

They Still Have Much To Tell Us

by TRICIA PEONE

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Historic New England has seven properties in Massachusetts' North Shore region dating from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that have long been recognized as significant for their architecture. Their presence on the modern landscape bears witness to the past; yet, it can be difficult to connect with the people from this period who seem less accessible to us from a distance of several hundred years. The late seventeenth century was a turbulent but formative period for Massachusetts, filled with witch trials, warfare, and political instability. The *Recovering New England's Voices* project has made it possible for me to share my fascination with this period while bringing new perspectives to the way we interpret these historic houses.

Through a close reading of court records, we can recover the stories of people from the Dole-Little property in Newbury and Gedney House in Salem. Court records can be a rewarding source to work with, but they have their limitations and it is important to consider the context and circumstances in which they were created. These records can show us how remote the seventeenth century is and at the same time remind us that people in the past made choices, just as we do, often in exceptionally difficult circumstances.

For example, a dozen pages of testimony from the Essex County Quarterly Court sessions is all that survives of a conspiracy that, had it been successful, would have been the largest organized slave revolt in New England.

In late May 1690, an enslaved Black man called James escaped from the household of Richard Dole in pursuit of his freedom. James brought with him all of his clothing and a gun with powder and bullets. Night watchmen captured him where he was waiting to meet two white men, Isaac Morrill and George Major, who had promised to help him.

Court records disclose evidence about the alleged plot from James, who was about thirty years old at the time. He confessed that a month before his escape, Morrill, a French-speaking immigrant from the Isle of Jersey, persuaded James to join him and to recruit as many enslaved people as possible. One night Morrill

knocked at James's window and told him that he should not "stay there any longer to be abused and remain a slave."

The court described Major as "a man of ill fame." He had been an indentured servant in the Dole household and was pressed into service in two colonial wars. Major appeared in court records several times: in 1671 for fornication, for burglary in 1677 (stealing food), once for cursing, and then in 1690 for conspiracy with James. As a result of the burglary charge, Major had been branded on his forehead. He worked as a laborer, sometimes alongside enslaved people.

James admitted to an intricate plot that involved bringing a force of 800 French and Indigenous soldiers from Canada to attack the North Shore. The conspirators planned to "destroy all the English" and free the enslaved Black and Indigenous people. His confession was corroborated by other witnesses. James detailed the route they were to take and swore that the last time he saw Morrill, he told James that he had just seen the army of the French headed that way. Throughout his testimony James made this conspiracy—this desire for freedom—come from Morrill's mouth, but we can read between the lines and hear the power that must have come from speaking these words out loud to the court.

In the late seventeenth century, the Dole household included Black and Indigenous enslaved people, white indentured servants, and the large Dole family. The head of the household was Richard Dole, who had come to Newbury as an apprentice in 1639. He gradually increased his status and wealth by purchasing land, exploiting enslaved labor, and seeking positions of authority in the community, including as a constable, selectman, and deputy to the General Court. He left an estate worth nearly £2000 at his death, making him one of the wealthiest men in the area. His will, written in 1698, mentioned five enslaved people: Grace, Betty, Mingo, Tom, and Lucy.

Over the course of his lifetime Dole enslaved several other people, including James and a man recorded only as "Richard Dole's Indian." Their feelings and lives were trivial to him; he once exchanged a Black woman for a parcel of salt marsh on Plum Island.

*To the Honored County Court now sitting at Ipswich
 The Humble petition of Mary Gedney of Salem
 Humbly sheweth that your petitioner being a widow & having
 severall small children to maintaine & much put to my
 shifts for a livelyhood for my self & them
 doth humbly pray your honor to Grant me a license
 to sell wine & liquor without doors, by which I am
 in hopes to get something to support my family, & your
 petitioner shall ever pray. Mary Gedney.
 Salem: 24 March 1690*

*This petition granted J^{ts} Ipswich Court 28th Mo 1690
 att: B^{ry} a Genl^l Chm 70 48-121-3*

In 1690, Mary Gedney petitioned the state's high court for a liquor license for her Salem tavern. (Courtesy of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Archives, Massachusetts)

of her tavern "for entertainment of jurors and witnesses." We can imagine Mary Gedney serving ale to her brother-in-law, the magistrate Bartholomew Gedney, as he considered the evidence against his neighbors.

After Eleazar's death, Mary chose not to remarry but instead to run a business, which gave her more independence. Contrary to typical inheritance patterns of this time, she managed to keep Gedney House until she died in 1716, and then she passed it through her own will to her daughter Martha and her husband. Through court records and probate documents, Mary Gedney can speak to us about agency and the choices she made for herself.

One recurrent theme in my time as the research scholar for the North Shore area has been how much the people of early New England still have to tell us. New stories challenge the way we think about this period and demonstrate the broader significance of these properties in the region's history. There is great potential for finding and telling new stories and much more work to be done. 🐉

As a part of her research, Tricia developed two public programs that highlight the thwarted slave revolt and the Gedney tavern, which she will present this fall. Visit the events calendar at HistoricNewEngland.org for more information.

The current house on the Dole property is not the same structure that stood in 1690, but it was built in the early 1700s with repurposed materials from and quite near the original. The 1690 case allows us to catch a glimpse of the lives of people who are not typically included in the narrative of early New England, and it reveals how enslaved people actively resisted and fought for their freedom.

As a scholar of witchcraft in early New England, one of the first things I did at the beginning of the *Recovering New England's Voices* project was to check for links between Gedney House and the Salem witch trials. Mary Gedney, the second wife of Eleazar Gedney, ran a tavern after her husband's death and the court used her tavern during the witch trials of 1692.

This was not exactly new information; about a century ago, the Salem historian Sidney Perley noted that Mary Gedney held a license to sell liquor after she became a widow. To document this and prove that it was the same Mary Gedney associated with Gedney House, I searched through collections at the Massachusetts

State Archives, the Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum, and town and probate records.

Through this search, I found Mary Gedney's March 1690 petition to the court requesting a license to sell wine and liquor out of doors, "by which," she said, "I am in hopes to get something to support my family." At that time, her family included three children under the age of twelve. The court approved her petition, granting her a license to sell alcohol outside of the house, and she had a prime location to do so. In the late seventeenth century, the neighborhood looked much different than it does today. Gedney's house was located by the waterfront on the highway to Marblehead, so she would have seen many potential customers passing by her house. In the summer of 1692, Salem selectmen approved Gedney's request to operate as an innholder, which allowed her to rent rooms to travelers and sell meals and drinks to guests in her home.

By the time Gedney's tavern began to be used for official proceedings, several people had already been executed for witchcraft. Documents show the use