

CHAPTER XLI

AMOS FORTUNE, CITIZEN

Amos Fortune was born in Africa. The first part of his life is hidden under a cloud that we cannot penetrate. He was, most likely, a part of the spoils brought back from the Guinea Coast by certain merchant adventurers of Salem and Boston while darkness was still upon the face of the waters. Africa lacked many things, but one thing grew there in profusion like the wild cattle of the pampas. Human life was cheap, and so the slave trade was established with the enlightened world. New England was short of labor, but produced in excess furs, fish, lumber, and rum. Africa furnished no market for furs but a fathomless appetite for strong drink, and so the traders of the day loaded their ships with the poison of civilization and shipped it to the Guinea Coast in exchange for human souls. They wanted only the young and strong. And if they could secure a cargo by traffic with kidnappers, the profit was all the greater. Good Negroes, young and well set-up, sold on the wharves of Boston for twenty pounds each. Before the Revolution nearly every town in New England had slaves. Justification for the slave trade was easy to the Puritans of New England because it offered an opportunity to Christianize a benighted race.

So Amos, in youth and strength, in fear and wonder, and against his will, came to America. In surroundings and conditions so mystifying and strange that it was like being transplanted into another world, he learned new ways and, bright above the ordinary, proved a good biddable servant. The length of his servitude we do not know. He may have been shifted about in many towns for many years as the property of many masters; but in 1763 he had gained a Christian name and a trade, and was the slave of Ichabod Richardson, a tanner of Woburn, Massachusetts.

In naming their slaves the Colonists displayed an ironic humor out of keeping with the traditional Puritan character. Scattered over New England, in sheds and huts and chimney corners, were Caesars and Pompeys and Scipios, not to mention Zenobias, Cleopatras, Snowballs, Roses, and Violets. The slave was usually known by the surname of his master, but usage sometimes found a more fitting appellation, changing with ownership or circumstances, as when Pompey Blackman upon manumission became Pompey Freeman. Amos Fortune probably owed his name to a pleasantry. Someone jokingly

called him Fortunatus, not because of an overflowing purse like that of the fabulous character of whom he was the namesake, but because he had none at all. We find the name Mr. Fortunatus in one instance applied to him in business papers which have been preserved. It was more happy in its significance than most; but for everyday use he needed another, and so a pious master called him Amos.

Amos worked cheerfully the long week day hours, but rested on the seventh day, a blessed boon that even a selfish taskmaster could not take from him, for it was laid down in the Decalogue that "on the seventh day is the Sabbath and in it thou shalt do no work." Ichabod Richardson was a good man according to his light. Under his tutelage the poor slave learned a useful trade and received religious instruction. He went to meeting with the good folks on the Sabbath and, clearly, he imbibed something of the spirit if not the letter of his teaching, and surely this was the better part.

By faithful and ready wit Amos became an expert tanner and currier. This was an essential trade in a primitive community. Without ever going to school he learned to read, write, and cipher, and as he gained light and vision he naturally became restless under his bonds and sought perseveringly the means to make himself free. In 1763 he made a bargain with his master by which, when certain conditions had been fulfilled, he was to become his own man. The following paper appears to have been a tentative record of the transaction. It will be noticed that it does not bear the signature of Ichabod Richardson, but it was probably a first draft of one of even date and more exacting demands that was actually executed:

Know all men by these Presents that I Ichabod Richardson of Woboarn in the county of Middx: and province of the Massachusetts-bay in New England Tanner, for diverse good Reasons me hereunto especially moving Have and by these presents do Covenant, promise grant and agree to, and with my Negroe man Amos That at the end of four years next insuing this Date (or at my Decease if it Should fall within that Term) that he the Said Amos Shall then be Discharged, Freed, and Set at liberty from my Service power & Command forever, and have full Liberty to Trade Traffick and dispose of him Self, in all Respects as he pleases, and Have and Enjoy & convert to his own use all the profit of his own Labour and Industry equal to men that are freeborn, and that neither I, nor my Heirs, nor any other person, or persons acting, or claiming by or under me or them, Shall have, challenge, or Claim any Right to, or in his person property or Labours, but Therefrom Shall be Excluded and for ever Declared by force & virtue of these presents.

In Witness Whereof I the Sd Ichabod Richardson have here unto Set my hand & Seal the thirtieth day of December 1763. in the fourth year of his majesties Reign &c. . . .

Signed Sealed & Delivered
in presence of

Seal

It might be supposed that the "diverse good Reasons" were merely nominal, but subsequent developments reveal an understructure of pounds, shillings, and pence that were the essential element of the transaction. The deal was therefore duly safeguarded by another transaction, a little obscure to the unprofessional mind, by which Amos was to create in the hands of a neighbor, who served as banker, a trust fund out of which any arrearages due to sickness or disability at any stated payment period could be drawn to "Endemnify the heirs of the Estate of his deceased Master Ichabod Richardson." Thus it appears that the good master Ichabod died before the demands of the indenture were fully met and payments were continued to Simon Carter until the 23d of November, 1770. After seven years of incredible effort the widow and heirs of Ichabod Richardson came to his rescue by a general quitclaim of their interest given, as stated, "In consideration of the many faithful services Amos Fortune did perform to the said deceased Ichabod in his lifetime and hath since performed to us respectively whereby our several interests have been greatly increased, do &c. . . . grant unto said Amos Fortune the full and free Liberty of his person and services from and after the ninth day of May, 1769." Thus, at the age of fifty-nine years, Amos became a man. He had gone far, but the best of his hopes and aspirations were yet to be realized. In four years more he was a citizen of Woburn and the owner of a homestead. Soon after, he married a wife, of whom he was bereft in a year for the vital statistics of Woburn record the death October 3, 1775, of the wife of Amos Fortune.

After a seemly interval of nearly three years and the accumulation of the wherewithal, Amos found another whose price was literally above rubies. She was the chattel of Josiah Bowers in the neighboring town of Billerica. The chroniclers of the day did not waste words in romancing, but the reader is welcome to supply such side-long looks and surreptitious preliminary attentions as fancy may suggest. Josiah doubtless knew what was going on and was in the way of trade not above capitalizing sentimental considerations to his own advantage. The price of likely Negroes may have been from twenty to forty pounds, Lawful Money, on the wharves at Boston, but this was for raw African product, unacclimated and untrained in household service. Here was a finished article of trade, a good cook, a handy servant of good disposition. Amos was in no position to derogate by a word from the value of his prospective purchase. He must pay the price. A transaction of so much importance, like the transfer of realty, must be in writing.

Billerica June ye 23 1778

Then Rec'd of Amos Fortune fifty pounds in full for a Negro garle Named Lydia Somerset being now my property the which I do Sell and Convay to the afoarsaid Amos and I do Covenant with the Said Amos that I have Just and Lawfull Rite to Sell and Convay the Said Lydia in Manner afoarsaid and I will War-rante and defend the said Lydia to him against all the Lawfull Clames and Demands of all Persons What Ever.

Sined Sealed and Delivered

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Josiah Bowers

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Isaac Johnson

To Amos this evidence of proprietorship was priceless and he treasured it to the day of his death. Fortunately, with other valuable papers, it came into the protective hands of Mrs. Dorcas Lacy, of an old-time Jaffrey family, and later by inheritance into the possession of Miss Celia F. Slason of Los Angeles, California, who, in turn, passed it on to the present Committee on Jaffrey History.

Amos had bought a slave and made her his wife. The property was free and clear of all encumbrance. No troublesome installments were coming due as when he bought his own freedom. He had reached the pinnacle of earthly happiness. But happiness, however deserved, was not long his portion and before a year passed he was bereaved of his gentle Lydia.

It is not the habit of his light-hearted race long to harbor grief and soon he began to take notice of a "Violet by a mossy stone" who became more than a Violet to him. Again he brought to the hymeneal altar his offering of fifty pounds. This time the title to his "Heart's Desire" rested in a neighbor named James Baldwin, and with like formalities as before the purchase was made and the papers duly signed, sealed, and delivered on the ninth day of November, 1779. "Amos Fortune and Violet Baldwin, blacks, both of Woburn," were married the following day, November 10, 1779.

Having a good trade and freedom, Amos, nearly seventy years of age, began looking about for a new and untried field in which to establish himself in the world. In June previous to his marriage to Violet he was at one time in Keene where he loaned of his surplus six pounds to one Samuel George, taking as security a "blue broadcloth Coat, striped pattern jacket and furr hat," which seem to have been unredeemed and may have served for his wedding attire later in the year.

In 1781 he came with his family to Jaffrey, but scarcely had he landed his goods when the constable appeared and with punctilious

formality warned him to depart forthwith with all his belongings. The old record book is defaced, but clearly there was a third member of the household included in the constable's dubious welcome, doubtless an adopted daughter whom he had purchased at the market valuation of goods in that category. This warning, having served its purpose to free the town of liability for their support if they later became impoverished, also serves to fix the year of their arrival in Jaffrey.

His first residence and place of business in Jaffrey is unknown but it was probably upon Minister Ainsworth's farm, near the foot of the hill west of the Common, where by sufferance, highly creditable to the owner, he was permitted to clear land for a tanyard by the bank of a brook that furnished the flow of water requisite for his trade. This parcel of the pastoral domain, though in possession of the Ainsworth family for many years in the early history of the town, long bore the unpleasing designation of "The Nigger Piece," a name only to be explained by its intimate association with one of Amos' race.

In 1789, as he prospered in business, he purchased of William Turner, in a more favorable location, twenty-five acres from the farm now known as the Baldwin Place. Here on a chosen spot by the banks of Tyler Brook, which supplied water for his industry, he erected a substantial house still standing on the premises. He also built a barn and currier's shop for the dressing of leather, cleared and equipped a tanyard, and evidently excavated two sizable basins in the adjacent Tyler Brook for the long continued soaking and washing of hides that were required in the primitive methods of his day.

So far as we have learned, Amos was the only tanner in Jaffrey for some years after his arrival, and he was without doubt the most skillful for miles around. His accounts furnish evidence that hides were brought to him from as far away as Reading and Sterling in Massachusetts, and from Amherst and New Ipswich in New Hampshire. He had the full trust and confidence of his customers; he received their notes and his own were readily accepted by his townsmen in business transactions. What better evidence can we have of the standing in the community than the following neighborly letters?

Jaffrey oct. 25. 1790

Sir pleas to Let Mr. Joel Adams have a calf Skin if mine ant out Let him have one of Yourn & I will swap or allow you for it.

Mr. Amos Fortain

B. PRESCOTT

Jaffrey, October 28th 1789

Mr. Fortin Sir Please to Pay Samuel Avery Twelve Shillings & you oblige Yours to Serve It being for Value Recv'd by me

SIMEON BUTTERS

Amos Fortune's house was of the common design, one story with a large central chimney and fireplace on two sides. In the kitchen fireplace was the crane with hanging kettles, fire shovels, tongs, and bellows, all of which were listed in the inventory of his estate. Could we have had a glimpse into his home we could have found a picture of comfort above the average of his neighbors. He had bedsteads, feather beds, bedding, tables, writing desk, chests of drawers, a looking glass, a Windsor chair, six house chairs, iron and tin ware, warming pan, cheese presses, churns, footwheel, woolen wheel, and loom.



AMOS FORTUNE'S HOMESTEAD

He had livestock sufficient for his family needs, a cow, a heifer, and a mare. He had the full equipment of farming tools of his day, a collar and hames, traces, and other harness, a plow, one dung fork, two shod wooden shovels, pitch forks, rakes, saddle, bridle, pillion, side saddle, scythe, tackle, hay hooks, steelyards, grind stones, flax brakes, baskets, "Pidgeon net," and currying tools. He had nose irons for a sleigh, but no wheeled vehicle.

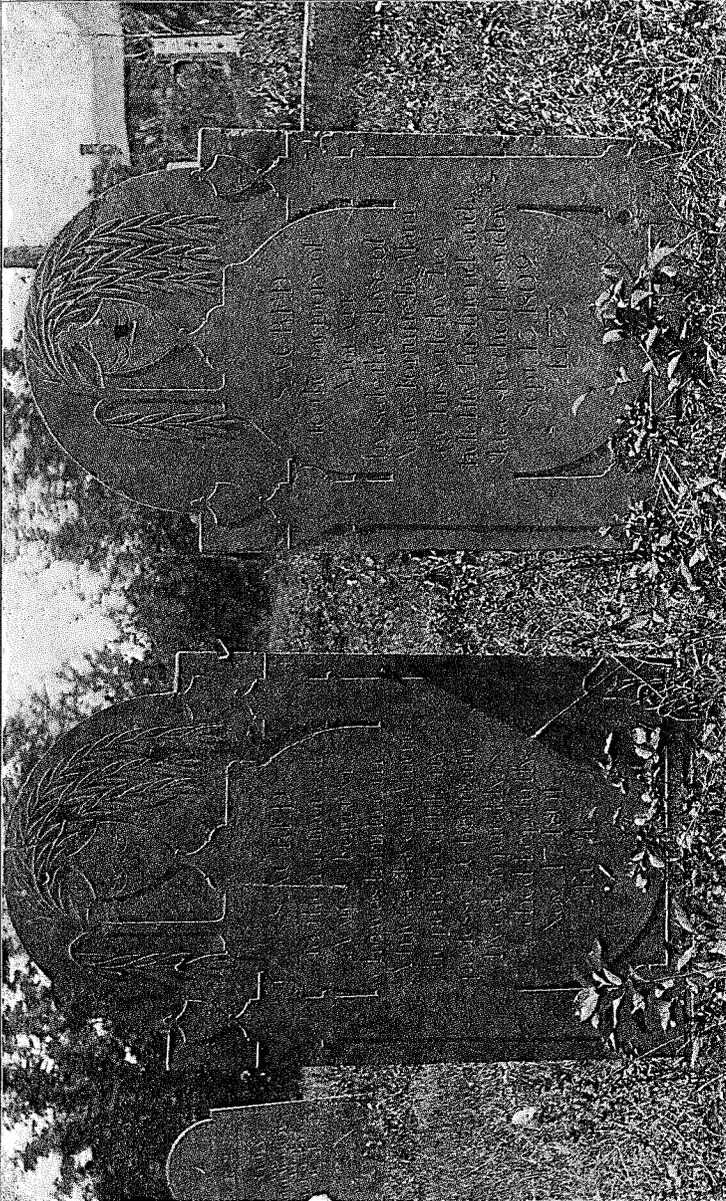
Amos subscribed for a newspaper of the day by which he showed himself in advance of the general run of his townsmen in information and in intelligence. He was a member of the Social Library, made up of the most intelligent citizens of the town, (see Libraries).

Amos dressed better than some; perhaps as well as the best. In

his wardrobe were leather breeches for everyday as befitted his calling; velvet breeches for meeting on the Lord's day. He had silver buckles on his knees and on his shoes the same. He had a striped vest, a tall fur hat of woolly white to go with his curly white hair, a fur coat for winter, and a great coat for common wear, a "deep blue strait bodied coat, one fustick coloured strait col coat," two pair of boot legs, and one lambskin surtout.

The mode of travel of Amos and his family to the end of their days was by horseback with saddle and pillion. This was the common practice of his day. Can we not see him as he rode sedately into town on a pleasant Sunday morning perched upon his horse, with Violet clinging trustingly behind? Not since Bobby Shafto went to sea has a more engaging picture come to us out of the past than that of our Amos of a Sabbath morning on his way to church with his velvet breeches and long blue coat, silver buckles on his knees and on his shoes, and his tall woolly hat. Can we not see Amos when the service is over, with the native courtesy of his race, bowing and shaking hands with Deacon Spofford and Doctor Howe, himself the most gracious of them all?

In 1801, at the reputed age of ninety-one years, he made his will; and it is by this instrument that we estimate the true measure of the man. He was now old but declared himself of sound and disposing mind and memory. For his executor he wisely selected one of the trustiest of his fellow citizens, Deacon Eleazer Spofford. He left to his widow his household goods and all the improvements and profits of his real estate during her natural life. To his adopted daughter, Celyndia, he left his loom and small foot wheel as a means of livelihood; and for her further well-being, if unwed, she was to have a home with Violet to whose care she was commended. Then, after this prudential provision for his own, came his expression of regard for the church that had received him in brotherly kindness and the school district where he had made his home. He enjoined upon his executor, after his other bequests and just dues were paid, and "handsome gravestones" had been erected to himself and wife, to make a "handsome present" to the church and likewise to the school district in which he lived. Here, if nowhere else, is conclusive evidence that Amos was a handsome man, for, as the time-honored adage has it, "Handsome is that handsome does." The residue, by modern standards, was not impressive. His bequest to the church was the sum of one hundred dollars with which was purchased a silver communion service that long fulfilled its sacred purpose; but alas,



FORTUNE GRAVESTONES

with mistaken benevolence was donated to a struggling mission church in the far West. The educational bequest, at first amounting to two hundred and thirty-three dollars and always known as the Amos Fortune Fund, was given to the old school district No. Eight, where its income was used as long as the district existed as an educational subdivision. By a special Act of Legislature, when the town system of schools was adopted, the Fortune Fund became the possession of the town, with the provision that its income should still be expended for the benefit of the local school. Following the abandonment of the district schools the income of the fund was allowed to accumulate until with the principal it has now reached the sum of one thousand dollars. A recent judicial decision makes the income from this accumulated fund available for general school purposes. In 1928, with the purpose of honoring the donor and creating an interest in the Jaffrey schools in good citizenship the town voted the income from the Fortune Fund as prizes for contests in public speaking, which have become annual events in the school calendar.

Amos Fortune lived frugally, temperately, and uprightly. Whether or not ninety-one years was the span of his life is unimportant. Life, it has been truly said, should be measured by heart-beats and not by figures on a dial. Ages were encompassed in the long heart-breaking climb up from savagery in Africa, through slavery, to free citizenship in America. Only an honest purpose and stout heart beating steadily all the way could have gone so far. His place is unique in the history of Jaffrey and probably of New England. Tradition has only good to say of him, and his memory is one of our dearest possessions. He was a slave and one of a despised, down-trodden race; but happily enough of his life and character has come to our knowledge so that we can say of him in the words of the poet that he was "a man for a' that and a' that."

Well done, Amos. Green be the turf above you! You have left a good name and shining example to all the world. We are proud to claim you as a citizen and brother. Monadnock will not last longer than the influence of your generous spirit and honest heart. There never will be any one so great and wise in the town you honored and loved that he may not learn a lesson of the obligations of citizenship from your humble example. Jaffrey will be a better and richer town for your example. Every child who goes to school here will benefit by your sacrifice; and all who care for church and school and the blessings of home and community life will delight to do you honor!