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### Royall House and Slave Quarters

15 George Street

Medford, Massachusetts

[RoyallHouse.org](http://RoyallHouse.org)

## Drawing from the Past: Interpreting the Slave Quarters

One of the Royall House and Slave Quarters' greatest assets is also its greatest mystery: the free-standing brick and frame outkitchen and slave quarters, which stands a mere thirty feet from the main house. This building provides tangible evidence of the reality of northern colonial slavery and offers our visitor an experience that is unique to this site. However, for all its power, much about the structure prevents us from understanding this building as the enslaved Africans who lived and worked there would have. In the coming year, the museum's board members and staff plan to explore new ways of bringing this structure to life that will allow for a more complex interpretation of the lives of the Royalls' enslaved residents.



Eighteenth-century documentation of the Slave Quarters is limited to its presence on a map drawn by Henry Pelham in 1777. This incredibly detailed map, made to aid British troops (by the half-brother of John Singleton Copley), includes several structures on the "Gen'l Royall's" property as well what are believed to be garden beds on the courtyard side. One of the structures delineated as a simple rectangle is in precisely the position occupied by the Slave Quarters.

The Slave Quarters was both described and photographed on several occasions in the nineteenth century. In the second volume of his *History of Middlesex County*, Samuel Adams Drake noted that "The brick quarters which the slaves occupied are situated on the south side of the mansion and front upon the courtyard, one side of which they enclose. These have remained unchanged, and are, we believe, the last visible relics of slavery in New England." One hundred years had



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passed between the period during which the building served as living and working space for enslaved Africans and Drake's observations. Whether the building was truly "unchanged" is impossible to verify, but given its status as a utilitarian outbuilding, alterations may have been less likely.

Around the same time, photographers, including Boston photographer Wilfred A. French, recorded the exterior appearance of the Slave Quarters. These images show a building that looks, on the outside, much as it does today, although its weather-beaten bricks and clapboards were in need of attention. There is no documentation of the building's use by the owners who followed the Royalls. Although it is likely that it continued to be a functional building, it is not known whether it was used as on-site housing, perhaps for domestic workers or those who tended the grounds.

Between 1934 and 1935, Medford resident Jacob S. Crytzer created measured drawings of the Slave Quarters as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), a part of Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) that put unemployed architects to work documenting the nation's built heritage. This series of very detailed drawings gives us a sense of the building's interiors just after the last renovation of the frame portion of the building. Among the interesting notations made by Crytzer are that the space that is now the meeting room was originally divided into three rooms for enslaved families, the room above the outkitchen was probably original and may have been a bedroom, and that there remained several "iron rings

in which ropes were inserted for the purpose of hauling heavy crates or barrels out of the cellar." On elevations of the exteriors, he noted that the brick facing the courtyard was laid in Flemish bond, a high-style technique appropriate for the side that faced the Royalls.

It is important to keep in mind that Crytzer's notes were based on his observations of the architecture and whatever knowledge he possessed



Historic New England Library and Archives

about buildings associated with slavery and the institution itself. They do, however, provide a starting point for considering not only how the building looked in the eighteenth century, but how spaces within were used.

Isaac Royall Sr.'s probate inventory documents the presence of an outkitchen, which has been interpreted to mean the brick portion of the Slave Quarters. It is unclear exactly when the frame section was added, but it is likely to have occurred during his son's residency, perhaps in the 1760s. One of the greatest mysteries has been determining the use of the new section. The de-



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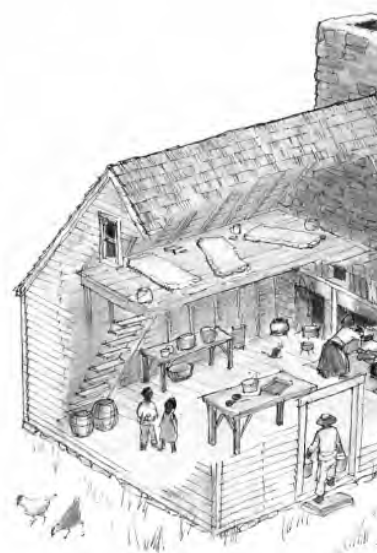
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lineator of the HABS drawings suggested divisions that accommodated family units, but within the past twenty years, scholars have offered different theories. Edward Chappell of Colonial Williamsburg and architectural historian Anne Grady have noted that the three sections may have accommodated a variety of uses, including storage and work-space in addition to living quarters. Both cited the paired slave quarters at Arlington House in Virginia. Although they are early nineteenth century buildings, they share a remarkably similar layout with the Royall House quarters: buildings divided into three sections with an attic space above. HABS documentation for Arlington's south Slave Quarters notes that according to oral tradition, one end was used to store supplies, the center was a smokehouse, and the other end and loft above were used as living quarters. The north building, also divided in three sections, included additional living space, an outkitchen, and a laundry room. This example does not have a direct link to the Royalls' Slave Quarters, but provides additional food for thought about how enslaved people at the site experienced this important building.

Ultimately, the goal of our exploration of the building's history is to provide additional nuance to our interpretation of the lives of the people who worked and lived within. Since so little original material exists to recreate the interior physically, one solution is to create a conjectural drawing that not only depicts how the interiors may have looked but that suggests how they may have been furnished and used. Our board of directors has been working with Gerald Foster, a local artist, writer and architect. Gerry recently collaborated with Historic New England on a series of cutaway drawings of seven iconic kitchens featured in the book and exhibition *America's Kitchens*. His illustration of Green Hill Plantation in Virginia, inspired us to pursue a drawing that would offer our visitors a similarly vibrant representation of the architecture as it is currently understood, along with people and their surroundings.



Detail of Plantation Kitchen, from *America's Kitchens*, Historic New England Library and Archives

During the first stages of the project, we have found that there are many more questions than answers. However, we hope the interpretation that we create will generate even more thoughtful conversation about what we do and don't know about this very important part of Medford's and America's history.

## News Briefs

A class from **St. Peter's School** in Cambridge came for an early spring tour. The students sent a sheaf of tour reviews to **Tom Lincoln**, our Executive Director. There are too many to quote them all, but here are a few comments: "I learned that Massachusetts had more slaves than I expected." "On the dining room floor was a cool Turkish rug that looks similar to the one in my house." "My favorite thing was that you set the tone by showing what the slaves did." Teacher **Nicole Putney** also noted that she'll be back with her class and others next year.

A permanent exhibition entitled **Confronting Our Legacy: Slavery and Antislavery in the North** opened recently at the **Historic Newton's** museum. Working with **Melissa Westlake**, we contributed text and images from our archaeological artifacts to the exhibit. Go to [historicnewton.org](http://historicnewton.org) for more.

We again hosted the **Medford Arts Council (MAC)** annual grantee showcase in May, which was attended by about 60 people. The event included a brief dance performance on our lawn by Kelli Edwards and Sandra Zarotney Keldsen of **Dances by Isadora**.

Artwork from 3rd grade students at the Roberts Elementary School was on display as part of the Children's Art Showcase. The Medford Arts Council, a local agency which is supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency, recently made a grant to support our reinterpretation of the Slave Quarters -- thank you! We are delighted to work with the arts community here in Medford. (Photo courtesy of Bianca Mase)

Our **May 12 Open House**, held in conjunction with Medford Community Read, was a good suc-

cess. Some 60 visitors attended, including many who had never been to our site, and several came from other cities and towns. Special thanks go to The Friends of the Medford Public Library for their generous donation in support of the event; Barbara Kerr of the Medford Public Library was a force of nature, as always. Volunteers deserve a big "Thank you": **Anne Donaghy, Beth Fuller, Ryan Hayward, Theresa Kelliher, Margen Kelsey, Elizabeth Merrick, Mike Oliver, Penny Outlaw, Jennifer Pustz, Dale Rider, and Gracelaw Simmons**.

Boston historian **Alex Goldfeld** presented a lively program about Boston's North End on March 21. The SRO crowd was treated to the broad panorama of the history of this fabled neighborhood, including that of free blacks in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Yankees of the pre-Civil War era, and the successive waves of Irish and Italian immigration into the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. Mr. Goldfeld has an encyclopedic knowledge of the people, buildings, streets, sights, and sounds of one of Boston's oldest and most important areas. The evening was enhanced by the personal memories of many in the audience. We look forward to having Mr. Goldfeld back on another topic!

More than 400 **Medford Fifth Grade** students and their teachers toured our site on May 29 and 30. This longstanding tradition was made possible by our generous volunteer guides and helpers: **Beth Fuller, Sharon Guzik, Ryan Hayward, Margen Kelsey, Clara Read, Dale Rider, and Gracelaw Simmons**. Executive Director **Tom Lincoln** did the introductory talks (about 10 times!) and students saw both the Slave Quarters and key portions of the main house. We look forward to some of the kids coming back as guides in a decade or two!





## Welcome New Directors

**Elizabeth Ammons** has been an English literature professor at Tufts University since 1976, where she's taught courses in Multicultural America before 1860 and Race, Racism, and American Literature. A prolific author and editor, her specialties are 19th and 20th century American literature and U.S. literature and race studies. She is a co-founder of the Community Cupboard Food Pantry at Medford's Unitarian Universalist Church, where she's on the board of trustees.



**Christina Hunt** is an emerging museum professional with a special interest in interpreting American art and material culture for history museums. She holds a B.A. in History from the University of Virginia and is currently an M.A. candidate in Art History and Museum Studies at Tufts University. Christina is working to document our museum's recent restoration project for posterity. She is a Medford resident.

## Structural Repairs Complete

On April 9, preservation carpenter John Watson got right to work. Last fall we had identified some significant deterioration on the southeast corner post of the Slave Quarters but were advised to keep the exterior walls of the building closed up until the spring so that an invasive repair could take place if the damage proved to be worse than expected. This delay also gave us the necessary time to raise funds for the corner post repair. Thank you to our annual appeal donors for making this work possible.

On the morning that work began, we waited anxiously as Mr. Watson removed more and more of the building's sheathing, fearing that we would discover a preservation nightmare. But happily we found that most of the serious deterioration was on a very large wooden block that had been used to repair the corner post decades ago when the lower portion of the post had been cut away and replaced. The eighteenth-century wood that remained in place just above the rotted block was still largely intact and in remarkably good shape. At some point, there had likely been gutter leaks which caused the deterioration first in the nineteenth century and again in the twentieth.



In a matter of days, Mr. Watson had replaced the block with new wood and joined it into the solid part of the original post using a traditional skive (diagonal) joint. He then tied the new work into the original corner brace. He replaced several pieces of sheathing board and rows of clapboards to complete the repair. Generally, he thought the building's wood framing was in excellent shape. "You're good for another 200 years," were John Watson's parting words.

# Making Slavery History

We know frustratingly little about one of the most famous residents of the Royall House and Slave Quarters. As historian Margot Minardi demonstrated in a well-attended lecture at the Slave Quarters on January 18, however, there is still much to be said about “Belinda an Affrican” and her celebrated 1783 petition to the Massachusetts General Court.

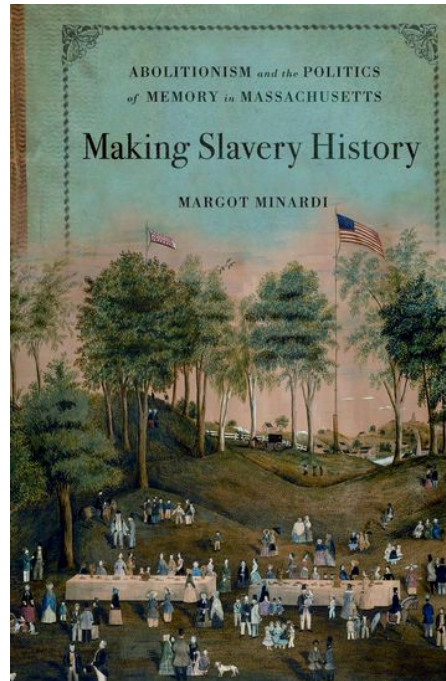
Minardi, who teaches history at Reed College, is the author of *Making Slavery History*, which examines how memories of the American Revolution made their way into discussions about slavery, and particularly about its abolition. Her book has been called “a work of genuine excellence” in the *American Historical Review* and “smart, creative and provocative” in the *New England Quarterly*.

Minardi spent academic year 2011-12 as an MHS-NEH Long-Term Research Fellow at the Massachusetts Historical Society studying the political culture of peace activism in the United States from the War of 1812 through the Civil War. Minardi grew up in Lexington and first encountered the Royall House and Slave Quarters as a student at Harvard.

Belinda’s petition for a pension from Isaac Royall’s estate is often cited today as an early argument in favor of reparations for slavery. What are we to make, then, of the legislature’s favorable response? Minardi argues that in the context of its own time, the pension granted to Belinda did not necessarily challenge the legitimacy of bondage.

Support for the elderly and infirm had long been a slaveholder’s responsibility—even for those who had been manumitted—so that their support would not become a charge on the public. What-

ever Belinda’s own thoughts about slavery, in granting her a pension from Isaac Royall’s estate, the legislators were affirming that not even an exiled Loyalist could escape the obligations that went along with holding human property. The legislature’s negative response to contemporaneous petitions for reparations from the public purse makes the point.



It was in its literary afterlife that Belinda’s petition emerged as a celebrated argument against the institution of slavery. Tracing the ways in which the petition was not only presented but actually rewritten in the British, French, and American press, Minardi outlined how it came to serve as an emblematic abolitionist text. A third-person narrative was turned into a memoir, and the picture of slavery’s cruelties was embellished with the addition of a rape. Most important, Belinda’s demand for a pension was transformed into a plea for freedom.

In fact, as Minardi pointed out, the historical Belinda was already free when she petitioned the legislature, emancipated legally but without the resources to remain financially independent. Her desperate personal circumstances were typical of many freedpeople, who had been prohibited from the benefits of their own labor. By presenting Belinda’s petition as a call for personal freedom, abolitionist writers obscured its testimony to the challenges faced by freedpeople, as they struggled to make real the promise of freedom.

Minardi left it to her audience to draw out the implications of the petition for today’s society, but it was hard not to leave her thoughtful lecture without reflecting on the ways in which Belinda’s own story prefigured persisting patterns of poverty, inequality and marginalization.

## Volunteer Spotlight

For **Ryan Hayward**, a guide at the Royall House and Slave Quarters, history is a passion that he studies, shares, and to some degree, lives. Ryan started volunteering at the site in 2007 after being encouraged by several board members. A graduate of Medford High School, Ryan recently received his Bachelor of Design Studies with an emphasis on Historic Preservation from the Boston Architectural College. He also volunteers for the Medford Historical Society and serves as the Board Chairman for the Medford Historical Commission. As an intern for Historic New England, Ryan created as-built documentation and construction documents for several historic properties. He also created architectural drawings and drafted a Historic Structures Report for the

Royall House. Ryan serves as the Lieutenant Captain of the Stow Minutemen, through which he engages directly with eighteenth-century history through encampments and other education programs. Ryan describes the Royall House and Slave Quarters as a “gateway to the past,” which he discovered during a seventh-grade field trip. He notes that since that visit, “It has stood as an icon and I am glad to be able to tell its story, as someone who was once a listener.”



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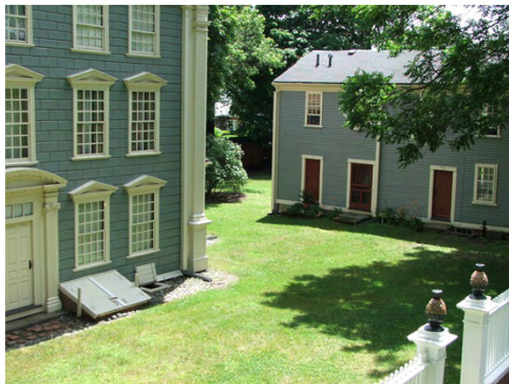
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# ROYALL HOUSE & SLAVE QUARTERS

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## Giving Voice: An Afternoon with Playwright Lydia Diamond

A perfect June day provided the backdrop to our well-attended annual benefit event. The buildings were open and the gardens in bloom, and our guests enjoyed eighteenth-century music and appetizing refreshments.

Speaker Lydia Diamond captivated the audience. She spoke movingly about the visceral impact of this first visit to our museum, and how powerfully she was affected by its history. After reading an excerpt from her compelling play *Harriet Jacobs*, she engaged a group of Medford High School students in a thoughtful discussion about the struggle for freedom by its brave young protagonist. It was truly a memorable afternoon, and we are grateful to Ms. Diamond, the extraordinary young people who participated in dialogue with her, and the many sponsors and volunteers who helped make this year's Giving Voice program such a success.

