

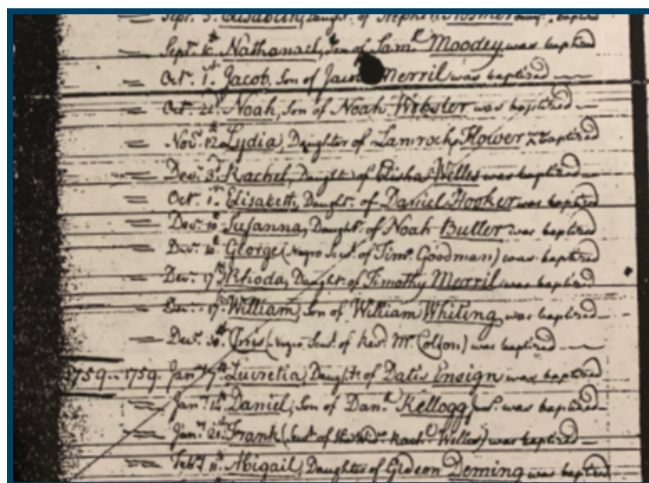
# Noah Webster and Slavery in the West Division

## Division

### What enslaved people might Noah Webster have known?

Noah Webster, Jr. grew up in the West Division of Hartford from 1758 to 1774. As a child and young adult, he might have interacted with at least 50 enslaved people who were forced to live in the West Division. About 15% of the 140 households in town in the 1760s used the labor of people who were not paid for their work.<sup>1</sup> These enslaved people of African descent did not have the freedom to make choices in their lives. The institution of slavery had economic benefits for the enslavers. Slavery was an institution supported by the church, by the laws, and by social custom.

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This church record from 1758 shows that Noah Webster, Jr. (1758–1841) was baptized as an infant in the Fourth Church of Hartford. This church community included many enslaved people, too. Within two months of Noah’s baptism, George, “a negro servant of Timothy Goodman was baptised.” And, Chris, a “Negro Servant of Reverend Mr. Colton was baptised.”

When Rev. Colton died in 1759, the enslavement of George was passed to his son Abijah who, starting in 1770, lived about a quarter mile from the Webster family on Sedgwick Road.

Between 1719 and 1770 the church records included 11 enslaved boys and men who were baptized:

<sup>1</sup>“Hidden History: Remembering Slavery and Freedom in West Hartford, <https://sites.google.com/view/westhartfordwitnessstones/database-of-enslaved-people>, December 29, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Fourth Church, Hartford Baptismal Record, October 24, 1758.

- 1738 Hannibal, enslaved by Thomas Hosmer<sup>3</sup>
- 1741 Page, enslaved by John Whiting
- 1742 Ned, enslaved by John Whitman
- 1742 Hercules, enslaved by Thomas Hosmer
- 1754 Lew, enslaved by Stephen Hosmer
- 1758 George, enslaved by Timothy Goodman
- 1758 Chris, enslaved by Reverend Colton
- 1759 Frank, enslaved by Widow Rachel Welles
- 1759 Ben, enslaved by John Whiting
- 1763 Caesar, “negro child of Lew” enslaved by George Hosmer (son of Stephen Hosmer)
- 1770 Rubin, enslaved by John Whitman.<sup>4</sup>



We speculate that Noah knew a man named **Bristow** (1731–1814) who was enslaved in Farmington, and served in the French & Indian War.<sup>5</sup> In 1772, when Sarah Whitman married Thomas Hart Hooker, they moved to West Hartford, bringing the enslaved man Bristow with them. When Noah, Jr. was 14, he may

6 Run-away from the subscriber of Hartford West-Division, on the night following 6th instant, a Molatto servant man named JUDE, about 21 years old, about 5 feet 8 inches high, had on a claret colour'd coat and waistcoat, and a light colour'd waistcoat, one pair of check'd linen trousers, two pair tow ditto, a pair good leather breeches, one white shirt, two check'd ditto, and is supposed to have a forged pass. TWENTY DOLLARS Reward and all necessary charges will be paid to any person who shall take up and return said Fellow to STEPHEN SEDGWICK. N. B. All Masters of vessels are forbid carrying off said fellow.

have known Bristow, a man of 41, who would have made his way from New Britain Avenue down Main Street past the Webster House into the center of town.

We speculate that Noah knew a man named **Jude** who was enslaved by Stephen Sedgwick on land where Buena Vista is today. In August 1774, Jude, age 21, sought his freedom. This was around the time Noah was getting ready to go to Yale to study. Would he have taken this story of a flight to freedom with him?



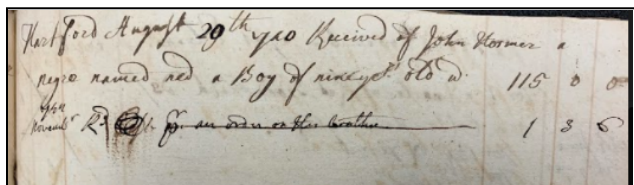
<sup>3</sup> Tracey Wilson, “How Can the Hosmer Family Help Us Remember Slavery and Freedom in West Hartford?,” April 13, 2020, <https://we-ha.com/how-can-the-hosmer-family-help-us-remember-slavery-and-freedom-in-west-hartford/>

<sup>4</sup> Tracey Wilson, “Whitman on Slavery,” *Life in West Hartford*, 2018, <https://lifeinwesthartford.org/colonial-life.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Bristow’s gravestone Old Center Cemetery, West Hartford CT.

<sup>6</sup> “Runaway from the Subscriber,” *Connecticut Courant*, 8/6/1774.

Noah might have known both Lyde (1735–c. 1800) and Page (1720–c. 1800) who were forced to live in the north end of town, enslaved by widow Jerusha Whiting. Likewise, Noah might have known Ned (1731–?) who was enslaved by John Whitman. At nine years old, in 1740, Ned was valued in John Whitman’s account book at £115.



Both Dinah (1711–1761) and her daughter Dinah (1750–c. 1800) might have known Noah. They lived in the north end of town and were enslaved by John and Jerusha Whiting. In 2022, students from the Mayor’s Youth Council in West Hartford successfully petitioned the Town Council to have a street named after these two enslaved women.<sup>8</sup>



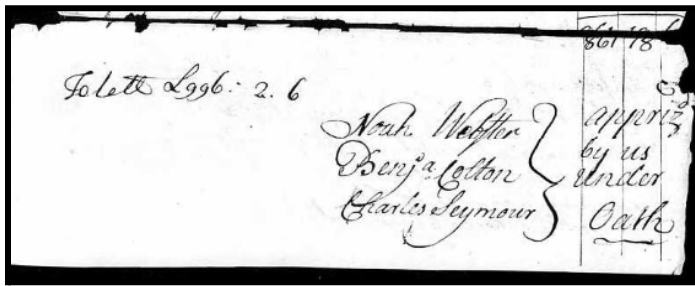
Though the Webster family did not enslave people, the institution of slavery was an integral part of the church, the economy and the power hierarchy of the town. Noah’s father, Noah Webster, Sr., was a weaver and farmer, and was also a public servant. He served the church and town,

Dung shovel 2	Flitch forks 3	Widder 1/3	Bagging net 2	-	8	2
2 valves & Brake 3	part of the Iron Gun	last 1/2	part of the Iron Gun	last 1/2	7	0
hoe 2/6	3 old axes	6 Bruff by the 1/6	Bruff hoolis		11	
Negro Boy 1/4	part of a Cedar Mill				32	
2 Beetle Kings	one Wedge	1/2 Mill	1/2 Mill		5	3
2 Wash tub 1/4	Bull 5	one	Yock of Oxen 10		15	1 4
large Yock of Oxen 11	one fat cow	white 3	15	one fat cow 2-16	17	11

and volunteered to be part of the Committees of Correspondence during the Revolutionary War. His reputation as a fair man also gave him the job of being an appraiser. When Stephen Sedgwick, Sr. died in 1766, Webster appraised his estate, including valuing the enslaved boy “Jude” for 45 pounds. What must Webster have thought and felt listing Jude under axes and above a milking cow? This is the same Jude who sought his freedom in 1774.

<sup>7</sup> John Whitman’s Account Book, Connecticut Museum of Culture and History.

<sup>8</sup> Deidre Montague, “West Hartford to rename street in honor of two enslaved women,” *Hartford Courant*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.courant.com/2022/05/19/west-hartford-to-rename-street-in-honor-of-two-enslaved-women/>



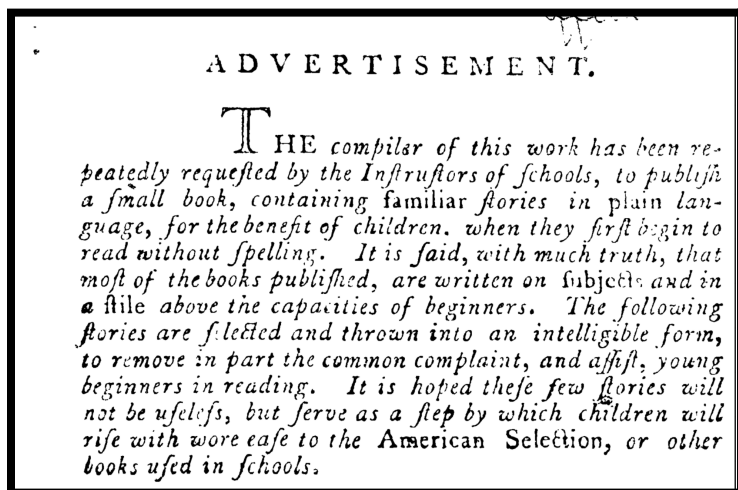
Noah, Sr. appraised Jerusha Whiting's Estate in 1776. In this inventory, he set a value on two enslaved people, thus being complicit in the institution of slavery.

During Webster's childhood in the West Division, his attendance in church, and in public gatherings, he would have interacted with people of African descent. Most were enslaved, brought here against their will, living in a town whose institutions and families supported this oppressive economic system.



## What did Noah Webster want students to learn by reading the *Little Readers Assistant*?

In the 1780s, Noah Webster grappled with the question of what students should learn in the classroom. He taught school in Goshen, NY, Sharon, CT, Philadelphia, Glastonbury and Hartford in the 1770s and 1780s.



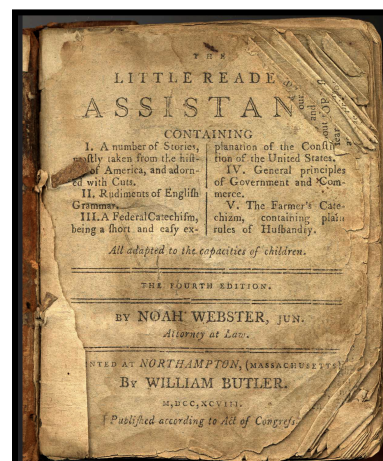
In 1785, Webster published *The Little Readers Assistant*.<sup>9</sup> This advertisement in the *Connecticut Courant* told readers that this book is written

for “young beginners in reading.” He saw the book as a stepping stone to his more complex work *The American Selection*, published in 1794.

Webster wrote 20 stories in a 48 page school book, particularly for the “capacities of beginners.” Slavery was the subject of two of his 20 chapters.

His book, published when he was 27 years old, reflected his knowledge of slavery, in part from his upbringing in the West Division from 1758–1774.

One of his chapters, “Story of the Treatment of African Slaves,” (p. 38–41) started with a description of the trade in African people. He wrote of the prisoners taken in war being sold or bartered to white people for “iron, rum, trinkets . . . or a pistol.” The story is illustrated by a graphic of a coffle of four men followed by an enslaver.



<sup>9</sup> Hidden History: Remembering Slavery and Freedom West Hartford, <https://sites.google.com/view/westhartfordwitnessstones/noah-webster-and-slavery>.



Webster described the cruel middle passage. He gave the captives agency in writing that “sometimes they rise against their cruel masters, and attempt to regain their liberty.” When they arrived, they were sold, with “no regard paid to relations.” He questioned slavery at the end of this story by asking “Are they men like ourselves? What right hath one

man to enslave another?” (p. 40) Webster did not shy away from the reality of slavery, nor from the philosophical questions about peoples’ rights.

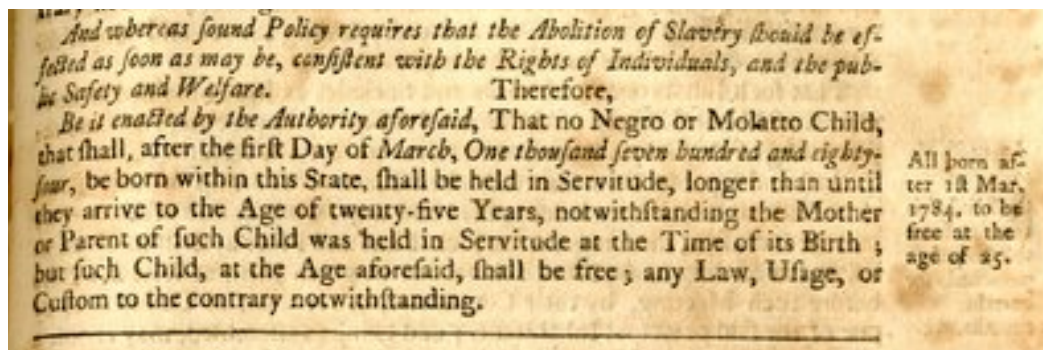
In the story “Lamentation of an Old Female Slave,” (p. 43-45) Webster recounted the story of a woman born in the early 1700s on the banks of the Volta River in Africa, a land of plenty. He described, through the woman’s eyes, her capture at age 12, and the middle passage. She was enslaved for 50 years to a wealthy man who then “cast [her off] to shift for herself.” He wrote that she said “Wretched before in bondage; now still more wretched in freedom -- Of what use is life to me?”

These two stories clearly show the terrors and wrongs of slavery, long before the abolitionist movement which most people say started in the 1820s. Webster’s *Little Readers Assistant* helped new readers understand this oppressive system and the cruelty that pervaded this institution. Some of his knowledge about this topic came from his childhood in the West Division. He felt students should study this topic.

## What did Noah Webster do as part of the Anti-Slavery Movement?

As he grew older, Noah Webster's opinions and actions about slavery and equality were much more complicated. His actions showed that he wanted slavery to end and at the same time his words confirmed the false belief that people from Africa were inferior.

It seemed clear that Noah Webster did not support slavery. He grew up in a family that did not enslave people. Yet, in the West Division community, quite a few households did. When he was growing up between 1758 and 1774 there were at least 50 people who were enslaved in the West Division of Hartford. His stories in *The Little Reader's Assistant*, written when he was 27, lead us to believe that he did not support the institution of slavery.



Massachusetts ended slavery through case law by 1783. Rhode Island passed a gradual emancipation law in 1784.

Lawmakers in Connecticut tried and failed to pass emancipation bills in 1777, 1779, and 1780.<sup>10</sup> When Noah was 26, in 1784, the state of Connecticut passed a Gradual Emancipation Act. This law ruled that babies born after March 1, 1784 would be freed when they reached the age of 25.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Harper, "Slavery in the North: Slavery in Connecticut," <http://slavenorth.com/connecticut.htm>

<sup>11</sup> David Menschel, "Abolition without Deliverance: the Law of Connecticut Slavery, 1784-1848" *Yale Law Journal*, Vol III, 183,

The General Court (the legislature) which passed this Act did not vote to give money to enslavers for what the enslavers considered to be “their property.” Instead, the gradual part of the law meant that the enslaved people would pay their value to their enslaver through their free labor over the first 25 years of their life.<sup>12</sup>

*For the Promotion of FREEDOM.*

**T**HE Committee of the Society for the promotion of Freedom inform those persons who are possessed of Slaves, that it is their intention to take proper measures for enforcing the laws of the State respecting slaves, and particularly the following clause of a law passed October 1788, viz.

“ And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That all persons who now are, or hereafter shall be possessed of any child or children born after the first day of March, 1784, and which by law shall be free at the age of twenty-five years, shall within six months from the rising of this assembly, or within six months after the birth of any such child, deliver or cause to be delivered to the Town-Clerk of the town where such person belongs, the name of such possessor, as also the age, name and sex of every such child or children, on oath, to the best of his knowledge, under the penalty of forty shillings, for each and every month neglected, to be recovered before an assitant or justice of the peace; the one half to the complainant and the other half to the use of the poor of the town where such child or children live.”

The committee request all persons concerned to take notice of the requisitions in the foregoing clause; and the parents of the children whose names are not duly lodged with the Town-Clerk, are directed to give the committee notice of such neglect.

JOHN TRUMBULL,  
CHAUNCEY GOODRICH,  
LEMUEL HOPKINS,  
NOAH WABSTER, JUN.  
THEODORE DWIGHT,

} Committee  
of said  
Society.

Hartford, Nov. 14, 1792.

This 1792 advertisement in the *Connecticut Courant*, “For the Promotion of Freedom,” was paid for by the Committee of the Society for the Promotion of Freedom and the Relief of Persons Unlawfully Holden in Bondage,<sup>13</sup> (1791-1795). This group wanted to make sure that enslavers were following this law by recording the dates of children born to people they enslaved.

When Noah was 34, he belonged to this subcommittee of the Society that bought this advertisement.<sup>14</sup> Others in the group were a writer, an elected official, artist and diplomat, and a poet and physician. The men on this committee provided free blacks with legal aid and protection from white people in wake of the 1784 gradual emancipation law. The committee requested that the parents of children who were not recorded tell members of the committee who would help get the birth recorded.

[https://openyls.law.yale.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.13051/9380/14\\_111YaleLJ183\\_October2001\\_.pdf;jsessionid=835B845DF61F35DFBE574D6EFC5E926E?sequence=2](https://openyls.law.yale.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.13051/9380/14_111YaleLJ183_October2001_.pdf;jsessionid=835B845DF61F35DFBE574D6EFC5E926E?sequence=2)

<sup>12</sup> Acts and laws of the State of Connecticut in America (1784), <https://archives.library.wcsu.edu/omeka/items/show/2625#:~:text=In%201784%2C%20%22gradual%20emancipation%22.of%20abolition%20throughout%20New%20England.>

<sup>13</sup>James D. Essig, “Connecticut Ministers and Slavery, 1790-1795, *Journal of American Studies*, ol. 15, No. 1 1981, p. 27, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/27553931?read-now=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27553931?read-now=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

<sup>14</sup> “For the Promotion of Freedom,” *Connecticut Courant*, November 19, 1792.

Members of the Society paid attention in their local communities. They received reports of Blacks abducted by armed men, as well as complaints that whites participated in the trafficking of enslaved people. Members asked prominent individuals in the state to use their influence to help blacks held as slaves in the South. Each meeting had orations about the slave trade.

In 1792, the Society petitioned the general assembly for total abolition of slavery but that bill did not pass. The Gradual Emancipation Act lasted until at least 1848, when an enslaved person, born before 1784, died.

During the time that Webster was a member of this committee, he wrote a 56 page treatise called the “Effects of slavery on morals and industry” (1793). In this pamphlet he argued that slavery had negative effects on production and the well-being of society. He wrote that free men were better at producing things because they worked for their own benefit.”

At the same time, Webster held racist views. He wrote about the “laziness of slaves” in America. He said that the oppression that was part of the institution of slavery corrupted the characters of enslaved people and made them liars and made them cruel. Webster argued that it was up to white Americans to end slavery for both economic and moral reasons.<sup>15</sup>

Almost 50 years later, in 1840, the Rev. Amos G. Beman (1812–1872), wrote a letter to Noah Webster asking him about books about African History. At age 28, Beman was a teacher at the Talcott Street School which opened for its Black congregants in 1830. It was part of the Talcott Street Congregational Church (now Faith Congregational) that opened in 1819. Beman, like Webster in his late 20s, was a teacher, searching out materials for his students.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Noah Webster, “Effects of Slavery on Morals and Industry,” 1793, p. 6,

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N20179.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Correia, “The Rev. Amos Beman’s Devotion to Education, Social Activism, and New Haven,” Connecticut History.org,

<https://connecticuthistory.org/the-rev-amos-bemans-devotion-to-education-social-activism-and-new-haven/>



Webster, then 82, replied that Africans had “no history. . . [the] race has remained in barbarism. . .]His answer, based in part on his devotion to the written word, was also replete with racism that goes far beyond words he wrote earlier in his life.

Webster’s letter reflected the opinion of many nineteenth-century “white” Americans. Webster and his contemporaries assumed that vast, fixed, biological, and intellectual differences separated Europeans from Africans. He believed these things were fixed by nature and he showed the differences were also constructed by human beings. These assumptions led to a cultural divide between the Africans themselves, and whites who supported emancipation but not equality and those few whites who supported emancipation and equality.<sup>17</sup>

However distasteful Webster’s words may be to us today, if we do not listen to Webster’s voice, it makes the Civil War and equal rights seem inevitable. A look at the tensions of the 1840s helps us realize that racial equality and abolition were clearly contested terrain that we still address. This allows us to see the past as a contentious playing field of ideas and actions, not one ordained by nature or God.

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<sup>17</sup>Noah Webster to Beman, April 27, 1840, Beman Papers, New Haven Afro-American Historical Society; Tracey Wilson, “Noah Webster and Amos Beman,” *Life in West Hartford*, <https://lifeinwesthartford.org/noah-webster.html>, 2018.