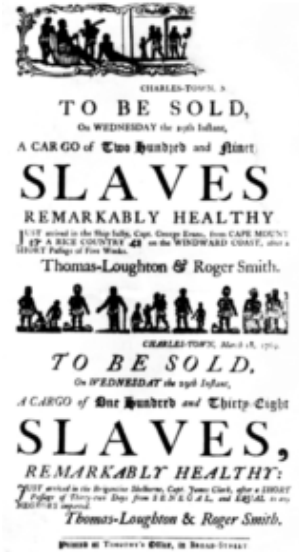


# “Servants for Life”

## My Grandparents Owned “Servants for Life”



In 1641, Massachusetts was the first colony to legalize slavery and was a center for the slave trade throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The [1754 slave census](#) listed more than 2,720 slaves in Massachusetts.

**1754** – Billerica reported eight slaves (three males and five females).

**1771** – four families in Billerica were recorded “servants for life” on actual valuation lists.

**1783** – Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court declared, “the idea of slavery is inconsistent with our own conduct and [the Commonwealth’s] Constitution.” [Quock Walker Case](#)

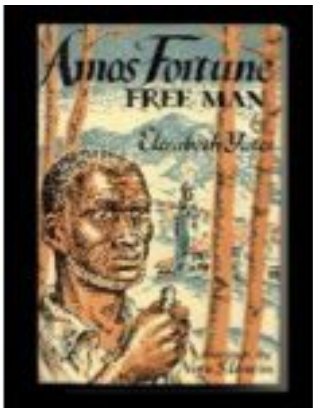
My 6<sup>th</sup> great paternal grandparents, Jonathan Bowers (1674-1744) and Hannah Barret Bowers (1679-1765), lived in Billerica, Massachusetts. Jonathan was a representative to the General Court, a captain in the militia, large landowner, postmaster, and generally influential citizen. Jonathan and Hannah were also slave owners. The first documentation that I found mentioning that they owned slaves references the birth of Nelly York in 1752 to Lydia York, a slave of Hannah Bowers.



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*Amos Fortune, an exemplary citizen of colonial New England, was born in the early 1700s in Africa and came to this country as a slave. A tanner by profession, Fortune bought his freedom and that of his two wives. Unfortunately, nothing is known of Amos Fortune's early life. The first historical record is an unsigned "freedom paper," dated December 30, 1763, in which Ichabod Richardson "agreed to and with my Negroe man, Amos, that at the end of four years next issuing this date the said Amos shall be Discharged, Freed, and Set at Liberty from my service power & Command for ever..."*

*Richardson died unexpectedly in 1768, and his will contained no provisions for the slave's promised freedom. Amos Fortune negotiated with the heirs to pay off his bond and made the last payment in 1770, becoming a free man at age 60. During the next few years Amos Fortune lived and worked in Woburn, buying land and building a house. His first wife, Lydia Somerset – whom he had purchased for \*fifty pounds from Josiah Bowers of Billerica – died shortly after their marriage in 1778.*



*\*Pounds Sterling to Dollars/ £50 = \$7,500 in 2016 U.S. dollars*

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