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# 60 enslaved people once toiled for a rich landowner in Medford. Kyera Singleton wants you to know who they were

By [Hayley Kaufman](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 8, 2020, 4:22 p.m.



Kyera Singleton, the new executive director of the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, sat on the staircase in the slave quarters. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

MEDFORD — On a small piece of land a few blocks off I-93 stand two buildings, both made of clapboard and brick.

One is an 18th-century mansion known as the Royall House, once home to the largest holder of enslaved people in Colonial Massachusetts. The other, a modest structure a few yards away, is believed to be the only remaining slave quarters in the Northern United States. At least 60 enslaved people lived here for years, working in the opulent mansion and on the more than 500 acres known as Ten Hills Farm.

Isaac Royall Jr. lived on the sprawling estate with his wife and children before [fleeing to Nova Scotia](#) on the eve of the Revolutionary War. He later set himself up in London and asked a friend to sell some of the enslaved people he counted as property. Royall left part of his fortune to Harvard, which led to the establishment of the Royall Chair, the school's first endowed law professorship. His family crest was used as an element of the Harvard Law School seal until 2016, [when it was finally abandoned](#) amid protests by students and faculty.

The African and Afro-Caribbean people whom Royall and his father enslaved are less well-known. The names they were given have been carefully gathered over the centuries, found in wills and account books and inventories. Nan. Ruth. House Peter. Cuffee. Perhaps the best-known is Belinda Sutton. In his will, Royall offered the woman, identified only as Belinda, the choice to remain enslaved or to have her freedom. Not surprisingly, she chose freedom. Two years later, in 1783, [she petitioned the Massachusetts General Court](#) for a pension from the Royall estate and it was granted. But she only received a portion of the settlement, so she petitioned five more times over the next decade, her name then listed as Belinda Sutton, seeking what was due.

Taken together, the two small buildings in Medford, now a museum, tell a foundational story of this country, of immense wealth underpinned by a brutal system of slavery. But they also bear witness to a vital effort to honor those who were enslaved here and to connect their history to the calls for racial justice galvanizing the nation today.

If that sounds like an enormous mission for an organization that has only one half-time employee on the payroll, it is. But Kyera Singleton, 31, who in April became the executive director of the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, doesn't see that as a problem, any more than she sees the museum's temporary closure during the COVID-19 pandemic as insurmountable.

Since her arrival, she has expanded the organization's virtual programming and social media reach, a first step toward making its resources more widely accessible online. She sees the institution as one that should be a part of the national — even global — conversation on race, history, and social justice. It is a conversation that hinges on unflinching honesty, and historical rigor.

“I think of this as an exciting time and an exciting challenge,” said Singleton, a PhD candidate in the department of American Culture at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and a visiting dissertation fellow at Harvard. “When we think about Northern slavery and we think about Massachusetts, people think about abolitionist history, and that's true, but it's both. There's a history of slavery here.

“I think about our space as being a space in which we can help our communities talk about racial injustice by thinking about the long history of it. That's one of the things that we can do, and that's what we want communities to lean on us for — to talk about how the legacy of slavery impacts Black communities and communities of color today.”



A view of the slave quarters at the Royall House and Slave Quarters on George Street in Medford. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Boston was a hub of global slave commerce, and the keeping of enslaved people here was not uncommon. In 1754, according to a count ordered by the governor, [there were 2,720 enslaved people](#) in 119 Massachusetts towns. Of those, 1,270 resided in Suffolk County. Another 361 lived in Middlesex County, where Ten Acres Farm was located. As a legal matter, slavery was ended in Massachusetts in 1783 after a [series of court cases](#) but persisted under the guise of indentured servitude for some years after.

At Royall House, this challenging story has become central to the museum's mission, though the means of the telling have had to shift; a pivot to virtual programming has been essential because of the virus.



But the challenges of maintaining two aging historic buildings remain all too real. On a recent humid Tuesday, Singleton, wearing a colorful headwrap and a navy T-shirt that said “Vote,” conferred with two workers on a dire construction issue. Not only was the brickwork at one corner of the slave quarters crumbling, but the wood sill that rested on it had rotted. All of it needed to be ripped out and replaced as soon as possible. Waiting on grant money or the largesse of donors was not an option.

So Singleton did what any savvy millennial would do: She [posted a GoFundMe](#) page to crowd source money for the repairs. They raised the \$20,000 in less than two weeks, so Singleton and the museum’s board decided to extend the fund-raiser through Aug. 20 to help purchase virtual programming equipment and replenish some of the tour income that’s being lost while the Royall House and Slave Quarters remains closed.

It is Singleton’s approach — collaborative, academic, digitally focused, and dynamic — that led the board to hire her just as COVID was shutting the world down. After a major rebranding of the museum 15 years ago and the retirement of a longtime executive director, the next phase of development is coming into sharper focus, board members say, and she is the person to lead it.

“She herself is a full-fledged scholar and that’s a wonderful asset to have,” said board member Barbara F. Berenson, the author of several books including one about Boston abolitionists. “But so is her commitment and her ability to make history accessible and alive.”

Indeed, to tour the museum with Singleton is to have the lives of the enslaved people depicted in rich and methodical detail. In the quarters, artifacts unearthed during an archaeological dig at the site prompt her to imagine their inner lives. Bits of tile made into game pieces lead to a discussion about how enslaved people might have created leisure time for themselves and built community amid a regime that sought to limit their autonomy. In the mansion’s kitchen, she points out the shockingly narrow and worn circular stairs that laborers had to run up and down, again and again, at the bidding of

the Royall family. Under a kitchen shelf nearby, she points out a couple of thin pallets.

“We know that enslaved people were sleeping in here,” she said. According to an inventory, “there are five beds, ‘five negro beds,’ in the kitchen. So we know that people are sleeping where they’re working.”

The focus of the museum has not always been on these intertwined stories of wealth and servitude. For decades, the Royall House and the history of the family, headed by Isaac Royall Sr. and then by Isaac Jr., were the draw for visitors. Tours showed off the architecture, art, and furnishings with almost no mention of the enslaved people who made the lavish lifestyle possible.



The exterior of the The Royall House mansion in Medford. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The erasures galled board member Peter Gittleman. For years, he pushed to present a more complete history, one that exposed the realities of Northern slavery and the ugly truths about the Royalls’ wealth, gained from enslaved labor on their sugarcane

plantations in Antigua. But his protests often fell on deaf ears. “I was told, ‘That’s a story no one wants to hear,’ ” he recalled.

But in 2004, the tide began to turn. Gittleman, now co-president of the organization, was no longer the only voice on the board calling for change. By 2005, the mission statement had been rewritten and the mythology of the Royalls as magnanimous land owners abandoned.

“That was put to bed once we rebranded,” he said. “We had a moral obligation to tell the story of the 60-plus enslaved people who were on that property.”

Now, with Singleton helping to lead the charge, plans for the museum are growing more ambitious.

In addition to her academic work, the Camden, N.J., native served as a policy fellow for the ACLU of Georgia, working on mass incarceration, reproductive justice, and voting rights. That background brings another level of engagement to her efforts to connect the history of slavery to the current social justice uprisings.

“This is not just history about Black Americans. This is American history. Slavery is American history. And we want people to understand that,” she said.

“What are these longstanding historical racial and social inequities that exist that really hurt Black communities today? What are the roots they have in enslavement? Let’s talk about it. Let’s be honest about it.”

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