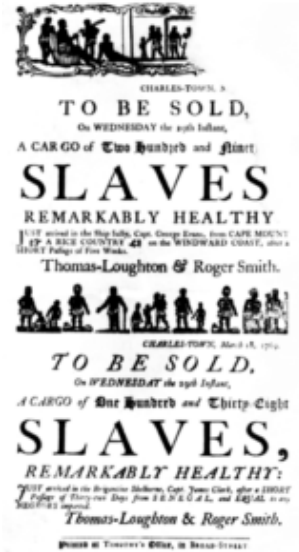


# “Servants for Life”

## 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.

“Nelly y<sup>e</sup> daughter of Lydia York, y<sup>e</sup> negro slave of y<sup>e</sup> widow Hannah Bowers was baptized at y<sup>e</sup> desire and on y<sup>e</sup> account of its Mistress, May 24, 1752.” In the town records for 1772 there is

Records show that Lydia York had two other daughters. Lydia who was baptized in 1754 and listed as a “servant girl to old Mrs. Bowers” and Anne who was baptized in 1756. Lydia’s parents Pompy and Dillo, brother Samson and sister Eunice all resided in Billerica, I found no record of their status.



BILLERICA, May 2, 1761.

Know all men by these presents, that I, Hannah Bowers, of Billerica, widow, have sold unto Lot Colby, of Rumford, in the province of New Hampshire, a mulatto Negro boy, named Salem, and have received forty-five shillings sterling, in full consideration for the said boy, witness my hand,

HANNAH BOWERS.

Test: { JOSEPH WALKER,  
JOSIAH BOWERS.

In 1761, Hannah [sold](#) a boy named Salem to Mr. Lot Colby of New Hampshire. Remarkably, [Salem Colby](#) (aka Colbey) served during the American Revolution as a soldier in the New Hampshire Brigade, enlisting in 1780 and

receiving a pension for his service (photo).

In researching Hannah and Jonathan’s son, Josiah Bowers (my 5<sup>th</sup> g-grandfather), I discovered a record of Josiah selling a slave girl to Amos Fortune. That girl was none other than Lydia (b.1754) the daughter of Lydia York. The story of Amos

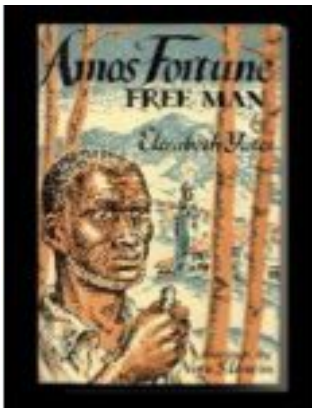
is very interesting and has been told in a book entitled, **Amos Fortune – Free Man (Yates – 1950)**. Below is an excerpt from the [The Amos Fortune Forum](#) regarding Amos.

Bilreca, June ye 23 1778  
Then Recd of Amos Fortune fifty pounds in full for a Negro garle Names Lydia Sumersete being now my property the which I do Sell and Convey to the aforesaid Amos and I do Covenant with the Said Amos that I have juste and Lawfull Rite to Sell and Convey the Said Lydea in the manner afoarsaid and I will warrant and Defend the Sais Lydia to him againste all the Lawfull Clames and Demands of all persons What Ever.  
Sind Sealed and Delivered  
in presents of  
Josiah Bowers  
her  
Milesent X Braddon  
mark  
Isaac Johnson

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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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