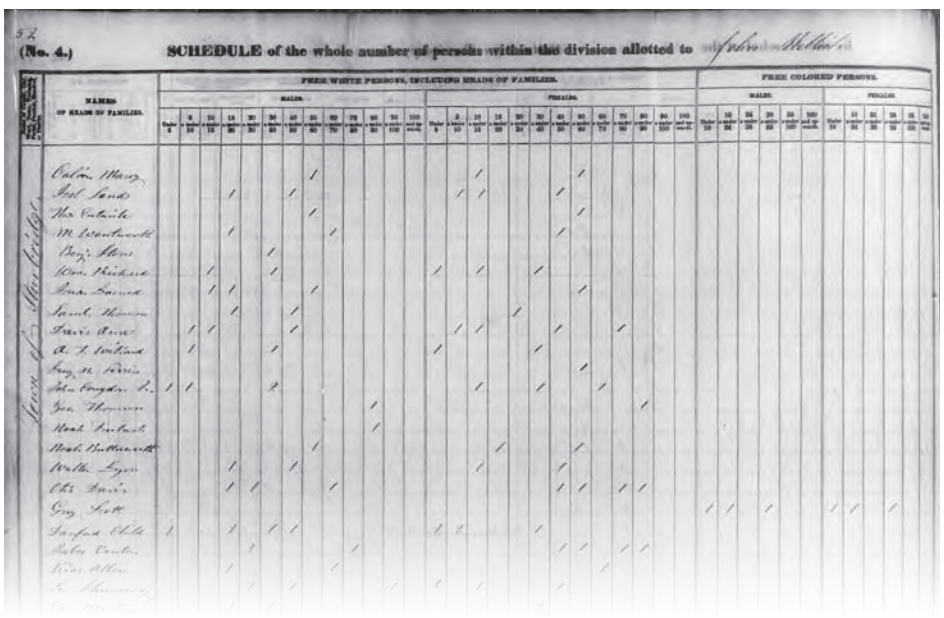
1830s BLACK HISTORY at OSV

February is Black History Month! The number of African Americans in rural New England in the early 1800s was very small, but important. Let's explore a little about life for these residents during this time.

To find out more about the people of color living in the region, historians look at the **census**. The census is an official count of the population. From 1790 to 1840, the census shows that people of color made up:


(No. 4.) SCHEDULE of the whole number of persons within this division allotted to

- 2-3% of the population in Rhode Island and Connecticut
- 1% in Massachusetts
- .5% in Northern New England.

This is about 2% of the whole New England population during this time. Sometimes people who lived in poverty or on the fringes of society were not counted in the census, so the actual numbers might have been higher. Native Americans were not counted at all until 1860. Also, people who had less than half Black ancestry were counted as White in Massachusetts. All of these factors make it more difficult to trace the lives of people of color in the 1800s.

During the early 1800s, the largest Black communities were located in Boston, Providence, Worcester, Springfield, and Hartford. Still, there were small pockets of people who lived in rural towns like Sturbridge.

In rural New England, people of color lived in a variety of different situations. Some people lived as servants in White households. Some families were the only Black family in a White neighborhood; some had other Black neighbors. At Old Sturbridge Village, the Small House is one of the first buildings you see as you enter the museum. It is called the Small House because it is only 20 feet long and 20 feet wide. How big is your house? The Small House was modeled after the home of the Croud family who lived in Sturbridge in the early 1800s. Robert Croud and and his wife Judith were of African American and Native American descent. Houses like the Small House were very common in New England at the time. About one-third of people lived in houses like this, including many African American and Native American families like the Crouds.

Like the Croud family, there were many families of mixed Native American and African American ancestry. Until 1848, it was illegal in Massachusetts for a person of color to marry a White person. Slavery ended in New England by 1845 and there were many people in the North who opposed ongoing slavery in the South. Still, racism was widespread. While White and Black people interacted in public spaces like at work, the store, or school, they probably did not socialize with each other as friends or equals. Some churches had segregated seating for parishioners of different races. In Massachusetts, public schools were open to both Black and White children. Sometimes, children of color faced prejudice in these public schools, or had trouble accessing the education they had a right to receive. Parents in Providence and Boston helped to found schools that gave their kids an equal education.

What kinds of jobs did people of color in New England have in the early 1800s? This depended on where they lived. In the sailing city of New Bedford, almost all Black men were sailors. In Worcester, many Black women were laundresses. In a countryside town like Sturbridge, the most common occupations for people of color included being a general laborer, barbers, and shoemakers. Some were healers or physicians. One woman, Harriet Wilson, was born in rural New Hampshire and became the first African American person to publish a novel in North America. Occasionally, Black men were blacksmiths, carpenters, or coopers. Racism played a big role in keeping them out of these jobs. Guy Scott, a Black man who lived in Sturbridge in the 1830s and 40s, was the foreman of the town's graphite mine. Mining was a secure job, and Scott earned respect in the community. He was able to purchase a home in Sturbridge along with 39 acres of land. His wife Hannah was Native American and helped take care of the family's farm.

At OSV, we know a lot about Guy Scott and his family. The Towne family, who owned the grand Towne House, employed a man of color who lived in the second floor of the barn. We don't know anything about him--not even his name. As we learn more about people from the past, it is important to remember whose stories we do not tell, as well as those we do.

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