letters this week i think Leila improves very much, especily in folding up her own letter. she must look high in her little pancake as you call it, Bell had better fetch on an empty carpet bag to take on Leila summer cloth with her.

Please kiss her for her papa & ma ma & tell her to be a good girl & i will let her go back again. Ret has gone to church, this evening we both go.

Henry Jones & family are well. Has Justin received the box yet. if you see him tell him that i have not got a place for him yet. but are on the look out. on the first of May the irish celebrate it by all meeting on the common with a wreath on their heads. each one takes his dinner with them & runs jumps & plays untill1 night they are all dressed in white.

My kind regards to all who may inquire. i will close by wishing you all the complements of the day.

Untill further i remain
your affectionate Son
Nelson A. Primus
Nelson and the Family Circle

The letter above shows Nelson very much a **Primus, affirming** the Victorian values of family, faith, temperance, and perseverance. Or, we might speculate, Nelson was writing to reassure his family that he was earning their goodwill and support, which he very much needed.

Nelson’s relationship with members of the family ranged from cordial (towards Henrietta), to **adoring** (his father and Rebecca), to warm (his mother and Bell). His reference to Henrietta’s marriage, in the letter of April 28, 1867, comes as a surprise, since Addie made no mention of it in her voluminous writings. This together with the fact that Nelson clearly had not come home for the ceremony suggests that a wedding—or this wedding—was not an occasion for a family gathering or a major celebration. None of Nelson’s letters in the collection was addressed to Henrietta, who was not living at home. The references to her are friendly but not intimate, and indicate that he was not in direct communication with her.

Rebecca appeared to have the traditional role of first daughter in the family: Assistant Mother. When he wrote that he would permit Leila to stay with her grandparents in **Hartford** through the summer, he cited Rebecca’s letter for reasons.

Nelson’s family loyalty extended to selling the book, *Women of the War*, door to door in Boston to help raise money for Rebecca’s school in Maryland.

---

14 Earlier, on Nov. 19, 1865, Addie wrote that Henrietta was rumored to be married to John Francis, but that Henrietta said “not so.” Typical of Addie to simply ask her if it was true. Henrietta married a man named Custus (spelling varies) who probably died; she later married Theodore Mitchell of the Hartford family.
In a marked departure from his usual style, he seemed to propose that Rebecca was not the only well-read family member. "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen," a quote from Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," was followed with comic bravado and possibly a bow to the original American go-getter, Benjamin Franklin:

Please to tell Mother to send me a copy of the book together with the canvassing book private instructions . . . & I will try to the best of my ability to use the most eloquent logic & influence that I can in selling them for my own sister, perhaps I can make money enough to go to Europe next fall & study, at any event I will work hard for it, I will get up in the morning and take a crust of Bread and canvass the city from morning until Night for I know that it will sell among the intelligent class of people . . . 15

A week later he wrote that he had "sold two books every day. . . I find that Boston has been pretty well canvassed by three women. People buy more readily of those women agents than of the men . . . "16 Still supportive in February of 1868, Nelson sent home a box of paintings to be sold or raffled at the fair to raise money for Rebecca's school.

Bell, two years younger than Nelson, was the recipient of half the letters, and clearly his closest friend at home. His tone was natural and unaffected when he addressed her directly. We feel that only for Bell would he clip a newspaper account of the grand ball his friends attended. "I wish that you had been here I know that you would have been the bell of that room for I

---

15Nelson to Bell Mar. 13, 1867]
16Nelson to Mrs. Primus Mar. 22, 1867]
have seen you when dressed look better than any Lady in the room."\(^{17}\)

Nelson hints at family troubles in several of his letters. I suspect he may have been overwrought about Bell on April 28, 1867:

I am willing for her [Leila] to remain on Bell's account, I thought if she were there she would devote Bell's leisure time & make her think less of the beau's i am pleased to here that she stays in more nights & out taking the clear air in the day. i most sincerely hope that she will be restored back to her former helth again. if by letting Leila stay. would do it, i would always let her remain. I hope that she will take my advice & let the young men slide, & never get married her condition cannot never be bettered. i will do all i can to help her & all of you when i get a start, my mind &thoughts are ever turned homeward Bound.

The references to Bell are nowhere explained. She did marry, had children, and lived to the age of 75.\(^ {18}\)

In none of his letters did Nelson mention Addie. This maybe explained by an early letter of Addie's! Writing to Rebecca in 1862, she seemed to have flirted her way into trouble: “in future I will treat your brother as any other young man acquaintance.” She acknowledged knowing that Rebecca didn’t like her ‘being friendly with him.” If Addie knew this, Nelson knew it as well, and was not anxious to tangle with either of them.\(^ {19}\)

Within his own household, Nelson’s daughter was the shining center of the universe. Writing to Bell on July 7, 1866, he mentioned for the first time

---

\(^ {17}\)Nelson to Bell Mar. 27, 1867.

\(^ {18}\)Isabelle married William B. Edwards who according to the 1915 Courant article cited earlier came from Maryland and worked for John H. Brockway until 1868. He then served as messenger for the Hartford Fire Insurance Company, and finally was superintendent of Center Church. They had, according to Zion Hill Cemetery records in the Primus Papers, two daughters, Lucille and Nellie (Singleton).

\(^ {19}\)Addie Oct. 28, 1862.
a problem with Leila, who was then at least fifteen months old:

Bell i assure you Leila has made a new start. she stands up by my side holding on my knee & her mother sits next to me Leila will reach out & take hold of her dress & go backward & forwards from Ret to me. all alone this is some thing that she never did before. she will walk by the time you get here.

In March of 1867, with Leila in Hartford, he wrote to Bell, “Please learn to walk.” By then she would have been two years old, and her not walk was a worry. She stayed in Hartford with her grandparents and Bell fi

March to September of 1867, and again from October until the end of the year. Nelson wrote, ‘We miss her very much, but finding & knowing it to her physical benefit. . . i think ill not regret the deprivation in the end.’ He seemed confident that in Hartford Leila had better care. With his income uncertain his daughter would have had a more comfortable life in Hartford, and Ret would be freer to earn money outside the home.

Ret did work. On November 30, 1867, Nelson wrote, “I spent [my, Thanksgiving] up to Mix. Rogers helping Ret. they sent for me to come up & do the carving they had twelve to dinner... Ret got all the ice cream she wanted that day...” Ret may have worked for Mrs. Rogers on a regular basis, since the family knew that Nelson could carve.

On March 7, 1868, Nelson wrote “Ret sets playing on the gitar. has lost her courage in dressmaking, & daires not to make the attempt out her sign.” It maybe that the women of the Primus family had encouraged Ret to take up dressmaking. On July 31, 1866, in a letter
Nelson made two references to sewing: 'Mr. & Mrs. Tredwell are well & wish to be remembered to you & Rebecca, she received the dress pattern. . . Ret & Sylvie have got their dresses done. . .," Rebecca and Bell must have offered to get Mrs. Tredwell a pattern during their recent visit to Boston, and may have helped Ret and Henry Jones’ wife start their dresses.20

If Ret was depressed in 1868, she had reasons. Her baby, afflicted with health or development problems, was a hundred miles away. Her husband had no steady income and no immediate prospects. She lacked the means or strength to help either one.

Nelson’s Appetite

In a cheerful frame of mind, Nelson described the Fourth of July, 1865, in Boston, as a day topped off by “a fine display of fireworks” on the Common, although they did not “come up to Hartford fireworks.” In the afternoon he had been one of fifty “colored men” who served dinner to a thousand guests of the City Council at Faneuil Hall. Nelson brought home a copy of the menu which he transcribed for his family’s edification:


20 In the same letter Nelson wrote, "Has Rebecca got rested yet. Miss Addie Howard asked me if had arrived home safe . . . Mr. & Mrs Tredwell are well & wish to be remembered to you & Rebecca . . ." He also wrote, “Leila is improving fast.” Because there are so many references to her health, it must have been fragile.

In the same letter he wrote:

How does your strawberries flourish this year as plenty as ever, have you got many cherries, I would like to drop in and tast one of your cherry pies. do you remember the many apiece of pie you have hid from me. . .

Nelson confirms for us that the Primus family kept a garden, with fruit trees, strawberries, and currant bushes, and surely raised some vegetables as well. In another letter Nelson mentioned currants that he brought back to Boston from Hartford, and at various times succotash, apples and corn. The corn may have been raised in the garden at 20 Wadsworth Street, or Holdridge may have brought it from Seyms & Co. where he worked. Nelson refers to pies and other home baked goods several times; the Primus family was making sure the Boston branch did not go hungry.

Nelson’s love of food crops up in unexpected places. His April 28, 1867 letter contains this curious juxtaposition: “I am glad to here that Henrietta has got so good a man for a husband. I wish them a life time happiness. i would like to tast one of her short cakes and one of Bell & your courent pies.” Poor Nelson was always hungry.

Writing after Thanksgiving dinner, November 29, 1866, he outlined a

---

21 Nelson to Bell July 7, 1866 for currants; Nelson to Bell Sept. 6, 1867 for corn and apples (he and Ret made pie of the apples after having corn every meal of the day until it was gone.)
modest feast that he had shared with Benajah Plato—a Hartford friend, brother of ‘Her Ladyship,” (Addie’s phrase) Gertrude Plato. The menu was “meet pie, oysters fried in crumbs, mashed potatoes & we wound up with an old fashion indian pudding.” Spending the holiday in Boston made him remember “olden times in Hartford when we used to go up to Aunt Bashes to dinner & spend the day & eve.”\textsuperscript{22}

His delight was clear on July 3, 1866, when he wrote to Bell that he had received the box of fruit his father sent “I tell you Bell it was the first time since i have been in Boston that i enjoyed any thing as much as i did the cake & cherries.” Leila, he added, ate all the strawberries.

**Hartford at a Distance**

It must have been hard for Nelson to contrast his own lot with that of his Hartford friends, Henry Jones and Peter Nott, both of whom appeared to be living carefree lives in Boston. He wrote, “Mr Jones & his wife went to the theater last night . . . Mr. Nott is not doing anything nor is not going to right away. he sayes that he is not in any hurry to go to wirk.” When Nelson requested that his Mother advance him money for pictures he was exhibiting and hoping to sell in Hartford, he wrote “please forward it by Henry Jones, as he expects to go to Hartford Friday to the dance, or by express.” And again, “The Boston young men give another grand Ball next monday night. . . Henry Sands).
& Sylvie & Peter Nott & wife Count upon going. . "23

Peter Nott I believe to be a younger brother of James Nott, who is listed in the household of Henry Nott in the Hartford 1860 census. In the 1865 Hartford City Directory both Peter and James were listed as porters, living at 9 Franklin Court with Mrs. Henry Nott-Henry had died and she would follow before long, as we know from Addie's letters. In 1867 the city directory lists only James Nott, porter, in Hartford at 14 State Street. Addie has described his propensity to drink. Peter is in Boston, spending his inheritance.

In adversity Nelson grew resentful of his Hartford admirers, both black and white. In November of 1866 he wrote,

I am sorry that my pictures do not sell any faster, those who pretend to think so much of me & my greatest friends are not willing to spend a dollar to help me. (This is the way to test your friends) i am depending wholly on them i have no other means to support my family. my card business is dull. Mrs. Seyms can't get her pictures painted any better by & by than she can now. another thing i would not do them so cheap when i have plenty to do and i woud now. & it would be a help to me to finish my studies, it showes the sympathy those people have for me i have got enough of Hartford, I have got two more pictures nearly done, i think i shall put them in the store here it will be better than sending them home. Mother as i told you before that i depending on the sale of these pictures to helpe me along to finish my studdies. you will do me a great favor, as they do not sell as fast as i anticipated, by letting me have some money until1 they are sold & then you can take your pay out of that. if you will grant me this favor, please forward it by Henry Jones, as he expects to go to H. Friday to the dance, or by express. I do not think that i shll be able to join you, in company south this winter, as i have met with bad luck. .24

---

23Nelson to Holdridge Primus May 28, 1866; to Mrs Primus Sept. 2, 1866; to Mrs. Primus Mar. 22, 1867.

24Nelson to Mrs. Primus Nov. 29, 1866; Card business I take to be sign painting.
& Sylvie & Peter Nott & wife Count upon going. . ."23

Peter Nott I believe to be a younger brother of James Nott, who is listed in the household of Henry Nott in the Hartford 1860 census. In the 1865 Hartford City Directory both Peter and James were listed as porters, living at 9 Franklin Court with Mrs. Henry Nott-Henry had died and she would follow before long, as we know from Addie's letters. In 1867 the city directory lists only James Nott, porter, in Hartford at 14 State Street. Addie has described his propensity to drink. Peter is in Boston, spending his inheritance.

In adversity Nelson grew resentful of his Hartford admirers, both black and white. In November of 1866 he wrote,

I am sorry that my pictures do not sell any faster, those who pretend to think so much of me & my greatest friends are not willing to spend a dollar to help me. (This is the way to test your friends) i am depending wholly on them i have no other means to support my family. my card business is dull. Mrs. Seyms can't get her pictures painted any better by & by than she can now. another thing i would not do them so cheap when i have plenty to do and i woud now. & it would be a help to me to finish my studies, it showes the sympathy those people have for me, i have got enough of Hartford, I have got two more pictures nearly done, i think i shall put them in the store here it will be better than sending them home. Mother as i told you before that i depending on the sale of these pictures to helpe me along to finish my studdies. you will do me a great favor, as they do not sell as fast as i anticipated, by letting me have some money until1 they are sold & then you can take your pay out of that. if you will grant me this favor, please forward it by Henry Jones, as he expects to go to H. F'riday to the dance, or by express. I do not think that i shll be able to join you, in company south this winter, as i have met with bad luck. . .24

---

23Nelson to Holdridge Primus May 28, 1866; to Mrs. Primus Sept. 2, 1866; to Mrs. Primus Mar. 22, 1867.

24Nelson to Mrs. Primus Nov. 29, 1866. Card business I take to be sign painting.
Mrs. Seyms, a white woman, wife of the proprietor of the store where Holdridge was long-time porter, had evidently delayed an order for paintings. Henry Jones went often to Hartford—once perhaps on a whim, having told his wife only that he would be late for dinner. At the end of the letter quoted above, Nelson regretted that he will not be able to go on the trip his mother and Bell were planning, to visit Rebecca in Maryland. The trip was one of many good times he missed because of lack of money.

Still he maintained his ties to the Hartford network. He stayed in touch with such hometown connections as Charles Mitchell, who made his mark in Boston politics, and his sister Clara, whom Nelson first mentions seeing last Wednesday eve at the music Hall, Winters St. at the Anti-Slavery Anniversary, which meet once a year, bothe colored and white meet there as if they were all of one color... I... had quite a chat with her, how she has grown, she spoke of you all, she is stoping on Anderson St. with her brother. . .”

Nelson informed the folks at home that “Mr. Ross the Methodist minister stationed in Hartford this year, came from Boston” and "Mr. Washington is stationed here this year, the one that used to preach in Hartford” Justin Hall was a Hartford friend who evidently wanted to relocate to Boston, and relied on Nelson to help him out, as outlined in the April 28, 1867 letter.

---

25 Nelson to Bell July 3, 1866.
26 Nelson to Holdridge Primus Jan. 28, 1866.
27 Nelson to Mrs. Primus July 10, 1865.
Benajah, or Dr. Plato, as Nelson sometimes calls him, seemed to move back and forth between Hartford and Boston, teaching, preaching, and practicing medicine. His school, Nelson wrote, was “right in back of our house,” and he tried to persuade Nelson to move to Philadelphia where there was a medical college. There was an art academy there as well.28 Regarding other Hartford news, Nelson expressed sorrow at the death of Mr. Freeman’s wife and of Miss L. Conover. Mr. Freeman, member of the Talcott Street Church choir, was a key figure in Addie’s fine tale, and Miss Conover was sponsor of one of the many festivals Addie catalogued for Rebecca.29

As his difficulties increased, Nelson’s sense of family solidarity seemed to grow stronger: His family, after all, never let him down:

You can tell Father that he may send on the money this week, if convenient. I hope that I shall be able to repay him for his kindness to me through life, at no far distant day, he has been a good father to us all, I did not appreciate it until I want out into the world among different people & different minds. I am willing to spend a life time to please him, if it will only repay him for his kindness to us all. if I study hard & tend strict to my profession I hope to reach to the hight of my ambition . . . 30

Nelson had to borrow money from his parents again later in 1867, and when he went home to Hartford he did yard work rather than visiting friends and neighbors. Either the young man of promise felt he was failing to live up to expectations, or he blamed Hartford for not providing the help he needed--I

28 Nelson to Bell Jan. 27, 1867.

29 "Aunt Emily has gone up to the church, a festival there . . . to aid the sick. Miss L. Baily, Mrs. Connover is the head of it.” Addie Nov. 16, 1865.

30 Nelson to Bell Jan. 27, 1867.
would guess both. Back in Boston Nelson wrote

I thank you & Father most kindly for my present, i did not intend for you to give them to me for what little fixing up I did about the house was all ready paid for years agoe . . . I was pleased the last sunday eve that Rebecca was there to see all the familey united in one band again around the table at tea, i hope that it will always continue to be so let us all be unitted, we may have trubbles to cross our path let us all take them thinking that they are not worse then what they are, it has been a pest to the hartford people to see us trying to get along & they have done all they could to brake us up . . . that is one reason i did not among the colord people when i was there, i see they could not do me any good therefore i took more solid comfore fixing up the yard . . . when i come home this time i hope to bring father his money that he lent to me.31

It is impossible to interpret the suggestion both of troubles overcome and ill-will on the part of others in Hartford. Neither Addie nor Rebecca makes any reference to such affairs. There is no reason to suppose that the Primus family, or Hartford’s black community, was without problems and differences.

Nelson’s Views

Like Addie, Nelson followed current events, particularly when the interests and welfare of blacks were involved. In his July 10, 1865 letter he mentioned hearing

Mr. Hamilton editor of the anglo-African at Mr. Grimes Church, also William wells Brown . . . also Mr. Smith from Washington raising subscriptions for the Lincoln monument association, he is the same gentleman that was on to Hartfort Just as the war broke out, trying to get colored people to enlist in the Mass. Reg. fifty fourth.

31Nelson to Mrs. Primus Oct. 18, 1867.
He remarked on the new Sunday liquor law in Boston, which was “raising the ire of the Liquor Dealers association” and turning to national politics quoted the “loyal papers of this state” that called President Andrew Johnson “the meanest man on record of which he deserves, and to ‘impeach him would be doing justice.” In this instance his judgment was less harsh than Addie’s.

As for religion, he declared himself a believer, but was not an active participant in church affairs. It may be that in Boston he missed the community of the Talcott Street Church. One speculates that his interest in the Episcopal rite may have had more to do with esthetics than theology. In any case there is the possibility that Nelson was more of a freethinker than his family might have liked. He was in no position to risk their disapproval by announcing such a view, but his statements of faith read like quotes from sermons rather than his own thoughts.

Nelson makes several harsh pronouncements on the subject of class. He stated no particular view of whites beyond the very dignified treatment of his refusing to work for the white man who wanted to underpay him. His sense of class, like Addie’s, came out in occasional disparaging remarks. One example is in the April 28, 1867 letter: “I often feel greatful to see how i have been traned up. different from most of our poor low colored people. . . ” and another is a remarkably comic prescription:

32Nelson to Holdridge Primus May 28, 1866.
33Nelson to Mrs. Primus Apr. 28, 1867.
34See the Sample Letter of April 28, 1867, the very long third paragraph.
... it is turning out with those freed girles just as i said the only way to get along with them is, when you tell them any thing is to have a big club, & every word you say knock them on the head, that is the only way i find to keep them in there place . . . 35

There is in the above a note of contempt that may be attributable to his youth. The note is struck several times-- in his not wanting his house to become the "depot for all the colored people from Hartford;" in his saying he had been "traned up different from most of our poor low colored people;" in his not mingling with the "colord people [in Hartford]. . . i see they could not do me any good." Nelson was not only young, he was experiencing disappointments that were unquestionably exacerbated by his being black. He complains only once about racial discrimination against himself, but clearly it existed and clearly he felt it.

An anti-Irish sentiment is contained in this note:

I see by the papers that we have had quite a riot in New York, saint Pat day, i would like to take those mick's & have my way with them, i would soon show them what it was to fite, the New York people are eat up with them, & now they can see how they treat them in return, i donot care if they only let the colored people alone . . . 36

Nelson wrote home about a First of August celebration, commemorating the freeing of slaves in the West Indies by Britain in 1827. In his remarks he speculates that the Primus family will probably take part in such an event in

---

35Nelson to Mrs. Primus Oct. 27, 1867. Addie has also referred to the freed girls, who appear to be staying at the Primus home presumably for help in finding work, and for training in the ways of the Yankees as well.

36Nelson to Mrs. Primus Mar. 22, 1867.
Hartford. For blacks, this date had more significance than the Fourth of July as an Independence Day. While August 1 celebrations had been used by Abolitionists as a platform to urge the end of slavery in the United States, The date was not observed in Hartford, according to David White, until 1860, but once begun, it continued to be observed as a holiday by blacks even after the end of the Civil War.37 Nelson wrote from Boston:

Tomorrow a great many of the Boston people are going to New Bedford to attend the first of Aug. a picnic. the Shaw guards are a going, i would like to go if i could afford it possibly, & then come to H[artford] on the 2nd. I presume that you count upon having great times on Thursday, i would like to be there to help participate. I suppose you [Justin] Hall will be a saleing. . . . please tell him my mouth is a wattering for some of his wattermelons.38

On the whole Nelson was much less inclined than Addie to dwell on personalities, but he did, as we have seen, make his views known in some instances. For reasons not explained, he wrote to Bell in March of 1867 when the baby was in Hartford, "do not take Leila up to Jacksons. I do not want Harriet to see her nor say anything to her. For I am down on her."39

As for supplying more information about Hartford life, Nelson's report of a conversation with Henry Jones confirmed that rental property was available in Hartford to blacks--an obvious truth for which I have found no


38Nelson to Bell July 31, 1867.

39Nelson to Bell, Mar. 13, 1867.
other direct proof. Henry was trying to sell two houses he owned in Hartford, one on Cedar Street, a block from Primus's, valued at $4,500, and the other "down by south green" which he valued at $5,000. His reason for selling was that "rents don't bring much" and in any case he wanted to buy in Boston.40

A last note, on Nelson's prose, which was distinguished by a formality that did not, like Addie's, often collapse into direct communication. Nelson felt obliged to assume a maturity he could hardly support, and the result is a wish on the reader's part for a few letters written later in life, to see how he turned out. While Addie in the letters is the same Addie she would have been in ten or fifty years, Nelson was an unfinished personality.

Regarding his writing, the inconsistent use of the small i for the personal pronoun is curious, as is his attaching an a to a verb: again, agetting. Mark Twain pointed out this construction as a characteristic of Southern speech.41 Nelson's English on the whole tends to be closer to standard than Addie's, and he seems better read. His spelling is indifferent (wirk, caussion), and his punctuation, like hers, is poor. Accidental or not, his puns are nice: on chime and charm in the paragraph about hearing the bells on Boston Common, and on Bell as the bell of the ball she did not attend.

It is impossible to guess how much schooling Nelson had, but he displayed knowledge of standard items of English literature, and showed that he followed local and national news to some extent.

40Nelson to Bell Mar. 7, 1868.
Beyond the Letters

The Primuses were a hopeful family. They had, by diligence and hard work, obtained a home of their own, raised four children to be decent Christian citizens, and earned a place of prominence in the black community. With other blacks of the time they believed that as they showed themselves to be a worthy people by educating their children and working hard to improve their lot, they would one day be admitted to full citizenship and accepted by whites as the true Americans they were.

Given this, it was possible for the Primuses to allow Nelson—to encourage him—to become an artist. And no doubt Nelson had demonstrated to them that he would not be swayed from his purpose. The contact with Bannister made Boston his first step, and he made some progress there. But lack of money or connections or both put a stop to his hopes for European training.

Life got no easier for Nelson after the letters stopped. Ret died, and Leila. One source gives Amoretta's date of death as July 18, 1876.42

Nelson was listed in the Boston city directory until 1889. One known work of his is a copy of an enormous "Christ before Pilate," twelve feet by eight. The original, by Michael Munkassy, a Hungarian, had been brought to the United States in 1886 and exhibited in Boston. Nelson's copy was shown in Boston in 1891 and again in 1894. He took it on tour, with his second wife,

---

42Document, "Nelson Chronology" in Hildy Cummings material at Benton Museum, University of Connecticut. Other data on Nelson in this section are from Ms. Cummings' collection of letters, clippings, and pamphlets.
Mary, lecturing on the painting and on Nelson's career. He was reported to be in Seattle when his father died in 1894. He may have been on tour with the painting.

Not many of his works remain. An early painting of his, a trout-piece, purchased by the Talcott Street Congregational Sunday School, has apparently been lost. Reproductions of two works are in a 1989 Oakland, California publication, Black Perspectives: "The Fortune Teller," oil on canvasboard, about eight by ten inches, done in 1898; and a genre painting of a robed Chinese man smoking a long pipe. The information given on the artist is as follows: "Settling in San Francisco in the late 1890's, artist Primus (ca 1842 - 1916) was originally from New England where he had earned the title, "Primus of Boston."

However much he loved and valued his family, something kept Nelson from coming home to Hartford. The alienation from the city that he felt had failed him may have turned to bitterness, or the sorrow at the loss of both wife and child may have made the East abhorrent to him.

It is ironic that he settled in San Francisco, where Holdridge had gone in 1849 seeking his fortune with the Warburton company.

In 1897 he was living in Chinatown, where one source says he "found help and friendship."43 From there he wrote on April 28, 1899, after the death of his mother, resigning as executor of his father's estate. Mary, his wife, witnessed the letter of resignation. In 1900 he was living in a boarding

house at 1006 Washington Street. Reportedly the earthquake of 1906 destroyed the mammoth Monkassy copy.

At his death, May 29, 1916, he was 74 years old. His death certificate lists the cause as pulmonary tuberculosis, his occupation as laborer.44

Nelson Primus had talent, ambition, and a fiery need to become an artist. His life story invites the speculation that he was a man with a self-imposed mission which he placed above everything else. He separated himself from family and friends by moving away, as gifted people often do, from the security of a known way of life, in search of freedom of expression, a life in art. The cost of such a move is loneliness, isolation, and usually poverty. Nelson never got the training he sought, never had the luck that sparks fame and recognition. But he painted all his life, an artist through sheer determination.

Unlike women of the white society, black women were encouraged to become educated to aid in the improvement of their race.¹

From the first day she walked into the classroom, her teachers must have seen in Rebecca Primus a youngster who could be groomed for a role in the great work that lay ahead for a rising people. And the teachers in Hartford's African School were some of the best role models the black community had to offer. In 1842, when Rebecca was six and certainly in school, the Reverend J. W. C. Pennington and his wife taught in the Talcott Street Congregational Church, where Pennington was pastor. In 1844, Augustus Washington, the daguerreotypist with two years at Dartmouth College to his credit, took over the First District African School, while Miss Ann Plato, whose landmark book had been published three years earlier, taught at the Second District School. Selah Africanus, a civil rights proponent who took part in the 1849 convention of Connecticut blacks, served as First District teacher from 1847 to 1850.

Rebecca's later life confirms that she absorbed from these teachers a sense of pride in her race, a personal stake in the struggle for "justice," and

the understanding that education was the key to that achievement. Her own family and its status in the community must have contributed to her developing a sense of mission. Because education was the area that appealed to her and where her talents lay, she found a home in the classroom.

It seems certain that she knew Ann Plato and her work; echoes of it appear in Rebecca's poem, "I've Lost a Day," a formal, moralistic lament she wrote at the age of 20. She may not have known Maria Stewart, but surely knew of her. Abolitionist Maria Stewart had left Hartford in the 1830s, but as both orator and journalist had achieved a national reputation that would have been followed with interest in the city.

Inevitably, Rebecca Primus became a teacher. We have no information on where she got her training, but direct statements in Addie's letters confirm that she did keep a school. As if by design, then, when the call came for volunteers to bring literacy to the freedmen, Rebecca was ready.

In 1865, at the end of the war, the Freedmen's Bureau in Washington D.C. instituted a national effort to provide food, clothing, shelter, skills, tools, and education to former slaves. Hartford's response was to form a Freedmen's Aid Society, made up of influential, liberal--and white--members of Hartford's elite, with Professor Calvin Stowe, husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe, as President. Among the Directors were two members of the Cheney silk-manufacturing dynasty, the Reverend N. J. Burton, Pastor of the First

---

2Addie Dec. 1, 1861: "I see you still have your private school . . ." and Jan. 10, 1862: "I imagine [you] with you[r] pupils around you and giving them good instruction."

3The Stowes moved to Hartford in 1864.
Congregational Church, and Nelson Kingsbury, sometime operator of a textile mill and longtime civil rights activist.

A year later, the Hartford Society had changed in size and makeup. The post of Acting President had been created, suggesting that Professor Stowe was President only for letterhead purposes. The number of directors had jumped from nine to twenty-three, and most significant among the additions were two black women, Mrs. Holdridge Primus and Mrs. L. W. Saunders.4

The work of the Freedmen's Society had thus effected a giant step forward in race relations in Hartford: important and influential representatives of both black and white society met together on something approaching an equal basis, working for a common cause. It proved to be a significant starting point, since two years later, in 1867, Mrs. Primus was named a Director of the newly-formed Women's Christian Association, on which she served until 1871.

But the most far-reaching action of the Society was to send five teachers south to teach the newly-freed slaves. Rebecca Primus was the only black among them, but certainly not the only black teacher who went South after the War.5 In a complicated arrangement, she reported to the Hartford

4No L. W. Saunders appears either in the U.S. Census or the City Directories for these years. I base the above assertion on this from Rebecca's letter to her mother on Mar. 16, 1868: "I've no doubt the Soc'y meeting was quite interesting does Mrs. Saunders attend them?" There would be no reason for her to single out one of twenty-two white women to ask about.

5Rebecca Primus was the only black teacher sent by the Hartford Freedmen's Society. Among the other black teachers who taught in the South after the war was Josephine Booth, a Hartford native who then lived in Springfield, Mass. In Baltimore in 1865 awaiting her first assignment, Rebecca stayed at a boarding house that catered to black teachers.
Society, which paid her salary; to the New York National Freedmen's Relief Association, which supervised local chapters; and to the Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational Improvement of the Colored People, which supervised the school she established.

Rebecca Takes Up the Cause

*The efforts of the northern black female in the education of her race in the South during and after the Civil War have frequently been overlooked in educational history. Motivated primarily by the philosophy of self-help and race solidarity espoused within the black communities of the North, hundreds of black women journeyed south after the outbreak of war in 1861.*

Rebecca was thirty years old when she left for Baltimore and her new teaching venture. We can be sure that she and her mother, with help from Bell, sewed every garment she took along, and that her wardrobe was plain, serviceable, well-made, and tasteful. Rebecca had traveled before, but this was a longer journey in a new direction. Yankee-like, she kept track of every vehicle and conveyance, every stop—seventeen between Philadelphia and Baltimore—and every penny spent:

Expenses: $6.65 on the cars
.50 carriage
.50 baggage
2.00 on the boat
.75 baggage (from the boat to Jersey City)

---

6Perkins, 1049.

7Rebecca, Baltimore Nov. 8, 1865. One of Addie's early letters is addressed to Rebecca in Maine; in her letter of Feb. 16, 1867 Rebecca refers to someone she knew at Springfield high school.
Her assignment was to Royal Oak, Talbot County, on the Eastern Shore in Maryland. She boarded there with a couple named Thomas who owned land nearby, but rented the house they lived in. Mr. Thomas, a former slave, worked in a sawmill, but also farmed, kept horses, and had done a variety of jobs. Literate and energetic, he was active in local politics and served as one of Royal Oak's three black school commissioners.\(^8\)

After walking around Baltimore the day after her first arrival Rebecca wrote, "I have already seen almost as many colored people as there are in the whole of Hartford."\(^9\) That was an urban discovery; Royal Oak offered rural experiences, such as hog killing week, which caused school attendance to fall off, and "roasted Possum" for dinner.\(^10\)

Blacks in Royal Oak had no school and no schooling before Rebecca's arrival. Classes in what became the Primus Institute were held in a church for the first two years, and they consisted of daytime instruction, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., for boys and girls, evening classes for grownups, and Sabbath School for all who wished to attend. A full schedule for one lone teacher.

Rebecca wrote with pride of her students. For her monthly reports she kept records on their numbers, and frequently included figures on attendance.

\(^8\)Information from a letter in Hildy Cummings' Nelson Primus material, from Percy V. Williams, Assistant State Superintendent, Division of Education, Baltimore, Maryland, dated June 28, 1972. See also footnote 105.

\(^9\)Rebecca, Royal Oak Nov. 8, 1865. In 1860 the black population of Baltimore was 27,892. The total population of Hartford was 29,152. Baltimore's black population was 38 times Hartford's 716.

\(^10\)Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 14, 1866; Feb. 2, 1867.
in the letters home. When she was beginning her second year of teaching, she wrote that five of her pupils from the previous year were among the eleven callers she had had on a Sunday afternoon.\textsuperscript{11} Of the returning students she was happy to report: "those that came [back] have lost nothing during the vacation, & I have bright hopes for their future course."\textsuperscript{12}

Before her first school year was over, Rebecca decided that the school needed its own building, and set about getting one. She was not the only Bureau teacher to raise money and build a school, but her resourcefulness and determination attracted attention.\textsuperscript{13} "Mr. E. C. Estes commends me very highly for my perseverance in getting assistance to build the schoolhouse," she wrote on March 10, 1867. On April 20, she had received more praise from him: "He added that 'twould be very gratifying to me to know what pleasing statements the Assoc[iat]ion sent them relative to my exertions to get assistance for building our schoolhouse here . . ."

The Rev. Mr. Burton wrote from Hartford a "friendly letter" which "cheered me considerably by saying how willing the members seemed to be to aid in building our school house. He says my letters are read at their meetings & they are just what they need to keep up the interest in the cause."

A more homely word of praise came from Mr. Thomas's uncle, who

\textsuperscript{11}Rebecca, Royal Oak Oct. 1, 1866.

\textsuperscript{12}Rebecca, Royal Oak Oct. 6, 1866.

\textsuperscript{13}Rebecca wrote that her friend Miss Dickson, Freedmen's Bureau teacher in Trappe, MD, was "in her new schoolhouse" on Feb. 8, 1867.
declared that "if I should get up a dog fight I would do well at it, for whatever I attempt everybody thinks it's all right. I can't vouch for this but I do say, that these people seem to aid me all they can whenever I call upon them."

Raising money, Rebecca was relentless. She recruited help from white and black Hartford, from the residents of Royal Oak, and from the Freedmen's Bureau itself. "I've enclosed an appeal to the New York Sec'y with my report for assistance towards the land for our school house, out of the portion that would have been appropriated for my board here." The Rev. Mr. Burton in Hartford also wrote to Mr. Israel, of the New York Society, "about the schoolhouse." The pressure paid off. On February 8, 1867, she reported, "Mr. Estes writes from NY that the Society will pay for land for the school."

Getting the land was another matter. Rebecca wrote that the original seller, a "hard-headed old negro-hating secessionist" refused to sell at the last minute, so Mr. Thomas agreed to sell a parcel of his land for the school.

She enlisted help in Royal Oak on her own and through Mr. Thomas's connections: "We've had trees given to us for all the sills for our school house, and all of them from southern rights men, which I think shows they have no

14Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 8, 1868.

15Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 2, 1867. The arrangements for her compensation are nowhere clarified. The Hartford Society paid her $30 a month salary; the New York Bureau took care of other expenses--possibly travel, board and room.

16Rebecca, Royal Oak Jan. 11, 1867.

17Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 16, 1867.
real hostile feelings towards the col'd school, but are rather in favor of it. "18

She held fund-raising exhibitions, with her students demonstrating their new competencies:

I've copied off two dialogues for them one in which five will take a part & the other for two girls only. There are 30 learning pieces, then I'm also learning them some new pieces to sing. They've got "Auld Lang Syne," "Dare & do," & "Stars & Stripes" so that they can sing them well, & they've only been practising them about two weeks. Whatever they like they soon learn & it's just the same with their lessons.19

The residents of Royal Oak were as enthusiastic as Rebecca. "You wish to know whether those who attend school exhibit the same interest in it, I wish you could see for yourselves & then you'd think they had. The school is the topic at home & abroad, among the children as well as adults."20

Through Nelson she requested a contribution from Henry Jones in Boston.21 She even persuaded Nelson, on the brink of destitution, to sell books door to door to raise money for her school.22 She did the same: on March 2, 1867 she reviewed her sales and discovered she had sold $65 worth.

The fair in February of 1867 that in Addie's telling dazzled all of Hartford

---

18Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 30, 1867. Additional information is found in a letter in the materials assembled by Hildegard Cummings on Nelson Primus at the Benton Museum, University of Connecticut. Dated June 28, 1972, it is from the Maryland Dept. of Education, and signed by Percy V. Williams, Asst. State Superintendent, Division of Compensatory, Urban and Supplementary Programs. The letter states that the Primus Institute was built in 1865 [according to Rebecca's letters it was 1867] from lumber "said to have been used in a barracks for housing troops during the Civil War."

19Rebecca, Royal Oak May 25, 1867.

20Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 16, 1867.

21Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 23, 1867.

22Nelson to Rebecca Mar. 13, 1867.
raised $200, the largest single contribution to the fund. Money was also raised by subscription, a pledge to pay a given amount over a specified time. Perry Davis, a black property owner and deacon of the Zion Methodist Church, was one of those who sold subscriptions. Hartford Freedmen's Society records show that he returned varying sums of money collected from subscribers, certainly all of them black. From the letters it is clear that he wanted to charge the Society for his collection duties: "I thought Mr. Perry Davis had some strong motive by his exhibiting so much interest. You should likewise demand a fee. Your service is worth quite as much as his."23

The service she referred to was Mrs. Primus' placing freed women in jobs in the North. Rebecca mentioned them several times, as did Nelson, memorably. Through the Society, women who wanted work were sent to individuals who could find them positions. Holdridge and Mehitable already had employment contacts established, and apparently added this service their operation. Mrs. Primus took freed girls into her home to help acclimate them to their new surroundings and make sure they understood what was expected of them. Evidence of this occurs in several of the letters. Following a paragraph about the Hartford Freedmen's Society, Rebecca asked her mother, "Does Mrs. Cargill still retain her girl?"24 And later, showing how the social networks could expand, "Now about the girl you have with you. I told

23Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 23, 1867. Perry Davis, a Maryland native, owned $2500 worth of Hartford real estate in 1860 when he was 40. Employed as a porter, he was Clerk and Deacon at the Zion Methodist Church.

24Rebecca, Royal Oak April 28, 1867. Mrs. Cargill, a white woman who lives at 24 Wadsworth Street, is a neighbor of the Primuses. Her daughter Ida is mentioned elsewhere in the letters.
Mr. Thos of the probable connexion, he says it may be for he has an aunt that was sold away from here years ago and she's never been heard from since."25 In another letter, after expressing surprise that Mrs. Primus, with the help of a "freed girl," had finished her spring cleaning, "I think you've been very expeditious with all your drawbacks. I hope that girl will try to do well at whatever place you get for her . . ."26 Rebecca and her family were meeting with the particulars and effects of slavery on a personal level.

25Rebecca, Royal Oak May 11, 1867.

26Rebecca, Royal Oak June 1, 1867.
(The following document is among the Primus Papers. It is signed by Rebecca and dated September 1, 1867, about midway through her service in Maryland.)

Having been asked to make a few statements this eve'g. relative to my mission south during the past two years, I thought perhaps it might be interesting to my friends to do so, & therefore have taken up my pen to make the attempt.

I began my labors upon the eastern shore of Maryland the 11th of Dec, 1865 by opening a day & night school in the church, under the auspices of the Balto. Asson. an organization formed solely for the moral and educational improvement of the cold people of that state.

I began with 10 day & 26 night scholars, the number soon increased to 75, including persons of all ages. the adults attending the night session.

But few, very few could read, others only knew the letters or a part of them, yet the greater portion knew nothing about them. In a remarkably short time many learned them & also to read in "Sheldon's First Reading Book" quite well, now they're using "Hillards Third Reader," can spell well, study Geog. & Arith. & are learning to write. The children can make figures rapidly & write upon slates legibly.

The Actuary of the Asson has visited the day school twice & expressed himself well pleased with the proficiency they had made.

We have a flourishing & a very interesting Sabbath School in operation numbering between 50 & 60 members who seem to take great delight in attending it. Two thirds of them read in the Testament & answer questions therefrom with readiness.

They take great delight in perusing the S.S. papers that have been sent them from this school & by others in this city, being something entirely new to them, they've ever been recd with evident satisfaction.

I have distributed them once a month but having now nearly disposed of my stock, unless I can obtain a fresh supply I shall be unable to gratify them with them very much longer.

I have also occasionally sent them to other schools where they've also been recd with the same gratification.

We are now building a school house 34 by 24 ft. which is expected to be completed by the first of Oct. It is of wood & is being fitted up as
comfortably and as nicely as other school houses. It will probably cost a little over $400 00/100 we've already paid over $300. & $200 of this sum were furnished us by our Hartford friends & sympathizers. The recipients know not how to fully express their gratitude for this munificent gift.

They are all just beginning life, as it were, for many of them were made free by the Emancipation Act-- for which they revere the name of "Abraham Lincoln", but they are industrious, & hopeful of the future, their interest in the school is unabated & many of them deny themselves in order to sustain it.

The government has promised to assist in defraying the cost of the building &c. so that we hope to have no expenses upon it after it is finished.

I have now given a sketch of my work South, which I hope may be approved, & for want of time I close.

Hartfd Sept. 1st 1867. 

Rebecca Primus
Construction of the schoolhouse took longer than expected, but when she returned to Royal Oak for the fall term in 1867, Rebecca wrote that the building was up, and that the government had "taken the balance of our expenses upon itself and it will soon be entirely paid for. It is surrounded by a neat fence which has been whitewashed." She was planning a dedication ceremony for the following Sunday, with representatives from Washington expected, and a Bishop Wayman as well.27

Completed, the building measured 24 by 34 by 13 feet high, "a little larger," she had point out earlier, "than the white school house here." A letter from the Maryland State Department of Education states that the "Primus Institute" was built from "lumber said to have been used in a barracks for housing troops during the Civil War," and that as of 1972 it was still standing.28

While construction was in progress Rebecca mused, "When our schoolhouse is built the distance I shall then have to walk will be I judge just about the length of our street--from Buckingham to Park, I mean."29 She walked that distance daily, weather permitting, for just two more school years.

The nation, tired of war, tired also of Reconstruction; radical

27Rebecca, Royal Oak Sept. 30, 1867. The Freedmens Bureau in Washington had agreed to pay remaining costs of the building.

28Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 30, 1867 for measurements; Mar. 2, 1867 for description; Mar. 23, 1867 for comparison with white school. The Maryland Dept. of Education letter, cited in footnote 18, was dated June 28, 1972.

29Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 23, 1867.
Republicanism lost its constituency with its appeal. In 1869 the national Freedmen's Bureau was discontinued, funding cut off, the teachers called home. In view of this action in Washington, the the local Freedmen's Aid Society decided to follow suit, and withdrew its support as well. The Hartford Courant was not distressed:

The Hartford Freedmen's Aid society, which was organized in June, 1865, was formally dissolved at its managers' meeting on the first of the present month. The society has accomplished a very successful work during the four years of its existence, and presents a most honorable and praiseworthy record.

For two years five schools were supported by the generous contributions of our citizens, and for the last year three—those of Miss Carrie Loomis at Columbia, S.C., Miss Rebecca H. Elwell at Washington, D.C., and Miss Rebecca Primus, (colored) at the Primus Institute, Royal Oak, Md. . . . Too much praise can not be awarded to these teachers, whose self-sacrificing and truly missionary spirit has accomplished so much good . . .

Miss Primus's school has been partially sustained by the freedmen in the vicinity, and reflects great credit upon her ability and thoroughness as an instructor.

At this time the cutting off of the bureau supplies, with the abolition of all but the Normal schools, and the diversion of funds at home into other channels equally beneficent, makes the abandonment of the present organization unavoidable. The managers therefore desire to return their grateful acknowledgments to those who have generously supported the society, and to bespeak for the cause a continued interest. . . .

Staunchly Republican, the Courant had supported Abolition, the Union cause, and the impeachment of Andrew Johnson. To form a picture of the

times, it is instructive to note the tone of this and other articles dealing with similar matters: "the cutting off of the bureau supplies . . . and the diversion of funds at home into other channels equally beneficent, makes the abandonment of the present organization unavoidable."

Rebecca's last letter, dated July 3, 1869, did not mention the end of the mission, only that the end of the term was at hand.

**Rebecca and the Family Circle**

I can not conceive how it is others aside from my own folks are so desirous to peruse my letters. I can not think they are so very interesting. I never expected or even thought of any others perusing them. Why don't you read them to Miss Wells yourself, for I do not think they always bear inspection.\(^{31}\)

The home circle was Rebecca's base. She wrote her "home weeklie" faithfully every Saturday, letters usually covering twelve to sixteen leaves of paper, purposefully documenting her role in the uplifting of the race. The letters to the family were private, and so treated; Addie was allowed to read them because of her adoptive kinship. No doubt parts were read aloud to others, but two of Rebecca's constant topics, her own state of health, and racial incidents, were not for public scrutiny. It is my belief that the letters read at Freedmen's Society meetings were not those written to "My Dear Parents & Sister"—her usual salutation, but separate messages sent with

\(^{31}\)Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 7, 1866.
her monthly reports.\textsuperscript{32}

She was easy and affectionate with her parents and Bell—and her cat, Jim, whose offspring, Jim Jr., was with her at the Thomas's.\textsuperscript{33} She was concerned, protective, and sometimes patronizing towards Nelson. When he sent Leila to stay with the Primuses in Hartford, he provided written guidance for her care, ignoring the fact that his mother had raised four children without his help. Rebecca wrote, "I don't see what he's sent so many rules to govern her by for, he goes upon extremes . . ." Later she asked, " . . . how do the Rules work--well or otherwise?"\textsuperscript{34}

Still, she mentioned him often and wanted to help him. Upon being informed that he was unable to make the trip to Baltimore with Mrs. Primus and Bell, she wrote:

I am very sorry for I know he is disappointed & if I had the money in hand I would defray all of his expenses. Will you please get me a nice little Turkey for him and send it on immediately that they can have it for their Christmas dinner. Benajah [Plato] dined with them Thanksgiving day. He's [Nelson, that is] got the idea of going to Europe again upon his mind. I'm glad he's succeeded in getting a good tenement to live in. I guess they find it much more desirable and comfortable too. Don't forget or neglect to send the Turkey. Make out my Bill & bring with you that I may know just how much they all cost.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{32}On June 2, 1866 she wrote that she had written to Mrs. F. Cheney but would "not write to Mrs. E. D. Cheney till Monday, though I've the Report ready."

\textsuperscript{33}On Mar. 2, 1867 Rebecca wrote, "My little Jim hurt his foot last night & this A.M. I've been bathing it w/Rum, and he thinks it's awful . . ."

\textsuperscript{34}Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar 16, 1867; Mar. 23, 1867.

\textsuperscript{35}Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 14, 1866.
The tenement, I judge, was a better arrangement than the rooms in Mr. Hawkings' house. At least Nelson's family had a place of their own.

Rebecca's relationships with her sisters were quite distinct. Towards Henrietta she seemed politely distant, and her questions in the letters make it clear that the two were not close. Rebecca's remarks also seem to confirm that the circumstances of Henrietta's marriage were unusual. In March of 1867, Rebecca commented,

So Henrietta and her husband have attended church together once... Gert alluded to her being out alone one Sabbath & also how very nice she looked... Give my love to them both. I suppose they're getting along well.36

Both Rebecca and Gert (Gertrude Plato) skirted the issue by not asking why Henrietta's husband did not regularly accompany her to church, which would have been expected in the Primus family. If Rebecca and Henrietta were in touch with each other, the question about how "they" were getting along would not have been necessary.

The circumstances of Henrietta's wedding remain puzzling. Since it is first mentioned in the letter of February 2, 1867, ("You must give my love to Henrietta and her husband always.") it may be that she married suddenly while her mother and sister were visiting Rebecca in Baltimore in December, 1866. They were gone almost a month, with their stop in Philadelphia.

Rebecca's attitude towards Bell was quite different. They were friends, sharing banter and interests. Rebecca wrote this to amuse Bell:

36Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 10, 1867.
Mrs. Thos has shown me your hen. one's name is Rebecca & the other Bell. they having been named according as they characterize the individuals whose names they bear. The latter being more gay than the former wears a crown, & this is the distinguishing feature, but the former produces the largest eggs & is the more independent.37

While this little fable has real applications, it seems completely good-natured. The rivalry between the two hens is friendly. There may have been a different sort of competition between Rebecca and Henrietta. Two same-sex siblings born close together can make for classic antagonism: one thinks of Cain and Abel. I am suggesting that from early on Henrietta felt that she was in Rebecca's shadow, and probably with reason. Along with the advantage of being the firstborn, Rebecca had a good mind and engaging ways. We know little of what Henrietta was like; only Addie seemed to spend much time with her, and she reported an on-and-off relationship. Henrietta was out of the house when the census of 1850 was taken and again (or still) in 1860. Her relations with the family appear to have been distant, maybe problematic.

Although most of the letters were addressed to My Dear Parents and Sister, in reality Rebecca was writing to her mother. Remarks and questions for Holdridge or Bell are addressed to them.

Mehitable Primus followed the Beecher version of the woman's sphere; no fainting couch or smelling salts for her. Strong and sure, we can guess that she ran her household, raised her family and conducted her several

---

37Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 20, 1867.
businesses with grace and dispatch. Her eldest daughter was the apple of her eye. She wrote her, probably every week, and tucked bags of gumdrops in Rebecca's trunk for a surprise when she arrived in Royal Oak. In one letter Rebecca refers lightheartedly to her mother's family, the Jacobs's, as "venerable & famous." 38

Rebecca was less intimidated by her father than either Nelson or Addie. Having read that Addie saw Holdridge twice at the railroad station waiting in vain for his wife and daughter, Rebecca chided them, "Why did you not write to Father again seeing you continued your stay?" 39 She addressed Holdridge directly in the letters from time to time, always respectfully, but without the apologetic air that Nelson used. "I thank you father very much for the crackers and ham, the receipt of which I neglected to acknowledge before I left." After her mother and sister returned home from their visit to Baltimore she wrote, "I thank you Father very much for your kind care of [Jim] while the rest were away." 40 Holdridge Primus appeared very little in the letters, and always in the middle distance. Throughout, his was a patriarchal though benevolent figure, the head of the household.

There is no question that he was a good provider and a supportive husband and father. Since his work day was easily twelve hours long, six

---

38Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 20, 1867.

39Rebecca, Royal Oak Jan. 9, 1867. Addie's sightings were reported in her letters of Jan. 9 and 14, 1867. This was following the trip that Mrs. Primus and Bell took to Baltimore to visit Rebecca in December, 1866. Nelson had intended to accompany them but could not afford it. On the way home, the women stopped off in Philadelphia to see friends.

40Rebecca, Royal Oak Oct. 1, 1866; Feb. 16, 1867.
days a week, and since he was known to have hired out as major domo at white society events, his time with his family was limited. Holdridge took his community responsibility seriously, however. A deacon of the Talcott Street Church, he was also an officer in the Excelsior Lodge of the Prince Hall Masons.

Rebecca's attitude toward children is interesting: while she did not mention or describe any of her pupils individually, she followed closely the progress of Nelson's Leila, inquiring about her often and sending money for Bell to make her an outfit. In an illuminating note she wrote, "Leila bore the piercing of her ears more bravely than I would have supposed."41

Another child Rebecca doted on was Dolly Dutton, first mentioned in the fall of 1868. Nowhere is Dolly's origin, age, or relationship explained, but Rebecca evidently spent time with her while she was at home during the summer. She mentioned her in nearly every letter during the following year, sending her love to "little Doll . . . her Auntie would like to see her fat self every day." She dreamed about Dolly, asked after her welfare, and instructed Bell to "get more goods and make a little cloak and sacque" for her.42

As did Nelson, Rebecca received boxes from home containing cakes, pies, and other edibles--and flowers:

I had another fine bunch of monthly roses & box, with another kind of

---

41Rebecca, Royal Oak Nov. 22, 1868.
42Rebecca, Royal Oak Oct. 18, 1868; Nov. 8, 1868; Apr. 12, 1869.
flower interspersed, sent to me Mon on my return from school. The leaves of the roses have nearly all fallen off now, and I’ve preserved them in one of my books. O yes, I was always fond of flowers but do not care to work among them. By your being so fond of them Mother, I cherish them more highly & because it reminds me of home & of those that constitute it.43

Rebecca, however, was in a position to reciprocate. She announced in her letter of April 8, 1868 that she had sent home a crate of oysters, and desired to know when they arrived.

In writing about the chickens and ducks Mrs. Thomas kept, Rebecca confirmed that Mrs. Primus did the same: Mrs. Thomas "watches over & cares for [her chickens] just you do mother for your birds," and "Mrs. Thomas . . . asked me whether you'd any hens setting, yet & I tell her I don't think you've thought of so doing." 44

The Hartford Circle

As if compensating for the inability to make calls in person, Rebecca sent greetings for and comments on many Hartford friends already familiar to the reader from the letters of Addie and Nelson. The Mitchells, Crosses, Saunders, Freemans, Platos, among others, constituted the Primus social circle, and represented the heart of Hartford's black elite of the time.

"Remember me to Mr. Mars and Mr. Cross and all the [Sunday School] class . . . I was expecting to hear of Lucy's & Mrs. Snyders' death, they are out of their misery & I trust have gone to that Better Land . . . Rev. A. G.

43Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 8, 1866.
44Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 13, 1867; Apr. 19, 1869.
Beman has recd a call to Mount Zion Cong[ch. Cleveland, Ohio... Has Charles Mitchell got so that he can walk without his crutches?... Did Nelson tell you Henry Johnson expects to come on in May?...[I] heard from Gertrude & Mr. Tines... I am real sorry for Mrs. Ward, Mrs. Clegget's family have used her very meanly indeed... I did not expect to hear of Mrs. Freeman's death so soon... sorry to hear Miss Babcock has been ill... I suppose Aunt Bashy's family are all well, the veranda must improve the look of the house much... remember me to Mrs. Mitchell and all the friends... [I was] surprised to hear of Alfred Plato's marriage & too with that wild acting creature... [Gertrude Plato] says she's not called upon the late bride yet. I should [think] the poor woman would feel slighted unless she's just like the Saunders themselves

What the Saunders were like has to be deduced from stray hints in Rebecca's letters. Thomas P. and Prince H. B. Saunders, whose grandfather had fought in the Revolutionary War, were merchant tailors in Hartford. Active abolitionists, they continued their activism in 1863 by sending a petition to Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner seeking voting rights for blacks. Their argument was based on "taxation without representation."
Rebecca mentions Tom Saunders in a letter dated May 11, 1868:

I see the Courant speaks of the return of Tom Saunders, I presume he's more foreign in air, speech, & dress than American now. I presume they're all very glad to have him return, & also have abandoned the idea of leaving their native land for the present at least.

What Rebecca had read in the Courant was a paragraph in "Brief Mention" a daily column of local news:

Mr. T. P. Saunders, the well known merchant tailor of this city, who has of late been carrying on his business in Paris, has returned home by the City of Baltimore, arriving here Tuesday evening.47

It is unusual to find news of black Hartford in the column, and equally unusual to find the Saunders' name without the designation colored following. Their footing in the community was firm. Rebecca may have heard rumors from the Hartford network that Saunders might stay in Paris.

I mentioned earlier that eccentricity was no bar to acceptance in the Primus circle. Cases in point are Miss Ward and Josephine Booth. Miss Ward, mentioned in the quote above, had been renting rooms in the Clegget family home, and was asked to leave because the Cleggets' son and his new wife, "Miss Seigno" wanted the rooms. The removal must have been sudden and unpleasant, since Rebecca wrote, "What a very disagreeable

47Hartford Courant, April 30, 1868.
family the Cleggets must be; what's the matter with Mrs. C?"48

Later in the spring Rebecca referred to Miss Ward's plight again, and to the fact that she was a difficult person:

I can understand your feelings Bell if Miss Ward's going to spend a week at our house. I expect I should feel ready to fly until the week was at an end. Is there no prospect for her getting another rent? I'm really sorry for her, although her presence long endured makes me nervous beyond description. Give my love to her.49

On May 18 Rebecca inquired, "Is Miss Ward still in Wethersfield? I really hope she'll decide to go on Long Island 'ere I get home." The unhappy ending, we learn from Addie, was that Miss Ward died early in June.50

Josephine Booth, a school teacher friend born in Hartford and educated in Springfield, was another "character" with a place in the Primus circle. Josephine also conducted a school for freedmen on the Eastern Shore, in Oxford, Maryland. Occasionally she traveled south with Rebecca:

My colleague has gone out for a walk, she has on that elegant black sack or basque I don't know which is the most appropriate term to apply. All look at her. I don't know what they think. I tell them she is rather peculiar.51

48Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 23, 1867. A Hannah Ward is listed in the 1860 Census, age 45, in the household of Rafael Sands. Addie, in her letter of Feb. 1, 1866, wrote of Mrs. H. Ward telling her of the death of the youngest child of E. Ward of Sag Harbor. The Primus letter writers do not seem to make a firm distinction between Miss and Mrs. The Cleggets were among the principal families of the black community. Alfred Clegget, a 33-year-old cordwainer and property owner according to the 1860 Census, beginning in 1863 was a member of the Talcott Street Church Committee.

49Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 28, 1867.

50Addie June 2, 1867.

51Rebecca, Baltimore Sept. 22, 1866.
A little later Rebecca wrote, "She gets along nicely here and appears well, they all see there's something to her although she's so odd." Josephine visited Rebecca in Royal Oak and elicited this: "Mr. and Mrs. Thomas look upon her as a very peculiar being, he says he does not think her equal can be found & I think he's about right--they both like her very much." Among her tales about Josephine are that she brought Mr. Thomas a picture of herself on a card, and for Mrs. Thomas a "bag of her own devising." In another instance Josephine wrote that she had been instructing her pupils to "speak some pieces at a holiday fair. Their gestures and articulation she deems very important." Rebecca wished she could be present to watch the animated instruction. Regarding the length of time it took for a box from home to reach her in Oxford, Josephine declared, "You know it takes longer for these heavy bodies to move south of Mason & Dixon's line than it does north of it."52

Josephine had her own way of entertaining visitors. She wrote to Rebecca that she "asks everyone who calls to read and some are taken by surprise--but she excuses none."53

The obituary in the Courant, March 16, 1894, gave Josephine Booth's age at her death as 52, and described her as "the eccentric rag and paper collector about whose life there has always been a mystery... She was a

---

52Rebecca, Royal Oak Sept. 27, 1866; Mar. 10, 1867; Apr. 27, 1868; June 1, 1867; May 18, 1867.

53Rebecca, Royal Oak March 16, 1867.
well educated woman, being able to speak five languages."54

Gertrude Plato probably would not qualify as an eccentric, but she roused mixed feelings both in Addie and Rebecca. When the fund-raising fair for Rebecca's school was being planned, there was speculation in the letters about whether Gertrude would take part. The date was postponed once or twice because of other events that might compete, and Rebecca passed along to her mother the long distance dig, "Gertrude says she'll assist you all she can when you have the Fair if she knows when it's to be." She made her own allegiance clear, adding, "I think you will do better by postponing it for I see there's so much going on in Hartford now 'twould be almost useless." After the fair, Rebecca inquired, "How did Gertrude endure 'the cross'?"55

Everyone has at least one impossible friend. All societies include individuals who flout the dull norm of polite behavior. It is only a matter of degree between the outspokenness of Addie Brown and the eccentricity of Josephine Booth. Each had positive qualities apparent to all and each was accepted without real reservation. Similarly, Rebecca's criticisms of various members of the network seem to be evidence of rivalry, not enmity. Black society stood together out of need. In a hostile or at best indifferent world, it would have been foolish not to have done so.

Long before the founding of the Freedmen's Society in Hartford, the

54This clipping and other helpful information was provided to me by Christine Adamson, researcher at the Connecticut Historical Society for the Hartford Black History Project.

55Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 14, 1866; Mar. 16, 1867.
Primus family had considerable business and acquaintanceship with whites. The Cargills, who lived on Wadsworth Street, were neighbors of the Primuses, and Mrs. Cargill, as mentioned earlier, hired one of the freed girls Mrs. Primus was placing. Rebecca wrote of seeing Ida Cargill's name in the Courant as one of the "fancy dancers in Mr. Reilly's soiree." Mr. Reilly's "Sociable" merited an exhaustive review in the May 2, 1868 paper:

Allyn Hall held a very large and brilliant audience last evening, on the occasion of the second annual scholars' exhibition and sociable of P. H. Reilly, teacher of dancing. The larger portion of the audience appeared in full evening dress... [The program] commenced at six o'clock with the performance of the overture to Zampa by T. G. Adkins's excellent band. The curtain then rose on a beautiful Scotch tableau...

Among the dancers of the Fling in the Scotch tableau was Miss Ida Cargill.

Other white names that cropped up in Rebecca's letters included Miss Kempton, who apparently sometimes played--I would guess piano--during church services for Bell. "I suppose you'll get her to play for you while you're away. I've no doubt she will, for you accommodated her several Sabbaths last Summer."

The Expanding Network

Rebecca's accounts of her activity in the South show how flexible, and adaptable, the network was. Wherever she went she added friends and acquaintances, black and white, who were fellow-workers in the cause of

56Rebecca, Royal Oak May 11, 1868.
57Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 14, 1866.
uplift or who had ties with other friends at home. In Hartford, The Rev. Mr. Burton, Miss Woodbridge, the Cheney women, and others associated with the Freedmen's Society in Hartford were of interest and were mentioned in her letters.

In Royal Oak, her new contacts included fellow teachers and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, with whom she boarded. She did not make friends with others in the neighborhood, with the exception of an old gentleman, Mr. Moore, for whom she regularly requested clothing and money from the Freedmen's Society. He, however was more a recipient of charity rather than a friend.

Of Mr. Thomas, her landlord, she wrote many anecdotes and one physical fact, that he "weighs one pound of being 200 lbs." 58 She enjoyed his company and relished his humor.

Mr. Thos. was the only one to kiss the homely bride--did it for "mischief"--he told me to tell you she was the homeliest woman he believed that lived or ever lived. You should hear him go on about that poor woman, he says if he'd seen how ugly she was before he got so close to her to kiss her he should never have done it . . . " 59

Of Mrs. Thomas she wrote carefully and cordially, describing her at various times as exhausted from caring for her sick husband, sharing her pointers on poultry raising, and noting her visits with relatives in Easton. Rebecca recorded a number of pleasant exchanges with Mrs. Thomas, for example: "I have attired myself in a calico dress this A.M. it being the first

58 Rebecca, Royal Oak Jan. 19, 1867.
59 Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 1, 1866.
that I've worn since Dec, I tell Mrs. Thomas it seems good to put on a clean, whole dress once more, I've worn my woolen one all winter and I can tell you it's about thread bear now & full of dust & dirt."

In a confidential note, she wrote that Mrs. Thomas was "one of those kind of persons who is ever seeking to know all she can of others' affairs, and then of expounding them to the world."

Rebecca's Style

Rebecca's style overall was that of the New England schoolteacher, including the inclination toward dry wit. As for the letters, her penmanship was rounded and flowing, her sentences the same. She wrote the longest letters and the most readable prose of the three correspondents in the Primus Papers. Her well-honed standard English rarely faltered. If her wording seems occasionally stilted, it is no more so than the newspaper usage of the day. But more to the point, it reflected the image she had chosen for herself: serious, purposeful, articulate, middle-class black school teacher.

Mrs. Primus must have expressed concern for her daughter's ability to withstand the writing demands upon her. Rebecca produced three and sometimes four reports a month, and letters to go with each; she also wrote letters to her family each week, to Addie at least once a week, and to a seeming host of friends and colleagues. Rebecca reassured her:

I am not always writing by any means & I seldom write at all unless I feel just like so doing, and then as fast as I can move my pen I put my

---

60Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 20, 1867.
thoughts upon the paper, so you can see there's nothing laborious in it, when I find I'm getting nervous I lay aside my writing materials and turn my mind to something else. I do not write as much as I did I'll assure you, but I don't want you to feel that I'm being injured thereby.\textsuperscript{61}

Rebecca's style was enlivened by flashes of humor: "I have worn my corsets ever since I left home, they are my chief support."\textsuperscript{62} One account of a social event ends with an unexpected turn on polite usage:

"The minister is a fine looking man, but the Bride is the homeliest woman I think that I ever met with, and she has very masculine features, still for all this she may possess many virtues & fine qualifications. (I did not discover any however last night.)\textsuperscript{63}

Concerning a wedding between two whites, the bride 52 years old and the groom 18, Rebecca noted that he was Dutch, "which probably accounts for his choice of a wife."\textsuperscript{64}

Writing home one Sunday, she noted wryly when the seventeenth caller appeared at the Thomas's door, "I've been interrupted again by another call. If any one comes in the Teacher must be seen and hindered at all events, and so it is."\textsuperscript{65}

In the spring of 1866, near the end of her first school year in Maryland, Rebecca had a surprise visit from Mrs. Freeman and six-year-old Willie. Rebecca wrote, "Mrs. Freeman had a gay time all along the route . . . I had a

\textsuperscript{61}Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 7, 1866.

\textsuperscript{62}Rebecca, Royal Oak June 2, 1866.

\textsuperscript{63}Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 1, 1866.

\textsuperscript{64}Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 14, 1866.

\textsuperscript{65}Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 30, 1867.
good laugh at her expense. She found every thing so different and met with so much to resent--which certainly did not make the matter better--that she was constantly disputing." There is a trace of condescension towards the unsophisticated Mrs. Freeman from the well-travelled Rebecca. 66

Rebecca's Personal Style

Throughout her time in the South, Rebecca found much to remark on, and in doing so she gave clues to her own character and makeup. For example, it is clear to the reader of the letters that religion was the source of her strength. The quotation used in the introduction to this paper contains a rare statement about her exact beliefs, but in nearly every letter she refers to attendance at church or Sabbath School.

In Baltimore with Josephine on the way back to Royal Oak in September of 1866, she wrote that they had attended St. James Episcopal Church in the morning, a Presbyterian church at midday, and in the evening attended the Bethel. 67

Rebecca worshipped a tasteful God, and as Addie learned, emotionalism and revivals were outside the pale. "The converts here are like those we have at home—they're only for a season." ... So the Methodists are keeping up their exciting meetings. 68 Unaccountably, Rebecca attended one "meeting"

66 Rebecca, Royal Oak June 2, 1866. There were twenty individuals named Freeman in the 1860 census. Two were named William: one was one month old and lived in the household of Thomas H. Paul, as did a Charlotte N. Freeman, 29 years old. These are likely the Mrs. Freeman and Willie who visited Rebecca.

67 Rebecca, Baltimore Sept. 22, 1866.

68 Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 10, 1867; Mar. 23, 1867.
that sounds as though it reached revival intensity. She wrote that the preacher began with "Let your light so shine" and then ranged, she said, through "Genesis, John the Revelator, Job, the text again, back to Genesis, & ended with the gospels. 'Twas a great sermon--he got the people to patting & if he'd continued much longer he would have had them all shouting I presume."69

A frequent subject in Rebecca's letters was health, her own and others'. Although Rebecca was a vigorous young woman and seemed in excellent condition, she paid attention, as one must have done in that time, to symptoms and discomforts. The Eastern Shore had more than its share of major disease: Rebecca noted at various times smallpox, typhoid, cholera, measles, and lesser ills such as fever and chills, in the neighborhood. No wonder she doted on her store of herbs from home. Particularly in the early letters she mentioned such treatments as senna (for the stomach), boneset (what is it for, she asked), vegetable compound, wormwood (for appetite), balsam of fir (she forgot its purpose), Porter's Bitters, snuff (for headaches), sage and hop tea, and Mrs. Higley's medicine for the catarrh.70

"I have just spread a plaster to put upon my chest which has recently become very weak, and today has began to pain me," she wrote on March 2, 1867. A week later, she was "well again, the pain in my chest is removed, but it continues very weak & at times makes me very nervous, a tendency

69Rebecca, Royal Oak Nov. 8, 1868.

70Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 8, 1867; Mar. 2, 10, 16, 23, 1867.
always produced in me by pains or weakness."

Rebecca suffered often from nervousness, a prevalent female complaint of the time, and indeed a badge of gentility. "Excuse the poor writing," she apologized in one letter, "for I have been subjected to one of my nervous series for a few days past & am not quite composed again yet." The reader notes that Addie was not subject to nervousness; her anxieties manifested themselves in the form of headache.

Regardless of the state of her nerves, Rebecca read constantly and also read aloud to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas. She mentions no novels or frivolous works. Her work of uplift led her frequently to two Puritan standbys, the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress. She mentioned reading the life of John Bunyan and excerpts from the Freedmen's Book, Lydia Maria Child's 1865 compilation of significant and inspirational writings. She also mentioned Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Huntley Sigourney.

Her interests extended to women's fashions of the day, although she deferred to Bell as the family style maven. A magazine that belonged to Mrs. Thomas went to Hartford on loan so that Bell could inspect and comment on the southern version of the Grecian Bend. Rebecca and Mrs. Thomas favored

---

71Phrase courtesy of Prof. Eugene Leach.

72Rebecca, Royal Oak Nov. 8, 1868.

73Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 16, 1867.
a particular manifestation called the Saratoga Bell. Mr. Thomas had actually seen women in Baltimore affecting the Grecian Bend, which he found "ridiculous." Elsewhere, describing a wedding she had attended, Rebecca detailed for her mother, the seamstress, what fabrics and colors were worn by the bride and her attendants, a "Delaine skirt, brown and figured, with a white waist."

Rebecca could number cooking and sewing among her accomplishments, skills necessary for middle-class home life, but there was clearly a little streak in Rebecca that kept her from being the perfectly predictable respectable lady. After an outing driving a colt that belonged to Mr. Thomas, she wrote of a liking for "fast driving & quick movements." She did not much care for gardening, but loved flowers. A loyal friend, she was no less opinionated than Addie, but presented to the world a smoother finish. Her intellectual potential had brought her unusual opportunities, which she seized with enthusiasm, and a number of challenges, which she met with courage.

Rebecca and Politics

---

74Rebecca, Royal Oak, Nov. 1, 1868. The Grecian Bend was a "look" that resulted from a tight corset and a generous bustle, the effect being to "accentuate the rear fullness by throwing the head and bust forward and the hips backwards." A fashion at the same time for high heels caused a balance problem and considerable anguish in standing or walking, according to Penelope Byrde in Nineteenth Century Fashion (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1992), 66.

75Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 17, 1868.

76Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 8, 1867. Delaine is a high grade worsted fabric described as muslin of wool.

77Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 8, 1867.
Judging from Rebecca's letters and Addie's, the women of Hartford's black community read the papers and followed news of all kinds. Among other items, Rebecca commented on "the death of Artemus Ward and of Dr. Livingston in Africa."78

But the issues followed most avidly were those connected with race, rights, and Reconstruction. The connection between racial justice and politics was a given. Outside of the Beecher family, one wonders if many white women followed national political events with such attention.

Regarding her own role, Rebecca passed on to her family this praise from the Rev. Dr. Burton, the white pastor of Hartford's First Congregational Church, who also saw the connection between politics, racial justice, and the work that Rebecca had taken on. He wrote:

"I do not know any sort of labor in the world more interesting just now than this teaching the freedmen at the South." And he wishes me all sorts of success, he says, "at the present rate of work we shall in a few years have so many of them taught to read, that all of the Andrew Johnsons in creation will not be equal to the job of keeping them down in the dirt under the white man's heel."79

Rights for the black man concerned Rebecca, but she never mentioned women's rights. This position places her squarely in the ranks of the middle class, her chosen spot. The notion of Woman's Sphere was in full flower in the first half of the century, and hardly let up in the second. A reading of the

78Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 16, 1867.

79Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 16, 1867.
letters leads to the conclusion that Rebecca, like others at the time, found demands for suffrage and other rights for women extremely radical. Rebecca did not see herself as marginalized because she was a woman, but because she was black. Furthermore, in the self-effacing model of Woman's Sphere manners, it would be un-feminine and divisive to be furthering her own interests in any way. Rebecca's attention was on race, not gender:

I hope there will be justice, impartial justice, given to the colored people one of these days. I was reading the "Civil Rights Bill" for colored & all people, in the "Communicator" & I will send it to you that you may read it if you've not already done so. As it had passed both houses of Congress with amendments, I am very anxious to know whether Prest Johnson has signed it or not. The Bill is excellent I think, only I hope the col'd people will not take the advantage of the privileges it prescribes.

I have had a real benefit all this week in perusing the "Independent" it goes down on Johnson pretty hard, & gives him his just dues. The paper is full of able & very interesting articles, all advocating the rights of the Colored man. there is a good deal in it about Conn. & the Democracy.80

One more comment about the quotation above. Rebecca feels included in a society of blacks. If the black man secures justice and equality, black women and children will benefit as well. Women's rights was a separate issue, and outside Rebecca's range.

Johnson vetoed the Civil Rights Bill of 1866; but, in the words of historian Eric Foner, "Early in April, for the first time in American history, Congress enacted a major piece of legislation over a President's veto."81

80Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 7, 1866.
The fear that Rebecca expressed regarding blacks taking "advantage of the privileges" the bill prescribed makes sense only in the light of her strong class identification, which will be discussed later. The bill, according to Foner, "defined all persons born in the United States (except Indians[1]) as national citizens and spelled out rights they were to enjoy equally without regard to race--making contracts, bringing lawsuits, and enjoying 'full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property.'" She may have feared that unscrupulous (low class) blacks would bring nuisance lawsuits against whites (or one another) or otherwise draw scorn upon the race.

Rebecca was interested in the vote, not for herself, but for black men. On March 30, 1867 she wrote, "I see by the Ind[ependen]t that next Monday is voting day in Conn." She wrote enthusiastically about the Negro Rights convention that Mr. Thomas, her landlord, attended in Baltimore. When he returned she had this to say:

The col'd delegates numbered about two to one white man, the democrats would have been the victorious party but for that. All were allowed to speak ten minutes at a time & [Mr. Thomas] says some of the col'd delegates spoke well also some of the whites, both those who were for & against the suffrage question. The ambition of the col'd men in this state [Maryland] is raised high I'll assure you, & they are confident of voting at the next election. It's the general topic of the day now among them.

---

82Ibid., 245.

83Rebecca, Royal Oak May 18, 1867.
Tension grew as blacks began to voice their ambitions regarding citizenship. Racial incidents on the Eastern Shore caused Rebecca at times to call for justice with particular heat:

I forgot to tell you . . . of a murder that occurred at Easton last Sunday night one week. It seems a very respectable colored man who resided with his family there, was on his way to church & en-route he was shot by a white rascal so that he fell a dead man immediately. The villain made his escape and has not yet been caught, he is said to be skulking about in the woods sustained by his secesh sympathizers. He is well known and detectives are after him.

Now a law has been passed there fining any person the sum of five dolls. who is known to fire off a pistol or anything else, in the place. there are some very lawless fellows in these towns & there is nothing to [sic] bad for them to do to a colored person. I trust something like justice will be given to the black man one of these days, for some are as persecuted almost as badly now as in the days of slavery. . . .

When Rebecca returned in the fall to open the school again, she wrote, more with resignation than anger:

. . . that Easton murderer has never yet been caught and never will be now I don't think. I suppose the circumstance is well nigh forgotten except by those most nearly connected, by this time. Tis shameful that such things are allowed to go on with impunity.

There was no scarcity of injustice. Writing about the difficulty of collecting a "tax" which I take to be a levy to help maintain her school, she explained:

---

84Rebecca, Royal Oak June 2, 1866.

85Rebecca, Royal Oak Oct. 1, 1867.
One obstacle with which the col'd people have to encounter here is in rec'g cash payments for their labor which makes it very hard for them & so too they're kept out of money. Their employers readily give them orders & desire their hands to take up all in orders but some will not agree to it. I think it's a grand shame & also an imposition, but I hope it will not always work this way, for it's very discouraging.86

Rebecca's neighbors in Royal Oak, free only a little more than five years, followed national politics with the same zeal that Rebecca and Addie showed, judging from her comment, "We have heard of Grant's election and all the cold people's hearts about here have been made glad thereby. . . . the Rebs are quite down in the mouth."87

Rebecca on Race

The appearance of Henry Highland Garnet in November of 1866 was a major event for Hartford's black community. Addie mentioned it in her letter to Rebecca, saying that "Aunt Em enjoyed him." Rebecca wrote to her family on Dec. 1 that she would have liked to hear his lecture. She may have seen the article in the Courant for Nov. 22, 1866:

A Plea for the Proscribed Race

Henry Highland Garnett, the distinguished orator, will speak in this city on Friday evening, his subject "A Plea for the Proscribed Race of America" of which he is a member. An effort was made to procure a central place for him to speak, but as he can only come Friday evening, and the most accessible places are occupied for that evening, it has been decided to have him speak in the Talcott Street church. Mr. Garnett is now pastor of a church in Washington D.C. and is well known as one of

---

86Rebecca, Royal Oak June 8, 1867.
87Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 8, 1868.
the most eloquent speakers in the country. Our citizens will be repaid if they attend his lecture.

While Mr. Reilly's Dancing School sociable was reported in detail in the Courant, the Rev. Mr. Garnet's speech was not. The awkward clue, "... of which he is a member"; the overexplaining phrase, "the most accessible places are occupied," and the fact that Garnett's message was not covered afterwards, suggest the setting in which the black community functioned in Hartford and elsewhere. The stature of that community was such, in any case, that Garnet chose to make an appearance in Hartford.

Rebecca's own views on race were expressed in neutral terms for the most part. She observed and reported, giving credit where it was merited:

Although the whites are mostly secesh here they all give colored men & women employment; the greatest difficulty is they do not pay sufficient wages & if the people will not accept their terms they send off and get "contrabands" as they are here denominated, to work for them so that it takes the labor right out of these people's hands & they are obliged to submit.88

As common cause with other Freedmen's Bureau teachers drew Rebecca into a wider circle, she incorporated their experiences into her record. She wrote that Miss Dickson at Trappe was stoned by white children and repeatedly subjected to insults from white men, in passing they have brushed by her so rudely she says 'as to almost dislocate her shoulders,' she says she tries to bear it patiently... . The whites are very mean there I'm told. white children take cold children's books from them & otherwise misuse & illtreat them.89

88Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 7, 1866.

89Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 7, 1866.
In the same letter she passed this on:

Miss Cummings writes me that two of the colored teachers Miss Anderson & Mrs. Jackson, are having a lawsuit in Balto with a fellow who put them out of the Ladies Room at the Depot, where they [were] sitting waiting for the train. It was going in their favor when the fellow plead a jury trial and she says there's no telling now which way it will go. I hope however he may get the worst of it at any rate.90

Rebecca passed on to her family this news she had from Josephine Booth, teaching nearby in Oxford:

an old colored woman from the alms-house was found dead [in Oxford] on the roadside last Friday, she was left there over night until a Jury could be summoned & they built up a pen around the body to prevent the animals from disturbing it. I've no doubt if it had been a white person there could have been a jury found that day.91

Rebecca wrote her family about a meeting of "copper heads" at Easton, and another at "the Oak" meaning Royal Oak, where her own safety was at least indirectly threatened. "The Principal topic . . . was the 'Nigger' of course . . . one speaker cried out 'put down the nigger school.'"92 Rebecca did, in fact, tell her family of racial "insults" directed at herself. In the letter of December 1, 1866, she wrote:

I had forgotten to tell you about the little difficulty I've had with this poor old secesh Postmaster here. It's all on account of the papers you've

90Miss Cummings is a sister of the Miss Cummings that Addie visited in New Haven. Addie wrote on Sept. 26, 1866, regarding Miss C., "Does her sister in Balto look like her?"

91Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 13, 1867.

92Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 13, 1867.
sent me & which he & his old jebusite wife have taken the liberty to open. Not sending the last to me with my other mail. 93

Mr. Thomas had gone to pick up her mail, she explained, and found that the papers—copies of the Independent and possibly the Communicator—had been opened. The postmaster told Mr. Thomas they had arrived in that condition and that it was illegal to send them through the mail. He said he would charge a $20 fine and thirty-three cents in postage to ransom the papers. The local postmaster, she went on, "says he's had more trouble with the d__m niggers papers then with anyone's else." Rebecca added to this "But I do not intend to trouble with them hereafter. I wrote a note to the Post Master at Easton to take the charge of all my papers & letters hereafter & he sent word that he would.

In her letter of December 14, 1866, she was probably reacting to a caution from her mother when she wrote that she had made sure there was no legal fine for sending papers through the mail. "No," she emphasized, I shall never trouble Lane or his wife for the papers." In January she urged her mother to keep on sending the papers, and adds that she has received her copy of the Independent.

In February, there came an unexpected turn of events. Lane, the "secesh" postmaster, had become "considerate" and offered to handle her mail. Rebecca's response was: "These white people want all the respect shown

---
93Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 1, 1866. The Jebusites were the original inhabitants of the area that became Jerusalem. Because they had to be displaced before David could found the city, this may be a stronger epithet than it appears to one unfamiliar with the Bible. Blacks considered Jerusalem or Zion the heaven-like place, in this world or the next, where they would find a real home, free from oppression, degradation, and want.
them by the cold people. I give what I rec. and no more."94 In this case she had finally won the respect of the postmaster. Either pressure had been put on him locally or by the Easton postmaster, or, less likely, he had decided that Rebecca was not a threat to the established order but rather a young woman doing good work.

In December of 1866 when Mehitable and Bell were preparing to visit Rebecca in Baltimore, they received minute instructions about transfers among the various trains, boats, ferries, horse cars, and carriages on which they would travel, and the cost, "Your expenses to Baltimore will be just $8.65 each." Her travel advice was based on her own experience with segregation as it was practiced on the railroads:

The Conductor will tell you which cars to take after you arrive at the Phila Depot (Southern RR), & if you find he puts you in the smoking car & the door of the next car is locked, watch the opportunity & as soon as the door is unlocked get up & go into that car. For you are not obliged to sit in the smoking car. I did not occupy it either time, as soon as I found out where I was I improved the opportunity & exchanged cars."95

A white colleague, Miss Hamilton, was assigned to a school in Washington, and news from her elicited this from Rebecca in a letter home: "I'm quite surprised to hear of Miss Hamilton's boarding with colored people. Mr. Tho[ma]s says if it was here the house would be stoned. I'm glad she enjoys her labor. The freedmen, women & children in Washington are a

---

94Rebecca, Royal Oak Jan.19, 1867; Feb. 23, 1867.

95Rebecca, Royal Oak Dec. 6, 1866.
different class of people from those in this state I am told.⁹⁶ Rebecca reported this without giving her own opinion, but when a similar arrangement involved her own home, she was more forthcoming. As she prepared to close her school for what turned out to be the last time, she wrote,

I hope that queer woman will be gone 'ere I come. Whose room does she occupy. Mrs. Saunders is so desirous of white society I don't see why she could not have made some arrangements to have accommodated her, instead of framing such an excuse & sending her to our house.⁹⁷

Possibly in connection with Freedmen's society work, Mrs. Saunders appears to have taken on responsibility for placing a white woman, and conveniently finding no room in her own home, imposed on the known hospitality of Mrs. Primus. Rebecca found distasteful the possibility that a white woman had been inhabiting her room at home. Her goal was equality with whites, not cohabitation. She was no more comfortable with the idea of sharing her home with a white stranger than most whites would have been in the reverse arrangement.

One of the attractions of Josephine Booth was her refusal to conform to the genteel ways that Rebecca embraced. Josephine supplied opinions that Rebecca seconded by quoting; for example, Miss Booth "deems the whites here only half civilized."

When she attended a fundraising event for a school at Miles River, Rebecca recorded that the place was a historic site: "This is the farm that

⁹⁶Rebecca, Royal Oak Apr. 7, 1866.
⁹⁷Rebecca, Royal Oak Jul. 3, 1869.
the famous Lloyd family once owned & where Frederick Douglass lived in his childhood & youth. It was so bad a place for slaves in those days that it has been named Georgia & still retains that name." She added that the Quaker gentleman who gave land for the school was married to a "bitter secesh." 98

Rebecca occasionally found and duly reported signs of progress with regard to race matters. One of the crimes against blacks that she noted was an attack on a young black man in the Royal Oak area by white youths. Rebecca advised her family that he was recovering, and that his employer, "although a secesh, has offered $500 reward for [information on] the perpetrators." 99

After reading in the Independent of a project to collect $50,000 as a massive tribute to the abolition work of William Lloyd Garrison, Rebecca wrote, "The world truly moves." 100

It seems clear that what Rebecca wanted was equality with whites. She believed that blacks were entitled to all the privileges and responsibilities that accompany citizenship. She also believed that the triumph of Union Forces in the Civil War, and the Emancipation Proclamation, were evidence that progress was being made. Her faith in the power of reason and the force of gentility precluded militancy on her part. At the same time, many instances came to her attention in which reason did not prevail. Rebecca

98Rebecca, Royal Oak May 25, 1867.
99Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 30, 1867.
100Rebecca, Royal Oak May 18, 1867.
was willing to exercise the rights she claimed even in defiance of whites. An example is the way she avoided Jim Crow seating on the train. The litany of racial incidents that she witnessed and heard about while she was in Royal Oak kept alive her resolve to stand firm not against whites but for black equality.

Class and Color

On the subject of class, Rebecca was quite candid: she identified with the upper levels. Both black and white members of the lower orders were objects of her disdain. She came down on Southern women who did not share her notions of propriety in dress or behavior.

I regret to hear the girls who have lately come on there have got into the habit of attending those night meetings, but the Southerners are so emotional & so fond of excitement that it's nothing more than could hardly be expected from them.101

Commenting on the freed girl who had proved disappointing to Mrs. Primus, Rebecca wrote "She's a fair specimen of these southern blacks. I understand them quite well now." Not angry, as Nelson's reaction appeared to be, but just as judgmental.

At the same time, Rebecca is sympathetic towards the former slaves and like her mother unfailingly helpful. It is consistent with the notion of uplifting the race that she would look down on them at the same time as she does her utmost to instruct them in proper ways. In the following excerpt, the arrangement referred to is not described, but Rebecca's attitude is clear:

---

101Rebecca, Royal Oak Mar. 10, 1867.
"I am very glad you have paid Mrs. Thompson, and I hope the members of the society will agree to have the remaining portion used as you propose, it well be so good to have the poor creatures cared for in this way. And I think it will be such an encouragement for the poor girls. How do those get along that have recently come to Hartford?" Possibly Mrs. Primus had suggested paying host families to board the freed girls until they found employment.

On a Sunday in springtime, Rebecca stood on her Yankee dignity after seeing

a number of the blacks attired in their new spring hats, bonnets & dresses some in the latest styles I judge, & oh! such looks ... some presented! Some of these people do make themselves appear so much more ridiculous than they really are. I don't know what they think of my always dressing so plainly.

Sounding like the perfect Yankee school teacher, Rebecca observed, on April 13, 1867:

My school has continued without interruption ever since this month came in, & I hope I may not have any lost days to report for the month. The children, having taken advantage of the warm days by taking off their coats, shoes &c. during play hours many of them now have bad colds. It's useless to advise to the contrary, for the adults are no better themselves, like black snakes, as soon as the sun shines & it begins to get warm they come out, one young woman was attired in a black silk basque & a light summer dress last Sunday.

In a revealing moment Rebecca confided to her mother:

102Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 23, 1867.
103Rebecca, Royal Oak May 18, 1867.
You desire to know why I did not introduce conversation at the Wedding [described in a previous letter]. Simply because I had nothing to say. I went merely as a spectator. I some times think they're almost afraid to talk or move in my presence. I always do what I can to remove their apparent embarrassment. 104

The residents of Royal Oak undoubtedly appreciated Rebecca's efforts on their behalf, but since she held herself apart from them, they treated her with awe. Rebecca was satisfied with this arrangement.

References to color among blacks are few in the letters, but Rebecca mentions it at least twice. Describing a new teacher for the Ferry Neck school, Rebecca wrote: "He is so very fair & has such light hair I took him for a white man, yet I suspect he's what may be called a bright mulatto." 105

In her letter of February 8, 1867, she wrote about Charles Mitchell, "I've no doubt they'll, that is himself and Elizabeth will come together yet, his position if nothing more will have a great influence now, color and hair notwithstanding." The obvious guess is that Elizabeth, his wife or sweetheart, may have used "color and hair" in anger against him. Meanwhile, Charles Mitchell was making a name for himself, having been elected to a two-year term in the state legislature.

---

104Rebecca, Royal Oak Feb. 23, 1867.

105Rebecca, Royal Oak Jan. 16, 1869. The same term was used by a black woman quoted in We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century, ed. Dorothy Sterling (New York: Norton, 1984). In a letter to her husband still off with the Union army in 1866, an ex-slave chided, "I have been confined, just got up, have a fine daughter four weeks old, and a little brighter than you would like to see." She had dictated the letter to her former master.
Beyond the Letters

Rebecca was surely the golden child of the Primus family. By volunteering to serve the Freedmen's cause she brought about unprecedented contact between the white and black communities in Hartford. She founded a school and brought literacy to hundreds of residents of Maryland's Eastern Shore. For four years she was the shining light of black Hartford and certainly white Hartford's favorite example of uplift.

With the last letter, in July of 1869, silence descends on Rebecca Primus. It is broken only at her death, in 1932. The Hartford Courant, in a splendor of irony, ran this obituary February 22:

Mrs. Rebecca (Primus) Thomas, 95, widow of Charles H. Thomas, of 115 Adelaide St., died Sunday morning at the Municipal Hospital after a long illness. She leaves three nieces, Mrs. Edna Edwards of Hartford; Mrs. Jessie H. Harris of Cambridge, Mass.; and Mrs. Nellie Singleton of Detroit, Mich. The funeral will be held Tuesday afternoon at 1:30 at S. M. Johnson's funeral home, 19 Pavilion Street, and at 2 o'clock at the Talcott Street Congregational Church. Rev. James A. Wright will officiate. Burial will be in the family plot in Zion Hill Cemetery.

For the intervening 63 years, public documents offer the only clues to her life.

In the costume collection of Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum is a light brown silk faille two-piece dress of Rebecca's. It is a simple but elegant gown with high neck, long sleeves, and two overlays of the same material, an apron like piece in the front and a sort of token bustle, unstuffed, in the back. The
buttons are crocheted, and a three-inch fringe outlines the peplum of the fitted bodice as well as the overlays. There is a two or three-foot train. The dress is machine-stitched and hand finished. No information came to the museum with the dress, beyond ownership. Originally there was a bonnet. The vintage, according to Carol Krute, Textile Curator at the Atheneum is about 1870. I would guess it was Rebecca's wedding dress. Why else keep what was described as a well-made but by no means high-fashion gown for sixty-odd years?

Rebecca married Charles Thomas, her landlord from Royal Oak, early in the 1870s. It is presumed that his first wife died. The first entry in the Hartford City Directory for Charles H. Thomas is in 1872, when he was listed as "janitor" boarding at 20 Wadsworth St. There was no listing for Rebecca, since women were not listed separately in the city directory unless they were the head of a household. In 1873, Charles H. Thomas was listed, no occupation, at 7 Fairmont, upper tenement. In 1874, he was at 3 Wolcott, where he and presumably his wife remained through 1889. Meanwhile, Mrs. R. P. Thomas is named as a Deacon and one of two Assistant Superintendents of the Talcott Street Church Sunday School. It is interesting that she is Mrs. R[ebeca] P[rimus] Thomas instead of Mrs.
Charles Thomas. She was widowed in 1891.106

In 1893 Rebecca P. Thomas, "wid. Charles," is at 20 Wadsworth. She stayed there until the death of her mother in 1899. Under the terms of Holdridge's will, the house would have been sold then and the proceeds divided among the heirs.

From a Distance

A fulfilling career was not a real possibility for a black woman in nineteenth century Hartford, however progressive and literate it may have been. Maria Stewart, abolitionist, made her career elsewhere. Ann Plato simply disappeared; Betsy Fish became a washer woman; Josephine Booth became a rag collector.

In contemplating the writers of the letters, we have only a slice of each life to go on. Each one-sided correspondence ends abruptly, leaving the reader grateful for what is there and regretful there is no more.

About Addie, one wonders petulantly, how could anyone so alive have died so young? Addie lived in the here and now; wide awake and flat out. A realist, she came to accept that marriage with Rebecca was simply not a possibility, and went on to build a different life. In novels of the nineteenth

---

106 The obituary of Charles H. Thomas states that he was born a slave in Maryland in 1834, and that he "bought his time" at the age of 25. He became a trainer of blooded horses for Col. Lloyd, whose father had owned Frederick Douglass. In Hartford, Thomas was gardener for Deacon Albert Day and most notably, doorkeeper for the Connecticut Senate for 1885-1886. The article described him as having "very large frame" and carrying "a cane and wore gold bowed glasses." It concluded, "having been long without work he died destitute." Information from the Connecticut Historical Society Scrapbook, vol. 17, p. 10.
century women wasted away and died of unrequited love; Addie died because
the science of medicine was in a rudimentary state.

As for Rebecca, if she had had the means, would she have returned and
continued teaching at the Primus Institute?

Rebecca was able, resourceful, and dedicated. Buoyed by the support of
the white power structure, she had volunteered her skill and spirit to a work
she had been raised to believe in. The work proved more difficult and the
obstacles more daunting than the whole nation imagined. When the funding
was cut off, she knew the work was not finished, but some New
England quality of restraint led her to accept the end of her mission south.
The price of trying to continue on her own was poverty, struggle, and personal
danger. Rebecca was neither a fanatic nor a martyr.

Nelson, on a personal quest, never quit. If he had had the means, he
would have gone in an instant to Europe to study.

His own temperament was no doubt a factor in his rootless existence;
further study would not necessarily have affected that. At the time he was
writing the few letters we have, Nelson was immature, and resentful both of
his own blackness and the gross unfairness of life. He found the role of dutiful
son too much to bear. Supposedly he found "help and friendship" in
Chinatown.\textsuperscript{107} He was comfortable as an alien among aliens.

Rebecca may have remembered, and Nelson certainly had heard the
story about their father going with the mining company on the adventure of

his lifetime. The California of the gold rush was a strange, wild country. Possibly more resourceful than the leaders of the Warburton party, Holdridge found work, made a good reputation—I would guess he sent money home on a regular basis—and returned in good time to his wife and family. Rebecca returned home when her adventure came to an end, but Nelson never ended his.

Born at a time when the millenium seemed about to dawn, Rebecca and Nelson lived long lives but that morning never came.
CONCLUSION

The major purpose of this paper is to make available to students and the public the extraordinary material in the Primus Papers. Three black lives, vividly if incompletely portrayed in personal letters, give access to a world now remote and seemingly unrecoverable. The element of race makes the papers doubly valuable, in view of the fact that we understand one another today as little as we understand our pasts.

I undertook an analysis of the black community of Hartford in 1860 in order to find out what sort of environment produced the Primus family and to make as clear as possible the physical setting of their daily lives. In doing this I uncovered a number of facts that throw new light on the city. For instance, three quarters of its black residents had been born in Connecticut; a full ninety percent were born in the North. They were native New Englanders for the most part.

The community that Hartford blacks created was in many ways similar to those of major cities of the North--Boston, Providence, New York, and Brooklyn. Separation of the races was taken for granted, occupational opportunities were severely limited, and blacks had to rely on their own resources for social services. Predictably, the Primus family letters and the data work together to shed light on life in Hartford.

By sheer hard work many in Hartford achieved a middle class standard of living. Two black churches offered choice in worship. At the request of
black citizens, the city had built a separate school for their children. Hartford blacks had a higher percentage of youngsters in school than Boston blacks, a better literacy rate than Boston blacks—better than the state of Connecticut as a whole. The percentage of home ownership was twice that of Boston, and housing was less segregated than any urban center from New York to San Francisco. Major public figures addressed Hartford audiences on slavery, abolition, and colonization.

This success was achieved by a relatively small population who benefited from their common culture and a condition best described as freedom from interference.

Black citizens of Hartford embraced the culture in which they found themselves. With their goal full citizenship, they subscribed to what essayist Shelby Steele described as middle-class values, "the work ethic, the importance of education, the value of property ownership, of respectability, of 'getting ahead,' of stable family life, of initiative, of self-reliance, etc."—qualities that are "raceless and even assimilationist."¹

The Primus Papers demonstrate some of the ways in which the nineteenth-century model of middle class life was adapted to black needs. Because the women needed to work in order to maintain decent living standards, black females were less likely than whites to limit their role in the family to housekeeper and mother. They moved about the community, spread and gathered community news, and actively followed political events

and national developments.

Another characteristic of Hartford's black population was its cohesiveness. Beginning with common background and united in their goals of justice and equality, needing one another in alien surroundings, they built a true community. Class distinctions were clear but not rigid. Leadership was awarded to those who proved themselves dedicated and effective. Holdridge Primus and others whose names become familiar to readers of the Primus Papers provided steady and reliable guidance. Differing opinions were expressed and debated, decisions were made and carried out. Hartford's blacks took for granted that they were Americans and had a stake in this country. After considering colonization, they decided they belonged here.

Blacks did not seek to be whites, but to join whites as full citizens. They were neither deceived about their status nor did they accept it. They made use of their long oral tradition to deal with the effects of discrimination. Subject daily to insults and injustices, they told and re-told the incidents, entering them into the community's oral log. Rebecca Primus referred to it and did it herself in her letters; so did Addie and Nelson.

They remembered, if whites did not, that their black grandfathers fought in the Revolutionary War to obtain freedom not only for white colonists but also for themselves. They agitated to be allowed to fight as Union soldiers.

Among the conditions that supported the formation of Hartford's black community, I mentioned the numbers. Of a relatively small population, 29,000, blacks were a small percentage, 2.4. They were some seven hundred
more or less like-minded people who had in common the color of their skin and in Leonard Curry's words, all the "discrimination, subordination, segregation, oppression, and exclusion" that entailed. Distributed over a fairly compact seven square miles, five hundred sixty-nine of them lived in 111 households. No doubt they knew one another on sight and probably by name.

As for freedom, non-interference from whites was the best treatment the black population could expect at the time. From the days of the Black Governors when masters lent their horses and carriages for the festivities, to the gala staged for the return of the Twenty-ninth and Thirty-first Divisions after the end of the Civil War, there was a custom of courtesy in public interracial dealings.

I take it as evidence of a fairly open society that Selah Africanus, Amos G. Beman, J. W. C. Pennington, Augustus Washington and other active blacks chose Hartford as a place where they could pursue their aims for themselves and their people. All of them moved on by 1860, to be sure, but the tradition continued within the black community of religious, social, and political activism.

In 1860, Northern blacks felt hopeful because the issue at the heart of public debate for the preceding thirty years had been their issue--slavery. The spectacle of white men demanding abolition raised hopes. The increasing ferment over the economic, political, and social effects of slavery in the 1840s and 1850s was interpreted as measurable progress. Here was the joining of

---

2Curry. Quote is the title of his chapter five.
interests, black and white, that could result in full citizenship for those so long held down.

While the practices of white society limited and separated black life, they did not define it. Horton and Horton wrote this about antebellum black Boston: "The picture of black society presented by an external view of black neighborhoods . . . is incomplete. For insight into what it meant to be black, . . . it is necessary to become acquainted with the interior life of the community."3

True also of Hartford, but for whites, up to now it has been out of the question to follow the Hortons' advice. The details of black life at mid-century had been preserved only in the minds of those who lived it, and they were gone. But three voices remain, recording three very different lives. Through the Primus Papers is possible to reconstruct something of the texture and flavor of a remarkable society at its zenith.

The decades after the Civil War and into the next century brought wave after wave of change until Rebecca Primus herself, the standard-bearer of the black community's hopes for uplift and justice, died in obscurity, her achievements forgotten, her grave unmarked.

---

3Horton and Horton, 13.
WORKS CITED


Hartford Land Records. City Hall, Hartford.


Hartford Charter Oak.
Hartford Courant

Hartford Evening Post


Jackson, Leslie, historian of Faith Congregational Church, formerly Talcott Street Congregational Church, Hartford. Interview by author, Nov. 29, 1994. SAND Complex, Hartford.


"Mortgage Burning of the Talcott Street Congregational Church 1826-1944." Memorial booklet. Hartford: Talcott Street Church, 1944.


United States Census 1790, 1850, 1860.


