



The Strange Career of Benjamin Franklin Prentiss, Antislavery Lawyer

A nineteenth-century genealogist alleged that Prentiss, the young St. Albans amanuensis of Jeffrey Brace's 1810 memoir, The Blind African Slave, practiced law in Richmond, Virginia, and ran a plantation in Wheeling, West Virginia. Although this curious story may have emerged from a confusion of two generations of the same name, the verifiable traces of Benjamin Franklin Prentiss's life offer a haunting glimpse into the tragedies and possibilities of 1810s Vermont.

By KARI J. WINTER

Under a glass case in the Special Collections Room of the University of Vermont's Bailey/Howe Library rests a small book with rough, decaying edges. If you are permitted to hold it in your hands, you will find that it smells of dust and decay. If

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you open it, its breath will mingle with yours, and you will run the danger of becoming entangled in a conversation between an odd couple—an elderly African man and a young New England lawyer—who were kindred spirits. The manual labor of a teenaged newspaper apprentice painstakingly created the physical artifact, the relic. Its living soul emerges from the human imagination.

Amid the scattered archival fragments that document the existence of Benjamin Franklin Prentiss, the only remnant that still throbs with life is this book, this conversation with Jeffrey Brace, published in 1810 under the title *The Blind African Slave: Or Memoirs of Boyreureau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace*. While researching the memoir for its first republication in 200 years, I uncovered a wealth of information about Jeffrey Brace but was able to find only minimal traces of Prentiss, which I summarized in my introduction.

The Blind African Slave gives no indication of how Jeffrey Brace and his amanuensis-editor Benjamin Franklin Prentiss met or why they agreed to collaborate on the memoir. Admitted to the Franklin County Bar in August 1808, Prentiss apparently made almost as little money as a lawyer as he did from sales of the book. On June 5, 1811, he was residing in the household of Luther Whitcomb in Milton, a small town south of St. Albans [Vermont], when the town selectmen directed the constable to warn him and his family, along with Whitcomb and five other families, to leave town . . . Benjamin Prentiss thus appears to have been a young man with little social or financial support in the 1810s, and thereafter he disappears from the historical record.¹

I wondered what motivated a young white lawyer of meager financial means to help an elderly black man tell his life story when he himself was struggling to establish a career and support a fragile family, but my efforts to glean more information were stymied until January 2006, when Marjorie Strong, an assistant librarian at the Vermont History Center, led me to an obscure genealogical book, *The History and Genealogy of the Prentice, or Prentiss Family, in New England, Etc., from 1631 to 1883*, in which Charles J. F. Binney asserts that Benjamin Franklin Prentiss owned a plantation near Wheeling, Virginia, and practiced law in Richmond, which was almost 250 miles south of Wheeling. Binney also alleges that Prentiss died in Richmond in March 1817.²

Genealogical sources are often helpful in historical research, but they are notoriously unreliable. While I had good reasons to doubt the veracity of Binney's claims about Prentiss, I found the mystery of his life even more intriguing. I embarked on a fresh round of research that took me to Virginia, Vermont, Québec, New York, and Ohio in hopes of finding more clues to Prentiss's story. In this article, I closely read

the archival traces of his life in conjunction with the social conditions within and against which he lived.

Benjamin Franklin Prentiss was an heir to all of his names. In keeping with the inattentive spelling customs of his day, his surname was recorded as Prentice, Prentis, or, most often, Prentiss. The name emerged from a social station of manual labor, apprenticeship. Its meanings include: To send or put to prentice; to bind as apprentice. A learner generally; a disciple. An apprentice at law. A prentice-boy, -girl, -lad, -years; often implying inexperience as of a novice or beginner (adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary). His first name was a nod to an uncle named Benjamin but his full given name, Benjamin Franklin, was a tribute to the printer, scientist, philanthropist, statesman, and author of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, who was already, at the time of the baby's 1774 birth, the most famous American in the world, although his most important achievements in diplomacy and literature were yet to come. The name Benjamin Franklin Prentiss thus expressed Enlightenment values of hard work and public spirit.

Benjamin's father, Dr. Jonathan Prentiss, was the son of a wealthy English farmer who had immigrated to Massachusetts and a "doctor-ess" who was the granddaughter of Earl Gilbert, a Scottish peer. Dr. Prentiss married Margaret Daniels, the great-granddaughter of a Scottish aristocrat, Lord Edgcombe, and she gave birth to their second son, Benjamin Franklin, on July 29, 1774, during a high pitch of Revolutionary fervor in New London, Connecticut. Like many eighteenth-century Americans, the Prentisses were nomadic. During wartime and postwar chaos, the Prentisses moved from one New England town to another. In 1779, they were in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, when their third child died at the age of two. In 1790, Margaret gave birth to her tenth child in Lempster, New Hampshire. Jonathan and Margaret had thirteen children in all, most of whom survived into adulthood. After moving time and again, the family joined a flood of immigrants to the booming frontier state of Vermont. They settled in St. Albans, a port and trading entrepot located on a bay of Lake Champlain near the Canadian border.

Although a cultural outpost, St. Albans was roiling with national and transatlantic controversies when Dr. and Mrs. Prentiss arrived with their large family of teenagers and young children. Lake Champlain, stretching for one hundred twenty miles between the Adirondack Mountains of New York and the Green Mountains of Vermont, served as a vital trade route for lumber and other goods that were transported via connecting waterways north to Montreal and south to New York City. The lake bustled with steamboats, sloops, schooners, canoes, and

other vessels during every season except winter, when much of its surface froze. In 1800, St. Albans comprised 121 households with a population that the U.S. census counted as 901, a number that included an active military company but did not include Indians, whom early U.S. census takers did not count. Despite their official invisibility, hundreds of Abenakis lived in the region. Dozens of free blacks also lived in the area, as did French Canadians or Acadians and other diverse peoples. The borderlands were religiously, linguistically, and ethnically heterogeneous, rife with Anglo-French, white-Indian-black, and American-Canadian collaboration and conflict. The village of St. Albans clustered along Main, Lake, Fairfield, Congress, and a few other streets dotted with log cabins, colonial frame houses, three or four general stores, a drug store, a bank, a tannery, saw mills, barns, stables, a woolen mill, a grist mill, an ashery, a park, and a cemetery. Sailors and visitors were plentiful enough to support three boarding houses or hotels in St. Albans.

Dr. Jonathan Prentiss was described by contemporaries as “thick set, square, remarkably spry, and powerful” as well as “quick-tempered and persistent.”³ He developed a stable practice as a physician that necessitated travel to neighboring villages and backwoods farms. The family’s persistence in the area suggests that they prospered. Historian Jeffrey Potash found that in Vermont “there was a strong correlation from 1795 to 1806 between persistence and wealth.”⁴ At the age of seventy-six, it was said, Dr. Prentiss could still outjump the smartest young men. His wife Margaret was a “shortish, plump, smart, neat, very industrious, very worthy, and genial person, of lively, pleasant wit, and always feeling well.”⁵ The couple’s sons entered various professions and their daughters married respectably, establishing a clan whose branches extended throughout the northern Champlain Valley, from Burlington to Milton and St. Albans, where Dr. Prentiss would continue living until his death in 1833.

At the turn of the century, Benjamin Franklin Prentiss, in his mid-twenties, was reading for the law and living in Granville, New York, a small town near the Vermont border. In February 1801, at the age of twenty-six, he married a nineteen-year-old Bostonian, Elizabeth Warren Chase, in Whitehall, New York, across the state line from Poultney, Vermont, where the sixty-year-old Jeffrey Brace was living at the time. Elizabeth was the daughter of Elizabeth (Begnell) and Thomas Chase, a Revolutionary War general who had died in Boston in 1787, shortly after Elizabeth’s seventh birthday. Within six years of her marriage to Benjamin, Elizabeth gave birth to five children, only two of whom survived into adulthood: their third child, America Frances Arabella Prentiss, usually called Arabella, born in New York on April 17, 1804,

and their fourth child, Joseph Gilbert Prentiss, born in New York on April 8, 1807.

With these two children in tow, Benjamin and Elizabeth Prentiss relocated to St. Albans, where Benjamin was admitted to the Franklin County Bar in August 1808. As the shire town of Franklin County, St. Albans housed the county courthouse and supported a burgeoning legal profession. But as an aspiring young lawyer Prentiss faced stiff competition. At least ten lawyers were already practicing in the town, the most formidable of whom was Cornelius Van Ness (1782–1852), who had moved to St. Albans from Kinderhook, New York, in 1806 with an inherited fortune of \$40,000. He was thriving as a lawyer, businessman, banker, and politician and would be elected governor of Vermont in 1823. Prentiss's chances at a strong professional start were further diminished by the fact that the economic boom of his parents' generation was collapsing. The era was economically and politically turbulent. Britain's abolitionist movement had succeeded in getting the transatlantic slave trade legally abolished in 1807, and the United States followed suit in 1808, but the trade continued illicitly. Thomas Jefferson had enjoyed several years of popularity in Vermont; by 1807 his party had won Vermont's governorship for the first time, a majority in the general assembly, and many seats in the United States House and Senate. However, when President Jefferson decided to impose an embargo banning trade with Canada as well as Great Britain, he was vilified throughout New England, where the embargo caused extreme economic hardship, inflamed sectional politics, and intensified resentment against Virginia's federal dominance. New England's hatred of slaveholders grew after the South gained power from the three-fifths compromise, which enabled southerners to gain congressional representatives by counting the people whom they enslaved as three-fifths of a person. Anger at Jefferson and his power base enabled Vermont's Federalists to regain some seats in the 1808 elections. When the Jeffersonian Governor Israel Smith attempted to enforce the embargo by calling out troops to combat smuggling, he lost the governorship to his Federalist opponent, Isaac Tichenor. Some New Englanders were so enraged by the embargo that they advocated seceding from the Union. Northern Vermont in particular was intimately intertwined in economic and personal relationships with southern Québec. Although some Vermonters were able to profit from the embargo by developing local industries and/or trading illicitly with Canada, many others suffered severe economic disruption and hardship. The prices of daily necessities skyrocketed.

In St. Albans, the proximity of the Canadian border enabled lucrative and lively smuggling, which supporters of the embargo struggled to

thwart. Prentiss's Jeffersonian competitor-at-law, Cornelius Van Ness, devoted himself to prosecuting smugglers such as Dr. John Stoddard, a St. Albans merchant and owner of a general store who ran Lake Champlain's most infamous smuggling boat, the *Black Snake*. In contrast, while launching his career as a Franklin County lawyer, Benjamin Prentiss devoted himself to talking with Jeffrey Brace, who had moved to the area with his family a few years earlier. Prentiss took an avid interest in Brace's life story and spent countless hours interviewing him, transcribing his story, researching his African origins, and preparing the manuscript for publication. In brief, *The Blind African Slave* recounts the story of Brace's birth in West Africa around 1742, capture by slave traders in 1758, transportation to Barbados, service in the Seven Years War, enslavement in Connecticut, service in the American Revolution, and eventual freedom in Vermont where, despite many severe struggles with racism and poverty, he married an African widow named Susan (Susannah) Dublin, raised a family, worked as a farmer and laborer, and became a part of a multiracial evangelical network of antislavery agitators.

Although they had to pay mandatory religious taxes until 1810, St. Albans residents embraced heterogeneous religious doctrines and practices. Some people remained, by conviction, indifference, or force of habit, in their forefathers' faiths, which ranged from traditional New England Congregationalism and Episcopalianism to French Catholicism and Irish Protestantism. Some residents of St. Albans maintained or adopted world views that were interlaced, consciously or unconsciously, with Abenaki and African traditions. The deism advocated by Ethan Allen was popular in turn-of-the-century Vermont, and some people remained agnostic free-thinkers for life, while others eventually joined more conventional churches or were set ablaze by the passionate evangelism of Methodists and Baptists. In the spring of 1801, the first flames of the Second Great Awakening swept through northern Vermont, and revivals would continue to ignite and burn wildly for the next three decades. Freewill Baptists, who broke from Calvinist Baptists' cold doctrines to embrace a more democratic worldview, flourished in Vermont, becoming leaders in the movements against slavery and in favor of temperance and women's rights.⁶ One of the converts to the Freewill Baptist faith was Jeffrey Brace.⁷ Prentiss, who partially wrote and partially transcribed Brace's memoir, represents Brace's conversion sympathetically, but he does not identify himself as sharing Brace's religious views. Indeed, he distances himself from the memoir's abundant Biblical quotations by telling the reader that they were "inserted by the request of the narrator, and under his immediate direction."⁸ The sections of

The Blind African Slave that we can identify confidently as contributions from Prentiss suggest that his interests inclined more toward the secular concerns of politics, farming, science, and geography than toward religion. The rhetoric he uses when speaking in his own voice is the Enlightenment rhetoric of natural rights, civil liberty, and religious tolerance.

The Blind African Slave leaves no doubt that Prentiss passionately embraced abolitionist and egalitarian politics. His introduction to the book is infused with outrage over slavery. He exclaims: “When we look at the custom of European and American nations of purchasing, stealing, and decoying in to the chains of bondage the negroes of Africa, and the custom sanctioned by the laws of the several governments; that public and private sales are legal; that they are bartered, sold, and used as beasts of the field, to the disgrace of civilization, civil liberty, and christianity; each manly feeling swells with indignation at the horrid spectacle, and whoever has witnessed the miserable and degraded situation to which these unfortunate mortals are reduced, in the West Indies and southern states of United America, must irresistibly be led to ask—Does not civilization produce barbarity? Liberty legalize tyranny? And christianity deny the humanity it professes?”⁹ Prentiss concludes his introduction by asserting, “Whoever wishes to preserve the constitution of our general government, to keep sacred the enviable and inestimable principles, by which we are governed, and to enjoy the natural liberty of man, must embark on the great work of exterminating slavery and promoting general emancipation.”¹⁰

Prentiss’s indignation over the abomination of slavery inspired him to pour time and energy into helping Brace recount his experiences. Although sympathetic to the New England Federalist camp that was agitating against the power of southern slaveholders, Prentiss could not feel comfortable with their regional politics because Brace’s story did not depict *Southern* slavery. It exposed *Yankee* involvement in the slave trade and, more explosively, called attention to the cruelty of slavery within respectable Congregationalist households. Antislavery sentiment had gradually prevailed in Northern states after the Revolution. “By 1804, every Northern state had committed itself to abolition, the result of a process that ranged from the efforts of the General Court of Massachusetts to establish gradual abolition laws in 1773 and 1774 to New Jersey’s gradual emancipation statute of 1804.”¹¹ Gradual abolition laws did not emancipate all slaves in the North, however. Some remained in bondage as late as the Civil War. Furthermore, “freedom” was viciously circumscribed for Northern blacks and Indians, who encountered innumerable obstacles to education, economic advancement, housing,

church membership, and social acceptance. Antislavery rhetoric often was infused with anti-black sentiment and worked hand-in-hand with racist social policies, economic practices, and legislation. Many anti-slavery agitators hated slavery in part because they hated blacks. Prentiss and Brace risked opprobrium and isolation by calling attention to the severe problems of racism in the North. They were insisting on opening a discussion that many northerners found intolerable.¹²

In addition to listening to and recording Brace's recollections, Prentiss read widely in the extant literature about Africa. The thematic concerns of *The Blind African Slave* indicate that he was deeply curious about African agriculture, flora, fauna, languages, governments, religions, laws, and customs. Aside from the Bible, the texts that Prentiss cites in *The Blind African Slave* can be divided into two groups: anti-slavery works and geographical or travel writings about Africa. They include the following:

"The Negro Boy," a popular antislavery song published in Washington, D.C. (1802)

"Help! Oh, help! thou God of Christians!" an anonymous, untitled antislavery poem published in the *Boston Weekly Magazine* (14 April 1804)

Cowper, William. "The Negro's Complaint" (first published in London in 1788 and reprinted often in the United States)

Damberger, Christian Frederick (pseudonym). *Travels through the Interior of Africa* (London and Boston, 1801)

Guthrie, William. *A New Geographical, Historical, and Commercial Grammar: and Present State of the Several Kingdoms of the World* (Philadelphia, 1809)

Hornemann, Friedrich, James Rennal, William Marsden, et al., *The Journal of Friedrich Hornemann's Travels, From Cairo to Mourzouk, the Capital of the Kingdom of Fezzan, in Africa* (London, 1802)

Morse, Jedidiah. *The American Geography; or, A View of the Present Situation of the United States of America* (London, 1792)

Shaw, Thomas. *Travels; or, Observations Relating to Several Parts of Barbary and Levant* (Oxford, 1738)

A well-educated man from an extended family of moderate means, Prentiss may have obtained reading materials from his family library, from bookstores or lending libraries, which were common features in Vermont towns, or from the University of Vermont, which was located about thirty miles south of St. Albans. His allusions to political events throughout the Atlantic world demonstrate that he read widely in the

newspapers and periodicals that were available throughout New England. He could have come across Olaudah Equiano's pioneering memoir of slavery, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, an American edition of which had been published in New York in 1791, but *The Blind African Slave* does not allude explicitly to Equiano.¹³ Prentiss and Brace do mention "the pathetic and persuasive eloquence" of the ministers in the "African churches, in the cities of New York and Philadelphia," which suggests that they were aware of a network of African and African-American preachers, intellectuals, and activists that was spreading throughout the Northeast.¹⁴ Closer to home, Prentiss and Brace may have heard the powerful sermons of the black Vermont Congregationalist minister, Lemuel Haynes. Brace himself was becoming a sought-after antislavery speaker who sometimes traveled with the black preacher, Rev. Charles Bowles.

The first book published in the town of St. Albans, *The Blind African Slave* was printed by an eighteen-year-old newspaper apprentice named Harry Whitney. Prentiss filed for copyright by depositing a copy of the book's title page with the clerk of the federal district court in St. Albans on June 20, 1810. The newspaper for which Whitney worked, the *Franklin County Advertiser*, advertised the book weekly between July and October. The newspaper's printing presses were housed in a new brick store located across from the courthouse on the town green. Vermonters were avid readers, and they most likely congregated often in the brick store, where they could purchase a variety of weeklies, periodicals, almanacs, and books as well as paper, pens, and groceries.

On October 18, 1810, the *Franklin County Advertiser* announced that *The Blind African Slave* would be "ready for delivery on Wednesday next" and that copies could be obtained from Prentiss and Whitney. Both men, along with Brace, most likely cherished dreams of distributing the book widely throughout Vermont, New York, Québec, the Northeast, and even the South through shipping to bookstores and selling to itinerant peddlers. Unfortunately, the *Franklin County Advertiser* went out of business within days of publishing the book. The hopes of all three men for brisk sales were dashed. Whitney moved on, searching for a position with another town's newspaper.¹⁵

Despite disappointing sales, *The Blind African Slave* did exert some influence on local, state, and national politics. In 1852, a black Vermonters named John W. Lewis asserted that Brace's "noble pious character had a powerful influence on the public mind in Vermont. . . . At Camp, Quarterly, or Yearly Meetings, Conferences, or associations of all denominations, an interview with brother Jeffrey, was eagerly sought

and enjoyed, by ministers and people.”¹⁶ Few explicit acknowledgments of Brace’s influence survive in archives, but the careers of people with whom he or his life story intersected testify to his presence. For instance, Lawrence Brainerd, who arrived in St. Albans from Troy, New York, in 1808 at the age of fourteen with twenty-five cents in his pocket, developed an intense hatred for slavery while peddling walnuts and working as a clerk for thirty-four dollars a year in the little town, where he had many occasions to encounter the striking figure of the elderly blind African and to hear or read his life story. Beloved for his compassion, generosity, and commitment to social welfare, Brainerd would become celebrated as “one of the first citizens of his state to espouse the antislavery case.”¹⁷ He would prosper in St. Albans as the owner of a general store and eventually would be elected to the U.S. Senate. Brace’s story also appears to have influenced the political views of Horace Greeley, who as a sixteen-year-old newspaper apprentice helped to publish and most likely wrote a detailed obituary summarizing Brace’s life for the East Poultney newspaper, *The Northern Spectator*.¹⁸ Shortly after publishing this obituary, Greeley left Poultney for New York City, where he became a powerful political force and founded the staunchly antislavery *New York Tribune*, the leading newspaper in the antebellum North.

During the years when Benjamin Franklin Prentiss was working on *The Blind African Slave* and attempting to establish himself as a lawyer, his closest brother, Jonathan, settled with his wife, Hannah Sparhawk, in Milton and gave their second son the name of Benjamin Franklin as a tribute to both the baby’s uncle and the famous Founding Father. Benjamin’s other siblings intermarried with some of northern Vermont’s leading families. In 1804, Benjamin’s sister Sarah married Heman Allen (1777–1844), who was the premier lawyer in Milton and a distant cousin of Ethan Allen.¹⁹ A tall man of “commanding presence” who combined “massive strength of intellect with inflexible adherence to principle,” Heman Allen gained a reputation as “the best real estate lawyer in the circuit”²⁰ and was elected as a Federalist to represent Milton in the Vermont legislature from 1810, the year *The Blind African Slave* was published, to 1822. In 1826 he would be elected to the first of five terms in the U. S. Congress. In 1810, Benjamin’s sister Elvira married Curtis Holgate of Milton, who relocated his family to Burlington and made a fortune by building and selling the first wharf in the Burlington bay.

While Brace and Prentiss’s collaborative work helped to foster the political sentiment that would make Vermont the most antislavery state in the Union, the book did not generate the income that Brace and

Prentiss desperately needed. By 1811, the year after *The Blind African Slave* was published, Prentiss had moved with his wife Elizabeth and their two young children to Milton, a village near St. Albans. He was not finding much success either as a lawyer or as a writer-editor, and financial difficulties apparently forced him to reside for a few months in his brother Jonathan's household.²¹ Hard times in Vermont were exacerbated by the continuing embargo, which was drastically inflating the cost of both domestic and imported food. If Benjamin and Elizabeth imbibed their era's growing infatuation with material acquisition, they would have suffered serious disappointment as well as discomfort during this time. Prentiss's passion for social activism, however, may have encouraged him to rebel against the acquisitiveness of his age. Indeed, he and his wife appear to have participated in an egalitarian social experiment. In Milton they joined six other families living in the household of a twenty-eight-year-old man named Luther Whitcomb. Whitcomb (b. 1783) and his wife, Polly Hazeltine, whom he had married in 1807, were from Newfane, a village 165 miles south of Milton. They had been living in Milton since at least 1810, when the census listed Luther as the head of a household that included his wife, a male child under the age of ten, and a white man between the ages of 16 and 24. By the summer of 1811, Polly's mother, Mrs. Hazeltine, had joined the household, as had Jonathan Parker (b. 1785) and his wife, Sarah Ann Whitney (b. 1790), who were from Rutland, a large southern Vermont town, where they had married in 1809. Sarah probably was the sister of Harry Whitney, the St. Albans printer of *The Blind African Slave*. I have been unable to uncover any information about the other families residing in Whitcomb's household aside from the men's names and the fact that the entire group, seven families in all, was warned out of Milton on June 5, 1811.²²

Why were seven families living together in the Whitcomb household? Whitcomb may have been running a poor house, but that explanation would not account for why he himself was considered undesirable by the town's selectmen. It is possible that Whitcomb's household was interracial or was connected to an interracial social alliance, because Jeffrey Brace was warned out of Milton in 1812, a few months after the members of Whitcomb's household. This Jeffrey Brace could have been either the elderly subject of *The Blind African Slave* or his namesake son, Jeffrey Brace Jr., who was seeking employment and may have been friends with Benjamin Prentiss, who was close to him in age. In sum, these warnings out hint at but do not flesh out an intriguing story.

If the members of the Whitcomb household were engaged in a communal experiment, they would have been part of a widespread, often

subterranean, cultural phenomenon. Since the late eighteenth century, many communes had been organized by idealists and discontents in America, Britain, and France. Historians have documented “several attempts to form a more perfect society in Vermont, and there must have been others” that disappeared without an archival trace.²³ Most communes were “dedicated to experimenting with new gender roles and family relationships.”²⁴ For conventional Christians, disregarding property rights and challenging traditional definitions of marriage were logically interconnected, indeed indistinguishable, vices. Marriage legally signified the husband’s possession of his wife’s body. Most American religions upheld *possession* as a primary article of faith as well as the foundation of the social order. But some social dreamers searched for *a more excellent way*. Notions of possession and private property provided, after all, the legal and ideological foundations of the enslavement and dispossession of Africans and Indians. Prominent as well as obscure American intellectuals were devoted to imagining a more just, humane world. In the 1840s, Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* advocated the formation of cooperative communities. Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted that, before quarrels broke out at Brook Farm, Massachusetts—the most famous communal experiment in antebellum America—the community had been “the pleasantest of residences.”²⁵

Critics of communes were mesmerized by the scandalous possibilities of non-possessive, non-hierarchical sex, with its terrifying and exhilarating overtones of anarchy, freedom, and pleasure, but they rarely contemplated the ways in which communal living could transform the relentless rigors of daily life, especially for women. Jeffrey Potash estimates that in order to meet their immediate needs for food, a five-member family in early-nineteenth-century Vermont required “three acres of wheat, two acres for orchard and garden, and ten to twenty acres of fodder-producing land. Animals necessary to support the family [included] five or six cows, two steers, three to four horses, five to six pigs, and a half dozen sheep.”²⁶ In seasonal cycles Vermonters planted, tended, harvested, and stored corn, wheat, rye, barley, flax, potatoes, pumpkins, turnips, parsnips, beans, peas, onions, and herbs. They picked pears and apples from their orchards, pressing and fermenting many bushels of the latter into hard cider. They hunted for game, geese, ducks, wild turkeys, and other birds, fished in Green Mountain lakes and streams, tended domestic animals, churned butter, made cheese, chopped wood and maintained a wood pile. They cultivated or foraged for strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, huckleberries, currants, grapes, cherries, and nuts, and tapped maple trees for syrup. With homegrown maple sugar or sugar from West Indian slave plantations, they made

preserves and canned vegetables for the long winter months. In brick ovens or over open fires they cooked stews and puddings, boiled meats and fish, and baked beans, breads, pies, and cakes. They spun yarn; made cloth; sewed, washed, and mended clothes; drew water; cured meats; scrubbed floors, changed diapers, wiped children's noses, tended the sick, and kept the home fires burning, a constant arduous task.

Communal life enabled people to divide and share daily chores, which lightened, sweetened, and varied the ceaseless grind. Precious hours were liberated for pleasures like reading, writing, art, music, conversation, or walking with a friend—activities that were confined to the Sabbath and holidays for many nineteenth-century women.²⁷ Whether or not they felt oppressed and dreamed of social revolution, the women in Milton, Vermont, lived hardscrabble lives and may well have found Whitcomb's communal household more rewarding than an isolated farmhouse or nuclear home would have been. The young ones, Elizabeth Prentiss, Polly Whitcomb, and Sarah Parker, could work alongside or split duties with the middle-aged Mrs. Hazletine and the household's other unidentified women. The seven families may have been forced to cohabit due to poverty, but since the Prentisses had many well-off relatives in Milton, St. Albans, and Burlington, it seems more likely that they chose to participate in a social experiment. New England was ablaze with dreamers. In the 1840s, Emerson told his friend Thomas Carlyle that almost anyone "you met on the streets of Boston might produce from his waistcoat pocket a community project for the reorganization of society."²⁸

Experiments in communal living were hard to sustain, however. Predictably, Milton's selectmen found Whitcomb's group highly objectionable. Warnings out were a common method through which New England towns underscored social norms, absolved taxpayers of financial responsibility for indigent residents, and pressured "outsiders" or undesirables to leave. Individuals who had been warned out often found a way to remain in town, but some were forced to leave by the sheriff and others succumbed to the social pressure. Luther and Polly Whitcomb left Milton and returned to southern Vermont. Jonathan and Sarah Parker moved to Windsor, Vermont, where they both died around the time of the Civil War. However, the recurrence in Milton's nineteenth-century vital records of surnames of the other families in Luther Whitcomb's household suggests that some of them remained in Milton or in the surrounding countryside.

Since Prentiss was a member of an influential extended family, it is puzzling that his family connections did not prevent him from being viewed as undesirable in the eyes of Milton's selectmen. Did Heman Allen resent Prentiss's attempts to establish a law practice that might

compete with his own, or did he dislike Prentiss's antislavery politics? In 1818, Congressman Allen would join the Vermont Colonization Society, which sought to solve "the nigger business," as two Vermont newspapers called it, by relocating blacks from the United States to Africa.²⁹ Many antislavery Vermonters viewed slavery as a curse not because of its injustice to blacks, but because the proximity of blacks was "ruinous to whites," as J. K. Converse, a Congregationalist pastor in Burlington, would put it in 1832. Converse valued colonization because it promised to free the country not from slavery but from "the unnumbered evils of colored population."³⁰ Although racist sentiments were not typically as vehement in 1811 as they would become in the 1830s, anthropological theories about "Negro inferiority" were routinely taught in Vermont schools. In short, Milton's selectmen may have used the warning out as a form of censorship against the political beliefs as well as the social practices of the Prentisses and the Whitcomb household.³¹

In an era when racial stereotypes, invective, and epithets saturated Vermont's public discourse, Prentiss promulgated views that were anti-racist as well as antislavery. The title he gave Brace's memoir, however, suggests that even Prentiss had difficulty imagining black people in terms that were not abject. He infelicitously chose to title the book "The Blind African Slave" although Brace was never blind during the years that he was enslaved. He went blind gradually in his old age, decades after he had obtained his manumission. Further, blindness is not a topic of any significance within the narrative itself. Although he was not a particularly skilled writer, Prentiss anticipated, in his unfortunate title, a trope that would come to dominate nineteenth- and twentieth-century representations of iconic blackness: the figure of the blind black man who is alternately or simultaneously abject, comedic, and exceptional.³² As Mary Klages has shown, Western cultural traditions typically represented blindness as "the most severe affliction. The New Testament singles out disabled people, especially the blind, as particularly wretched outcasts who thus gain Christ's attention."³³ On this reading, the addition of "blind" to "African" and "slave" intensifies the severity of Brace's wretchedness. It is also possible that Prentiss, in his unfortunate choice of title, was referencing, consciously or unconsciously, post-Enlightenment discourses that recast blindness "as something understandable and curable," the result, for instance, of untreated disease, physical abuse, and malnutrition.³⁴ If so, this would have been a theme worth developing in the memoir.

Whatever the weaknesses of Prentiss's writerly achievements, he was distinctly on the most progressive end of the political spectrum in Vermont, and his views certainly would have been controversial. The

Brace family had other white friends—indeed, more powerful friends—in northern Vermont, so Prentiss was by no means anomalous, but he undoubtedly suffered some degree of social ostracism due to his outspoken views. It is probable that his law practice suffered as well. Brace, as narrator of *The Blind African Slave*, alludes to the price Prentiss risked by aligning himself with blacks. In southern Vermont around 1800, Jeffrey and Susan Brace had been forced to surrender Susan's daughter Bathsheba to a white woman who wanted her as an indentured servant. Blacks were widely viewed as incompetent parents, and Brace could not find redress against the white woman. He asks rhetorically, "what lawyer would undertake the cause of an old African Negro against a respectable widow in Manchester, who had many respectable acquaintances. None, for if there had been one willing to take up in my defense, he would have been flung out of business for taking up so dirty a cause against so respectable a personage."³⁵ This passage suggests that Brace and Prentiss were aware that Prentiss risked professional ruin by taking up Brace's "cause."

On June 18, 1812, a year after the warnings out, President James Madison declared war against Great Britain, plummeting New England's economy into an even deeper recession. In addition to suffering financially, many New Englanders found the war morally repugnant and were outraged by the decision to invade Canada. The Vermont-Québec border was a porous political construct that had done little to inhibit trading and social exchange in the northern woodlands and waterways. Over the next two years the United States suffered a series of military and financial blows. The region from Lake Champlain to Montreal was one of three major military fronts, and Vermont bore intimate witness to disastrous military campaigns. To make matters worse, during the course of one year (1813–1814) an epidemic of diseases, mostly spotted fever, killed 6,000 people in Vermont, including many residents of Milton. Grief and despair caused many people to lose religion and others to find it or to convert from one form to another. Many Vermonters, alongside other New Englanders, began to agitate for seceding from the Union.

Despite the war's unpopularity, many Vermont men served in it, including Benjamin's brother, Captain Jonathan Prentiss, who commanded a company that included fifty Milton men.³⁶ As is always the case with war, the upheaval that devastated thousands of lives proved lucrative to defense industries and military suppliers as well as to some farmers, merchants, industrialists, clerks, and lawyers. The peace in 1815 introduced new hardships due to fierce industrial competition across the Atlantic world. Many Vermont factories, mills, and quarries

were forced to suspend operations temporarily or shut down permanently as the prices of glass, cotton cloth, iron, and marble plummeted. The dismal economy received further blows in 1816, the year of no summer, when severe cold caused a famine throughout New England. In June 1816, a snowstorm dumped ten inches of snow in some regions of Vermont, and it snowed again in July and August. The summer's frosts and snows damaged all crops, and the weather continued to be unusually cold in 1817. Some families starved to death, while others attempted to survive by foraging for roots and berries. Famine and economic depression, coming on top of years of war and disease, exacerbated the tendency of Vermonters to turn to hard drink. A special committee of Vermont's general assembly reported in 1817 that Vermonters were spending over \$1,000,000 a year on strong drink; a town of 2,000 inhabitants was expending approximately \$9,000 annually on rum and other drinks, which was more than "the total expenditures for schools and all public expenses."³⁷

The United States was rapidly expanding its territories westward, and the decade's hardships caused many desperate New Englanders to emigrate to the west and south. Benjamin Franklin Prentiss may have decided to search for a means to survive in a more prosperous region of the country. According to Binney, he died in Richmond, Virginia, in March 1817. However, Prentiss does not appear on Richmond's tax rolls, land transactions, or on any other extant records during the 1810s, '20s, or '30s. Nor does he appear after 1816 in the records of Vermont, New York, Québec, or any other place in North America, as far as I have been able to discover. If he did die in Richmond, he apparently had not acquired any taxable property. Binney claims that Prentiss worked as a lawyer in Richmond while running a plantation in Wheeling, but I have found no trace of him in Wheeling. The claim is implausible, in any case. Located on the Ohio River between the borders of Pennsylvania and Ohio in Virginia's slim northern panhandle, which would become the antislavery state of West Virginia during the Civil War, Wheeling was closer to Pittsburgh and Cleveland than to Richmond. It would have been difficult for Prentiss to maintain a law practice in Richmond while running a farm in Wheeling. Members of his family did move to Ohio, however, as Binney noted. Sometime after Benjamin died, his widow Elizabeth returned to Milton, where their daughter Arabella married Judah Throop Ainsworth in November 1830. Ten years later, Elizabeth accompanied her daughter, son-in-law, and four young grandchildren to Medina, Ohio, a small town south of Cleveland, where land was much cheaper than it was in New England. Widow Elizabeth Prentiss and the Ainsworths settled in Medina near

the home of Benjamin's brother, Edgcombe Prentiss, and his family. Historical archives do not tell us whether they were attracted or repelled by Ohio's harsh black codes, which attempted to bar free blacks from entering the state and viciously undermined the rights of blacks who already lived there.

Binney's curious story about the fate of Benjamin Franklin Prentiss may have sprung from a confusion between Prentiss and a namesake nephew. In the 1840s the nephew, Benjamin Franklin Prentiss II, divorced his first wife, Mary Hunter, in Milton, Vermont, and married an heiress named Milcena Minton in Richmond, Virginia. Her father was a military general and wealthy planter from whom Benjamin inherited a well-stocked plantation, \$25,000, and twenty-nine slaves. When Benjamin moved to Richmond, he took with him a son from his first marriage, James Hunter Prentiss, and his brother, Jonathan Prentiss, who worked as an overseer on his plantation in Henrico County, on the outskirts of Richmond. Jonathan resided in Benjamin's household along with a twenty-eight-year-old free black farmer named Samson Williams, who apparently served as a second overseer or manager.³⁸

On most southern plantations overseers were isolated figures who were ostracized by the master's family and despised by slaves. Whether or not Benjamin, whose marriage propelled him into Virginia's planter class, grew to disdain his overseer-brother, personal tax records reveal that as Benjamin gradually grew wealthier, Jonathan grew ever more impoverished. In the best of times, when Benjamin bought a gold watch, his brother could afford no more than a silver one. Over the course of time, Jonathan's personal property dwindled to virtually nothing. Meanwhile, Benjamin and Milcena had four children together, only one of whom, Benjamin Franklin Jonathan Prentiss, survived to adulthood. In October 1858, Benjamin Franklin Prentiss II, the joint heir of Vermont abolitionists and Virginia slaveholders, was thrown from his horse-drawn carriage and died. His brother Jonathan never married, and if he had children he did not claim them legally. He vanished during the Civil War, and his surviving relatives assumed he died in military service. Whether he fought for the Union or the Confederacy, for Vermont or Virginia, for slavery or against it, remains unknown.

In August 1865, shortly after the Civil War ended, a poet named John Trowbridge visited Cemetery Hill in Gettysburg, where he confronted the unspeakable horror of innumerable rotting corpses. Overwhelmed by anonymous carnage, he wondered how he could affirm the value of human life when he was watching "a veritable production line making stones lettered 'Unknown.'" ³⁹ His response was elegaic; he sought for words to recognize and memorialize the Unknown—the stories of lives

and deaths that “I could never know; in this world, none will ever know.”⁴⁰ Like many of the soldiers who fought to end or to perpetuate slavery, the fate of antislavery lawyer Benjamin Franklin Prentiss is shrouded in mystery. The incomplete information that can be pieced together from documentary evidence reminds us that “Unknown” aptly encapsulates the lion’s share of human life. Benjamin Franklin Prentiss did not attempt to publicize or flesh out his personal story; rather, he devoted his youthful energies to writing Jeffrey Brace’s story, not to create an icon but to help end an execrable social institution. Whatever his fate may have been after the book was published, his rare and strange achievement was that, for the months or years that it took to produce Brace’s memoir, he managed to push aside the iron bars of the self and listen to the voice of another.

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NOTES

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¹Kari J. Winter, “Introduction,” *The Blind African Slave: Or Memoirs of Boyreseau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 62–63.

²Charles J. F. Binney, *The History and Genealogy of the Prentice, or Prentiss Family, in New England, Etc., from 1631 to 1883* (Boston: Published by the Editor, 1883), 303.

³Binney, *Prentice Family*, 290.

⁴P. Jeffrey Potash, *Vermont’s Burned-Over District: Patterns of Community Development and Religious Activity, 1761–1850* (New York: Carlson, 1991), 43.

⁵Binney, *Prentice Family*, 290.

⁶David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791–1850* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 35.

⁷Jane Williamson’s current research-in-progress on blacks in early Vermont indicates that many or most of the black farmers and town dwellers sprinkled around the state associated with Baptist churches.

⁸Brace, *Blind African Slave*, 183.

⁹*Ibid.*, 89–90.

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¹⁰Ibid., 90.

¹¹Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 14.

¹²As late as the 1930s, when Richard Wright submitted his novelized autobiography *American Hunger* to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, the Vermont editor of the Book-of-the-Month Club, Fisher told him to cut the last third of the book that described northern racism. The book was published as *Black Boy*, a version that conformed to the formula of antebellum slave narratives in which slavery and racism were depicted as Southern problems in contrast to the egalitarian North, where blacks were “free at last.”

¹³British editions of Equiano had been available since 1789. In 1791 W. Durell printed and sold the first American edition at his bookstore and printing office at 19 Q Street in New York City.

¹⁴Brace, *Blind African Slave*, 155.

¹⁵Whitney printed newspapers in several Vermont towns until the economic hardships of 1816–17 forced him to declare bankruptcy. He died the next year, near the age of thirty. The elderly Brace outlived both his young amanuensis and his young printer. Surviving into his late 80s, he died in Georgia, Vermont, on April 20, 1827.

¹⁶John W. Lewis, *The Life, Labors, and Travels of Elder Charles Bowles of the Free Will Baptist Revival* (Watertown, Ma.: Ingal’s and Stowell’s, 1852), 196.

¹⁷H. Clay Williams, *Biographical Encyclopedia of Vermont of the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: Metropolitan Engraving, 1885), 46.

¹⁸Most obituaries published in *The Northern Spectator* consisted of one line, which makes Brace’s obituary all the more extraordinary.

DIED

In Georgia, Vt., Jeffrey Brace, an African, well known by the appellation of “Old Jeff,” supposed to be nearly 100 years old. He was taken from Africa by a party of white kidnapers, when about 16 years old . . . and served in the American Revolutionary Army, for which we believe he received a pension from our government. He had for many years been totally blind, yet his mental powers appeared to be hardly impaired. The powers of his memory were frequently tested by repeating whole chapters of the scriptures nearly verbatim. He was formerly a resident of this town (*Northern Spectator* 9 May 1827).

¹⁹Heman Allen was admitted to the Franklin County Bar in 1801. See Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, Vol. 1. (Burlington, Vt.: Published by Miss A. M. Hemenway, 1868), 93. He practiced law primarily in neighboring Chittenden County, as did one of Ira and Ethan Allen’s brothers, who was also named Heman. The challenge historians face in constructing life stories from documentary fragments is dramatized in a biographical sketch written by George Allen, a son of Heman Allen and Sarah Prentiss, who became a professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Pennsylvania. Allen noted:

Chittenden county may reckon, among its distinguished citizens, two, that bore the name of Heman Allen—both born the same year, both bred to the bar, both in public life together, long resident in adjoining towns, and afterwards in the same town, in earlier life opposed in politics, as Federalist and Democrat, but later of the same party, always personal friends, and even (although neither may have been aware of the fact) remotely related by blood. When members of the state legislature, they were distinguished on the roll, as “Allen of Milton,” and “Allen of Colchester.” When both came to live as neighbors, in Burlington, the latter, by his long residence as minister, in Santiago, had won the distinctive designation of “Chile Allen.” (Hemenway, 602–603)

See Allen’s sketch, “Heman Allen, of Milton, and Burlington,” in Hemenway, 602–06.

²⁰These descriptions can be seen as either authoritative or hagiographic, since they were written by Heman Allen’s son, George (see note above).

²¹In 1810, the U.S. census identified the Milton household of Jonathan Prentiss, Jr. (mistakenly indexed as Jonathan Prentinger) as containing two white men of the ages of Jonathan and Benjamin, two white women of the ages of their wives (16–24), and three male children under the age of 10.

²²State of Vermont

To the constable of Milton in the country of Chittenden, Greeting. You are hereby required to summon Luther Whitcomb, Jonathan Parker, Emery Alexander, Mr. Heel, Shelden Buman, Mrs. Hazleton and Benjamin F. Prentis, now residing with Luther Whitcombs family in Milton to depart said town together with their families and effects. Hereof fail not, but of this precept and your doings herein due return make according to Law__ Given under our hands at Milton this 5th day of June 1811.

John Jackson
Zebediah Dewey > selectmen
Moses Davis

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²³ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, 239.

²⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

²⁵ Emerson continued: “It is certain that freedom from household routine, variety of character and talent, variety of work, variety of means of thought and instruction, art, music, poetry, reading, masquerade, did not permit sluggishness or despondency; broke up routine. There is agreement in the testimony that it was, to most of the associates, education; to many, the most important period of their life, the birth of valued friendships, their first acquaintance with the riches of conversation, their training in behavior. . . . What knowledge of themselves and of each other, what various practical wisdom, what personal power, what studies of character, what accumulated culture many of the members owed to it!” Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Life and Letters in New England*, in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Blithedale Romance* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, edited by Seymour Gross and Rosalie Murphy (New York: Norton, 1978), 264–265.

²⁶ Potash, *Vermont’s Burned-Over District*, 82.

²⁷ I discuss communal households in a comparative regional context in *The American Dreams of John B. Prentiss, Slave Trader* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 143–145. I mention, for example, that in her 1898 memoir, Elizabeth Cady Stanton recalled the severe hardship of running a nuclear household in New England when she was a young wife. Her duties were so numerous and exhausting that all of her intellectual and artistic pleasures and aspirations “faded away in the struggle to accomplish what was absolutely necessary from hour to hour.” She longed for a cooperative commune that would embrace egalitarianism and justice. Linking the fight against women’s oppression to the fight against slavery, Stanton observed:

I now fully understood the practical difficulties most women had to contend with in the isolated household, and the impossibility of woman’s best development if in contact, the chief part of her life, with servants and children. Fourier’s phalansterie community life and co-operative households had a new significance for me. Emerson says, ‘A healthy discontent is the first step to progress.’ The general discontent I felt with woman’s portion as wife, mother, house-keeper, physician, and spiritual guide, the chaotic conditions into which everything fell without her constant supervision, and the wearied, anxious look of the majority of women impressed me with a strong feeling that some active measures should be taken to remedy the wrongs of society in general, and of women in particular. My experience at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention, all I had read of the legal status of women, and the oppression I saw everywhere, together swept across my soul, intensified by many personal experiences.

Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815–1897* (New York: Fisher Unwin, 1898), 149.

²⁸ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, 262.

²⁹ John M. Lovejoy, “Racism in Antebellum Vermont,” *Vermont History* 69(2001), 52.

³⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 52, 53.

³¹ For a useful analysis of warnings out, see Alden M. Rollins, *Vermont Warnings Out*, 2 volumes (Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1995, 1997).

³² For an insightful analysis of this phenomenon see Terry Rowden, *Dancing in the Dark* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

³³ Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁵ Brace, *Blind African Slave*, 171.

³⁶ Kathryn Jackson, compiler, *Milton, Vermont, 1763–1963: The Milton Story* (Essex, Vt.: Essex Publishing Company, 1963), 29.

³⁷ Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, 64.

³⁸ The primary evidence for Prentiss’s Henrico County plantation with 29 slaves is taken from 1850 Slave Schedules. I am grateful to Marjorie Strong for calling this source to my attention. U.S. census records identify Jonathan Prentiss, Samson Williams, a white woman, white children, and slaves as members of the household headed by Benjamin Franklin Prentiss in Henrico County, Virginia. Interestingly, Samson Williams outlived both of the Prentiss brothers. His descendants moved to Philadelphia sometime after Reconstruction. The 1930 U.S. census lists a probable grandson, Samson Williams, born in Virginia in 1880, as the head of a Philadelphia household that included his wife, Pauline (aged 48), and three grown children: Willis (32), Dorothea (24), and Elwood (19).

³⁹ David Blight, “Healing and History: Battlefields and the Problem of Civil War Memory,” *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 175.

⁴⁰ John T. Trowbridge, *A Picture of the Desolated States, and the Work of Restoration, 1865–1868* (Hartford, Ct.: L. Stebbins, 1868), 21–23.