

BENNINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER, June 2022 Issue



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

BOB TEGART

Well, things are moving along and we are into our summer months! We have one more event for the season with Tony Marro presenting *John Spargo: A Life* on June 12. He was an interesting fellow - a prolific writer and social activist who established the Bennington Museum. It should be an interesting program. Stay tuned for the lineup of programs in our fall season. We are now working on the 2023 season - let us know what you would like to see! And be watching for our summer events!

How to Discover Your House's History

During the May 15th Historical Society program, Michele Pagán spoke about how to conduct research into your house's history.

One of her suggestions was to look at the home's construction. For example, do the beams show circular saw marks? They provide a clue - circular saws did not exist in Vermont until the mid-1800s. Among the books describing parts of homes, she suggested *A Building History of Northern New England*, by James Congdon.

Here are a few other tips Michele provided:

- Talk to local folks, such as church leaders or the Town Clerk, to learn if they know anything about the house.
- Look at records in the Town Clerk's office. Trace back their card records.
- Read probate records and Grand Lists. Ancestry.com has probate records which list items in the house.

Other online records include:

- FamilySearch.org, which is free
- Census.gov, which dates back to 1790
- LOC.gov for Library of Congress records
- U.S. Agricultural Census records—the Dartmouth Library has many or you can visit nass.usda.gov/AgCensus/
- cdi.uvm.edu for Civil War information

The useful publication *Time and Place in Bennington* may be found at the Bennington Town Office.

Many of these sources may be found in the Museum's Regional History Room, which is open Monday and Thursday, from 1 - 4pm.

The Vermont Division of Historic Preservation notes that any changes to a home in the Bennington Historic District need to be approved first.

If you missed Michele's presentation, you can see the recording at benningtonmuseum.org/programming/bennington-historical-society/video-presentations/

ENSLAVED AT THE CATAMOUNT TAVERN

BY CALLIE RASPUZZI, COLLECTIONS MANAGER, BENNINGTON MUSEUM

A Black woman named Margaret Bowen (called Peg) was enslaved by Captain Stephen Fay in Bennington from 1772-1778. At the time, Fay was the proprietor of the Catamount Tavern on what is today Monument Avenue. Slavery was not uncommon in the northern colonies, and there are several examples of early white settlers bringing enslaved Black people with them to Bennington. The Black population in 18th-century Vermont is hard to calculate. When the first Federal census was taken in 1791 after Vermont joined the Union, there were 20 Black people counted in Bennington out of 2,350 total.

Peg was born around 1742. She was acquired by Moses Porter of Hadley, Massachusetts, in 1754 after he constructed a grand new house on a property he named "Forty Acres." When Porter died in 1756, his estate inventory listed two enslaved people, Peg and Zebulon Prutt, who were inherited by Porter's daughter and son-in-law Elizabeth and Charles Phelps, Jr.* Peg had two daughters, Rose, born July 2, 1761, and Phillis, born June 2, 1765.

In May 1771 Peg and another enslaved man named Pompe Morgan requested that the town clerk in Hadley record their intent to marry. They needed the consent of both of their enslavers, which Pompe's enslaver Jonathan Warner refused to give. Peg seems to have had more agency. In August of 1771 she "went out for herself," an arrangement in which she worked for another family, but her enslavers collected her wages. She may have been allowed to keep a portion of the money, or she might have sought this arrangement simply to be nearer her intended spouse. Nearly a year later a solution presented itself. Stephen Fay, in Bennington, would purchase both Peg and Pompe together; presumably Pompe's enslaver had given in. At this point, it appears Peg was given a choice. She could go to Vermont with her lover, or stay in Massachusetts with her children (Rose and Phillis were 11 and 7 years old)**. She chose her husband.

We know very little about Peg's life in Bennington. Back in Hadley her daughter Rose gave birth April 18, 1775. Three days later Peg's other daughter, Phillis, died of tuberculosis and the new baby was named after her. Peg did not meet her granddaughter until she was sold back to Charles Phelps, Jr. on March 6, 1778, for twenty pounds. We do not know what happened to Peg's husband Pompe. He may have died in Bennington, been sold to another enslaver, or perhaps gained his freedom. There was a great deal of ambivalence regarding slavery in early Vermont. The Vermont Constitution, signed July 8, 1777, declared an end to adult slavery, but in vague language and without any provision for enforcement. The first article of Chapter I stated "That all men are born equally free and independent...Therefore, no male person, born in this country, or brought from over sea, ought to be holden by law, to serve any person, as a servant, slave or apprentice, after he arrives to the age of twenty-one Years, nor female, in like manner, after she arrives to the age of eighteen years, unless they are bound by their own consent, after they arrive to such age, or bound by law, for the payment of debts, damages, fines, costs, or the like." The Constitution's use of weak wording ("ought" instead of "shall") might have been intentional.

Stephen Fay's son Jonas was the witness of Fay's 1778 sale of Peg. Jonas Fay was a delegate to the 1777 constitutional convention in Windsor and is generally credited as the Constitution's primary author. Just because the Constitution was signed did not mean that everyone abided by it. There was no ratification process, many people opposed the new government, and a difficulty in printing even delayed the first elections. People like the Fays clearly did not think the prohibition of adult slavery was binding. On October 24, 1778, the Vermont legislature appointed a committee to prepare a bill regarding the freedom of slaves, but no bill was ever presented, and no record exists of their actions.

**An Inventory of the Estate of Captain Moses Porter late of Hadley taken March 8th 1756. The two are listed as "A Negro man 53 pounds, 6 shillings, 6 pence. Negro Girl 33 pounds, 6 shillings, 8 pence" for a total value of 86 pounds, 13 shillings, 4 pence.*

***Her enslaver Elizabeth Phelps recorded the result in her diary, Thursday April 2, 1772 "This Day our Peg who has Lived with us near 18 years of her own Choice Left us and two Children and was sold to one Capt. Fay of Bennington with a Negro man from this town all for the sake of being his wife."*

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Both Stephen and Jonas Fay were aware of the fact that enslaving people was against the spirit of the new Constitution, if not the letter of the law. Presumably Peg herself was either not aware or was not in a position to do anything about it. Peg's value at twenty pounds was far less than her appraised value of 33 pounds and change in 1756, and it is possible that Fay chose to sell her at a loss rather than acknowledge the freedom that was rightfully hers. It is also possible that her value to her enslavers had fallen due to her age and the end of her prime childbearing years.

There are other examples of respected Benningtonians enslaving people after 1777, including David Avery, the second pastor of the Old First Church, and Moses Sage, North Bennington's most prosperous citizen. Fay did have contemporaries who were very much opposed to slavery and actually acted on their beliefs. After Ebenezer Allen captured a Black woman and her young daughter, who had been enslaved in Burgoyne's army, he freed them. He did not cite the Vermont Constitution in his manumission notice, recorded in Bennington by the Town Clerk on November 27, 1777 but stated, "it is not right in the sight of God to keep slaves." Other Vermonters may have felt the same way, but most, like Jonas Fay, were silent witnesses.

A year after Peg returned to Hadley, her daughter Rose became sick. She continued to battle what appears to have been tuberculosis until her death March 14, 1781. She was only 20 years old. Her daughter Phillis (Peg's granddaughter) also suffered from tuberculosis and died two years later.

Peg finally gained her freedom in May 1782. Whether the Phelps family had formally manumitted her or she purchased her freedom is, again, unclear. There were several court cases taking place in Massachusetts at this time which ended up making slavery untenable in the state.

When Vermont joined the United States in 1791, it was (on paper) a free state. The first Vermont state census reported only free Black people in the state. The Vermont Gazette, printed at Bennington by Anthony Haswell, in its issue of Sept. 26, 1791, stated, "The return of the marshal's assistant for the county of Bennington shows that there are in the county...17 black males over 4 and under 16; 15 black females. Total of inhabitants 12,254. To the honor of humanity, no slaves."

The Gazette's assertion was naive and optimistic. There were indeed examples of enslaved Vermonters up through the 1840s at least, and to our shame, slavery's legacy of racism still haunts us.

The story of Peg and Pompe appears in the books *Earthbound* and *Heavenbent* by Elizabeth Pendergast Carlisle and *Entangled Lives* by Marla Miller. We would like to thank Ruth Ekstrom for bringing Peg's story to our attention. We owe a great debt of thanks to Carolyn Duffy for her help in researching the lives of Peg and Pompe. Research is ongoing. If you would like to be involved, please contact Callie Raspuzzi at craspuzzi@benningtonmuseum.org.

On Saturday June 25th a Stopping Stone honoring Peg will be dedicated with a ceremony beginning at 10am at the former site of the Catamount Tavern on Monument Avenue in Bennington, followed by a reception at Bennington Museum. We invite the community to join us as we share and reflect upon Peg's story.



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Catamount Tavern Postcard, ca. 1920-1925

Published by ET Griswold, from a drawing by J. Lawrence Griswold

Bennington Museum Collection, Gift of Jane A. Haviland

The Catamount Tavern, where Peg was enslaved, was located on the corner of what is now Monument Avenue and Main Street in Bennington. It was built by her enslaver Stephen Fay around 1768- 1770. The building was famous as the meeting place of the Green Mountain Boys during the controversy between the New Hampshire grantees and New York and during the Revolutionary War. The building burned down March 30, 1871.



Know all men by these Presents that Stephen Fay of Bennington
in the State of Vermont, in consideration of Twenty pounds
Lawful money paid before the Delivery hereof by Charles
Phelps of Hadley in the State of Massachusetts, do make
Bargain Sell, Let over and Deliver unto the said Charles
Phelps his heirs Executors administrators and assigns
forever one Negro Wench named Peg, Witness my hand
and Seal at Bennington this Sixth day of March A.D. 1778
Signed Sealed & Delivered
in Presence of }
Jonas Fay } Stephen Fay

PegX_17780306_Fay-Receipt_Porter-
Phelps-Huntington-Family-Papers
Receipt from Stephen Fay to Charles
Phelps for Peg, March 6, 1778

Porter-Phelps-Huntington Family Papers,
Robert S. Cox Special Collections and
University Archives Research Center,
UMass Amherst Libraries.

Stephen Fay sold Peg back to Charles
Phelps after the 1777 Vermont
Constitution forbade slavery in the new
republic. This receipt is witnessed by his
son Jonas Fay, who is credited with
writing the Constitution.

ORIGINAL MEETING HOUSE MARKER

BY BILL MORGAN

Many people who drive past Bennington's Old First Church every day would be surprised to know that it isn't actually the "old first" church, but a newer second one. For more than forty years before Lavius Fillmore designed and built the beautiful colonial church building we know and love in 1806, Bennington's citizens were worshipping in a much more humble barn-like structure that stood in front of the current church and cemetery.

When Bennington was first settled in 1761 there was no separation between church and state, they were one and the same. The government levied taxes to build both a school and a church. Dates are not precise when you delve into the earliest history of the town but in either 1762 or 1763 the Proprietors of the town met and assessed each of the sixty-four right-owners \$6 in order to build a meeting house. Over the next few years, from 1763 to 1765 or 1766, they erected a very plain structure. It was 40 feet wide by 50 or 55 feet long with a 20 by 20 foot enclosed front porch and an upper room for the school. Tax payers supported the minister and the town gave him land on which to build his own house. Records indicate that the meeting house was never really completed and by 1774 further money had to be allocated to keep the building from falling into total disrepair.

During those early years everything of importance took place at the meeting house. In this place the Green Mountain Boys gave thanks for their capture of Fort Ticonderoga and when Bennington's first minister asked them to thank God for the victory, Ethan Allen stood up and suggested that they should thank him as well. That same minister, Reverend Jedidiah Dewey, preached to the soldiers on the Sunday before they went off to fight the Battle of Bennington and it was to the meeting house that they brought prisoners after the battle was over. Beginning in 1778, the legislature of the Republic of Vermont held eight sessions, making it the capital of an independent country for twelve years. And it was at a convention here in 1791 that the delegates proposed that Vermont become the 14th state in the Union. It was also in this building that the first murder trial in Vermont took place. Whitney and Tibbits were tried and found not guilty for the wanton murder of a Native American, Stephen Gordon.

By 1792 discussions were underway aimed at the construction of a new, grander church building and the maintenance of the older building was neglected. Visitors spoke of it as being in terrible condition even in the 1790s. At first the citizens didn't want to spend money on a new building and it was voted down in 1792 and again in 1797, but finally in 1798 they agreed to stake out a site for a new church and in 1804 the people of Bennington appointed a building committee. This coincided with new laws that forbid the use of public money for houses of worship and the new church was paid for by the members of the congregation.

When the original meeting house was torn down, the building materials were bought by Anthony Haswell who incorporated them in his own house just north of where the Battle Monument now stands. At the time nothing remained to mark the site of the first church so in the 1870s a group of men who remembered the old building got together and placed a stake in the ground, marking its true location. Discussions about a suitable monument were held throughout the late 1800s and into the early 1900s. The church parson, Dr. Isaac Jennings, Jr., began raising funds for the project, but with the outbreak of World War I, all the plans were put on hold. It wasn't until 1922 that Dr. Vincent Ravi-Booth, then pastor of the church, was asked to take over the project.

Seven designs were submitted for the monument, one even included an heroic bronze statue of Jedidiah Dewey, who was known as "The Fighting Parson." For years the plaster model for that statue sat in the office of Edward L. Bates, the Secretary of the Historical Society. In the end Ravi-Booth's more modest proposal was chosen. His design called for an upright monument to stand in the center of a forty-two foot Maltese Cross made by one hundred and twenty marble slabs embedded in the ground. The shrine itself was eleven feet seven inches tall and six feet wide. Fifteen tons of Pittsford Valley marble were placed on top of a forty ton concrete foundation, all the work of the Vermont Marble Company. On the south face of the structure, a bronze seal of the state of Vermont was affixed, three feet in diameter. Below the seal engraved into the marble was a quotation from the Old Testament: "The Place Whereon Thou Standest Is Holy Ground."

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On the north face a seventy-seven by forty-three inch bronze tablet was attached. At the top of the tablet was a relief depicting the Old Meeting House and underneath it was the following inscription:

"FOR GOD AND FOR COUNTRY. The first protestant church within the present limits of Vermont was organized here December 3, 1762. The settlers having arrived June 18, 1761. On this site was erected in 1763-5 the first meeting-house in the New Hampshire grants: a plain building of unpainted wood, fifty feet by forty, replaced in 1806 by the present church edifice.

Here preached Jedidiah Dewey, the first minister of the church, the trusted counsellor of the colonists. Here the forefathers met in prayer for assistance against the oppressive measures of New York and the overwhelming power of King George. Hither the settlers returned from the capture of Ticonderoga, the Battle of Bennington, the surrender of Burgoyne, to offer up their thanksgivings, and here were brought the 700 prisoners, captured on August 16, 1777.

For forty years the center of the religious life of the community, the meetinghouse was also connected with the political life of the state. Vermont was an independent republic from January 17, 1777 to its admission into the union March 4, 1791. The first legislature met at Windsor in 1778, and adjourned to Bennington for its June session, held on this site. The laws for carrying on the government of this sovereign state were enacted at the session of the legislature which assembled in the meeting-house, February 11, 1779.

Here met the convention consisting of one delegate from each town, which, on January 10, 1791, ratified the Constitution of the United States by the signatures of 103 out of 109 delegates: thereby preparing the way for the admission of Vermont into the Union, as the first state after the original thirteen."

The bronzes were cast by T. F. McGaun and Sons of Boston and the work was paid for by Mrs. Elinor W. Squier of New York. Eighty-nine members and friends of the Old First Church provided funds for the construction of the Maltese Cross paving, the grading of the property, and the installation of electric lights to illuminate the monument.

On July 8, 1923, more than 1,000 people attended the unveiling of the monument which followed a special service held inside the church. The eight speakers who took part in the exercises addressed the crowd from a temporary platform erected in front of the church. Large American flags were hung from the trees over the monument. Miss Katherine J. Hubbell, great-granddaughter of the early settler Elnathan Hubbell, unveiled the north side of the marker and Deacon Samuel Robinson, great-great grandson of Captain Robinson unveiled the other side. John Spargo, the president of the Bennington Battle Monument and Historical Association pledged the society to be the custodian of the monument. In his remarks Spargo prophetically stated: "We have built the memorial of stone and bronze -- materials which we regard as well nigh imperishable. Yet one tremor of Mount Anthony yonder, one convulsion of Nature, or even one bolt hurled from above by an invader riding amid the clouds, might reduce the memorial to a shapeless mass of ruin." In 1964 just as Spargo predicted, the monument was destroyed when a car failed to navigate the curve on Route 9. It crashed into the marble memorial and a four-ton section fell onto the car's roof. Surprisingly no one was killed, but the town decided not to restore the monument as it was. Instead they attached the two bronze plaques to a single slab which lies flat on the ground in the same location. Most passers-by don't even notice it.



*Slides from Old First Church
Restoration Lecture, 1933-1937
Vincent Ravi Booth (1876 - 1950)
Gift of Vincent V.R. Booth*

Sunday June 12, 2:00 PM

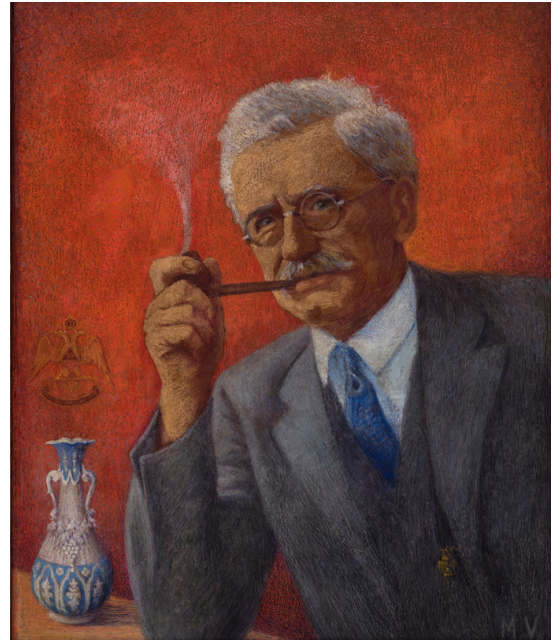
John Spargo: A life

A Bennington Historical Society Presentation

John Spargo was a young Socialist who ended up a Goldwater Republican. In this presentation Tony Marro will discuss how Spargo started out writing about the evils of child labor and ended up writing about Bennington pottery as the founding director of Bennington Museum.

About the Presenter

Anthony Marro was a reporter for the *Rutland Herald*, *Newsday*, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*. From 1971 until 1981, he was based in Washington, D.C., where his coverage of the U.S. Department of Justice included extensive coverage of the Watergate scandal. He then spent six years as the managing editor and sixteen years as the editor of *Newsday*. He is also co-author of *Beyond the Hiss Case: The FBI, Congress and the Cold War* and *Philip Hoff: How Red Turned Blue in the Green Mountain State*.



John Spargo, 1947
Sister Mary Veronica (1874-1965)
Bennington Museum Collection, Museum Purchase

**BENNINGTON MUSEUM IS OPEN EVERY DAY EXCEPT WEDNESDAY,
10AM-4PM**

**THE REGIONAL HISTORY ROOM IS ACCESSIBLE FREE OF CHARGE ON
MONDAYS AND THURSDAYS, 1PM-4PM**

**THE BENNINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEETS ON THE FIRST MONDAY OF
EVERY MONTH FROM 4PM - 5:15PM AT BENNINGTON MUSEUM.**

All BHS donors will receive a copy of the newsletter and other BHS announcements via email, and are invited to attend these monthly meetings.

Make a gift to the BHS today to help keep our programming and newsletters free and frequent this coming year!

Bennington Historical Society

A volunteer-operated program of Bennington Museum

Officers: Bob Tegar, President; Don Miller, Past-President; Charles Dewey, Secretary

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