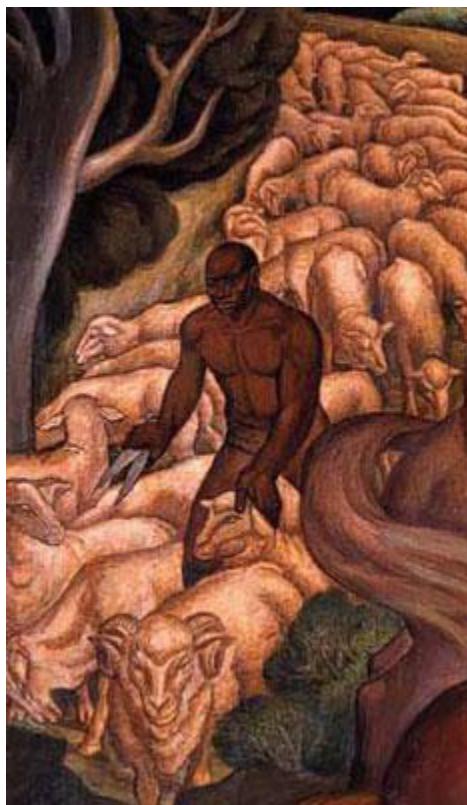


CATO PEARCE OF RHODE ISLAND



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1764

November 5, Monday: "Pope's Day" in [Boston](#). As usual, gangs of toughs from Boston's North End were battling it out with gangs of toughs from Boston's South End, for possession of each other's offensive effigies of the Catholic Pontiff. However, on this Pope's Day, in the struggle in the streets, the carriage containing one of the Pope effigies rolled over the head of a boy. Here is an excerpt from the diary of John Rowe (1715-1787):¹

A sorrowful accident happened this forenoon at the North End. the wheel of the carriage that the Pope was fixed on run over a Boy's head & he died instantly. The Sheriff, Justices, Officers of the Militia were ordered to destroy both S^o & North End Popes. In the afternoon they got the North End Pope pulled to pieces. they went to the S^o End but could not Conquer upon which the South End people brought out their pope & went in Triumph to the Northward and at the Mill Bridge a Battle begun between the people of Both Parts of the Town. The North End people having repaired their pope, but the South End people got the Battle (many were hurt & bruised on both sides) & Brought away the North End pope & burnt Both of them at the Gallows on the Neck. Several thousand people following them, hallowing &c.



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Hey, these good Protestant Bostonians hadn't mean to hurt anyone, they had merely wanted to ridicule and offend Boston's Catholics and defend the honor and reputation of their own neighborhoods, was all. Perhaps, we may assume, the dead five-year-old child had himself been a Protestant, an acolyte caught in the act of assimilating the imperatives of cultural chauvinism and religious prejudice.

[TIMELINE OF ACCIDENTS](#)

Elisha Reynolds Potter (Senior) was born in [Little Rest](#) (now [Kingston](#)), [Rhode Island](#). He would learn the blacksmith's trade and engage in agricultural pursuits, serve as a private on the side of the insurgents in the Revolutionary War, attend Plainfield Academy, study law, be admitted to the bar about 1789, and commence practice in South Kingstown Township. He would be elected in 1793 to the Rhode Island House of Representatives, and would serve as speaker in 1795 and 1796. He would be elected in 1796 as a Federalist to the 4th federal Congress to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Benjamin Bourn, and would serve during the 5th federal Congress until his resignation in 1797. He would go again to the Rhode Island House of Representatives in 1798 and would serve as speaker in 1802 and from 1806 to 1808. He would be elected to the 11th, 12th, and 13th federal Congresses (March 4, 1809-March 3, 1815). He would go again to the Rhode Island House of Representatives in 1816 and would serve until 1835, except for the year 1818 during which he would make an unsuccessful bid to become the state governor.

1. It was from this sort of hearty warfare between arbitrary groups, I would suggest, that the American system of political parties has evolved. The concept that one ought to belong to the political party which espoused the attitudes with which one agreed, and ought to change parties if one's attitudes happened to change, seems to be a later finesse on the spirit of faction, which originated in an attitude of "Let's see who pushes, and who gets pushed."

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1790

Although slaves were gradually being manumitted in Rhode Island, they were commonly becoming merely the servants of their previous owners. For instance, when a child was born free in this year to slaves in North Kingstown, on a farm near the “Devil’s Foot Rock,” he would nevertheless be bound under the law as an involuntary servant until the age of 21. He would grow up with his slave mother and two “free” siblings but would retain little memory of his father, a slave on another farm in the neighborhood. By the convention of the time he would take the family name of his mother’s owner, Giles Pearce,² and would be known as Cato Pearce.³



1796

March 10, Thursday: Cato Pearce would remember that when he was about 6 his mom “ran away from her master,” Giles Pearce, leaving him and two others (one a 10-month infant) behind. The children would never see her again: “I ’member she told me to be a good boy and she would bring me somethin’ when she came back.” On this day the North Kingstown, Rhode Island slavemaster placed an ad in a Providence newspaper, the United States Chronicle, offering a \$10 reward for his slave woman’s capture and return:

2. Giles Pearce is not recorded as owning slaves but according to the census his relative Joshua Pearce of North Kingstown held two slaves in 1782, four in 1790, and three in 1800. Presumably the four in 1790 were Cato, his mother, and his two siblings, and the three in 1800 were Cato and his two siblings after his mother had run away — and presumably Joshua, an elderly man, was allowing his younger relative Giles to make use of their services.

3. A BRIEF MEMOIR OF THE LIFE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF CATO PEARCE, A MAN OF COLOR: TAKEN VERBATIM FROM HIS LIPS AND PUBLISHED FOR HIS BENEFIT (Pawtucket, Rhode Island, 1842).

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RAN-AWAY from the Subscriber, in North Kingstown, County of Washington, on the 5th instant, A NEGRO WOMAN, about 27 years of Age, 5 feet 4 inches high, and walks with her Head very upright, had on when she went away, a dark Flannel Short Gown, and a Petticoat, a white Petticoat, a Man's Gray Gown, and a napped Felt Hat partly worn. Whoever will return said Negro to her Master, shall receive the above Reward, and all necessary Charges, paid by JOSHUA PEARCE, in North Kingstown, near the Devil's Foot.

1808

→ This was the year of the formation of the African Benevolent Society of [Newport](#), [Rhode Island](#), and also the African Society for Mutual Relief of [New-York](#). It was at about this point that, in [North Kingstown](#), [Cato Pearce](#), who had almost reached the age of 18 at which his master Joshua Pearce might have been permitted to prepare manumission papers under the state's gradual emancipation procedures, felt that instead he needed to run away from his master's farm. Venturing to the city of [Providence](#), he obtained employment from a Captain Bailey on board the schooner *Four Brothers*.

Bailey's vessel was bound for Wilmington, North Carolina with a return voyage to [Boston](#), but when suddenly the first mate "fell ill," they needed to put in to shore at [Wickford](#), Rhode Island.

We got into Wickford on a Sunday; and at the very time my master happened to be out a fishing. He knew it was the vessel I went in, and came on board and took me on shore. He took all my wages, and gave me a floggin'.

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This “falling ill” aboard the *Four Brothers* off Wickford would have been, of course, no coincidence. The white master Joshua Pearce must have, by making inquiries at the docks in Providence, learned what ship had hired his man Cato. He would have passed a message via another ship captain –white men sticking together– and Captain Bailey would have had his first mate feign this sudden illness that caused the putting ashore exactly where the white master was waiting. Cato Pearce would of course receive, instead of freedom, a flogging.



Plus, his master was of course entitled to seize all his wages.

1810

➡ Two years after being caught as a runaway and flogged, [Cato Pearce](#) ran away again. He only had a year to go, until under [Rhode Island](#) law he would no longer be required to serve his master without pay, but he ran away anyway — could he have been fearing that his master would sell him south into life slavery just before he attained his majority, or, could he have been fearing that despite technically becoming a free man, he would not be able to be actually free as a black man in the Rhode Island of that era? At that time there were only a few more than a hundred slaves left in South County, but the situation there for people of color did not seem markedly improved. This time he determined to try crossing the border into Massachusetts, because slavery had there in all its forms been outlawed, and hired himself out as a farmhand to a white family in [Rehoboth](#).

I went into Rehoboth, Mass., and hired out to a man by the name of Samuel Lyon. He was a dreadful wicked man, and while livin' with him I became more wicked and hard than ever. He had rum as plenty almost as water, and I got to drinkin' badly. I loved with him about three years. He died while I lived with him. His

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death was dreadful. I think he lay on his sick bed almost a fortnight. He cried bitterly for mercy – mercy, and told his folks that he was going to hell. He said he could n't be saved. Oh, he said, my feet and legs are in hell. He die in that dreadful state; and the last words that came from his lips were, "O Lord, gone!" I used to stand and look at him in this dreadful state, but I dare not go into the room. I then made up my mind that I would try to do better.

A few years later Cato would sign on as a crewmember aboard a schooner belonging to a Captain Rogers of New London, Connecticut, on a cruise to the Caribbean and then London. During a storm at sea he would try to pray, only to be told by the mate that "he would n't have d----d niggers praying on board. He cuffed me, pinched my ears, and told me if he catched me praying again he would tie me over the windlass." On his return in about 1815, after spending his wages, he would hire himself out to James Rhodes of [Providence](#).



By that time there would be only seven persons still enslaved in South County.

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1812

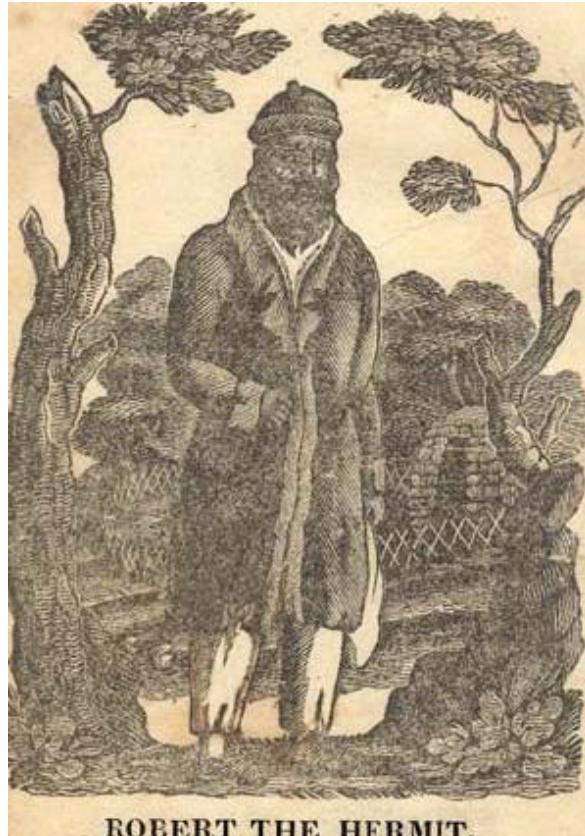
→ At about this point [Cato Pearce](#), who had been working on a farm in [Rehoboth](#), Massachusetts, signed on as a crewmember aboard a schooner belonging to a Captain Rogers of New London, Connecticut, on a cruise to the Caribbean. On his return in about 1815, after spending his wages, he would hire himself out to James Rhodes of [Providence, Rhode Island](#).



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In approximately this year [Robert Voorhis](#) was building his hut on Fox Point,



a peninsula of uninhabited land about a mile south of [Providence](#) Bridge in [Rhode Island](#), and would reside there for a number of years, until obnoxious construction work began in that vicinity. What had made this escaped-mulatto-slave-become-seaman resolve to become a [hermit](#)? —he said that had sneaked back down south via [Baltimore](#) to Georgetown in a fruitless attempt to recover his first wife and their children:

Feeling a strong inclination once more to visit the shores of the south, where I had not only been unjustly deprived of my liberty, but where I was inhumanly forced from my beloved wife and two darling children, I took passage (about fifteen years since) on board a sloop for Baltimore, and from thence proceeded direct to Georgetown. As twenty years had elapsed since I there left all that I held most dear in life — and so great a change had time effected in my personal appearance, I felt little or no apprehension that I should be recognized or molested by any, if living, who once professed a claim to me. In this I was not mistaken, for indeed as regarded the town, inhabitants, &c. so great a change had the twenty years produced, that I walked the streets at mid-day unnoticed and unknown. My old master (Voorhis and his wife had been some years dead, and the survivors of the family had removed to parts unknown— Bevins, the wretch by whom I was unjustly deprived of my liberty, and thereby forever separated [sic] from my unfortunate family, had a few years previous emigrated to the west— but, the principle object of my visit was not answered— of my wife and children I could obtain no satisfactory information— all that I could learn, was, that

soon after my disappearance, their sufferings and deprivations became so great, that my poor wife in a fit of desparation [sic], as was supposed, put an end to her existence, and that her helpless children did not long survive her!— this was enough! yea more than enough, to fill to the brim the bitter cup of my afflictions!— afflictions which had more less attended me through life!—I then felt but little desire to live, as there was nothing then remaining to attach me to this world— it was at that moment that I formed the determination to retire from it— to become a recluse, and mingle thereafter as little as possible with human society.

1815

At about this point [Cato Pearce](#), back from his voyage to the Caribbean, had abandoned religion and taken up drinking and carousing. After spending his seaman's wages in [Rhode Island](#), he began to attend the revival meetings held for people of color by a white man known to them as Elder Osborne (the Reverend V.R. Osborne was apparently being permitted by the white congregation of his [Methodist](#) church in [Providence](#) to preach to people of color, but only in all-colored assemblies and only at night). Elder Osborne was asking converts to rise and come forward, and some attenders did, but Cato always held back. He hired himself out to Captain James Rhodes of Providence. During a terrible storm while on another voyage to the Caribbean, he would feel an urge to pray out loud. The first mate would attempt to forbid such prayer, but later, below decks, he would again pray out loud. The first mate, hearing this, would call him on deck and shout "Didn't I tell you I wouldn't have no more hollerin' and prayin' on board?"

Then he hauled me forward and laid me over the windlass, and made one of the hands hold me over while he laid on three or four hard blows with a rope, and made me promise not to pray again. Then I didn't know what to do.... I wept a good deal —

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pretty much all night long.



RHODE ISLAND RELIGION

In about this year a portrait was made on canvas, by an unknown artist, of Elisha Reynolds Potter, Senior (1764-1835), one of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations's wealthiest plantation masters, owning some seven or eight farms. He was an enormous man, six feet four inches tall and weighing about 300 pounds.

Table of Altitudes

	Yoda	2' 0"
	Lavinia Warren	2' 8"
	Tom Thumb, Jr.	3' 4"
	Lucy (<i>Australopithecus Afarensis</i>)	3' 8"
	Hervé Villechaize ("Fantasy Island")	3' 11"
	Charles Proteus Steinmetz	4' 0"
	Mary Moody Emerson per FBS (1)	4' 3"
	Alexander Pope	4' 6"
	Benjamin Lay	4' 7"
	Gary Coleman ("Arnold Jackson")	4' 8"
	Queen Victoria with osteoporosis	4' 8"
	Queen Victoria as adult	4' 10"
	Margaret Mitchell	4' 10"
	length of newer military musket	4' 10"
	Charlotte Brontë	4' 10-11"
	Harriet Beecher Stowe	4' 11"
	Laura Ingalls Wilder	4' 11"
	a rather tall adult Pygmy male	4' 11"
	John Keats	5' 0"
	Clara Barton	5' 0"
	Isambard Kingdom Brunel	5' 0"
	Andrew Carnegie	5' 0"
	Thomas de Quincey	5' 0"
	Stephen A. Douglas	5' 0"
	Danny DeVito	5' 0"
	Immanuel Kant	5' 0"
	William Wilberforce	5' 0"
	Mae West	5' 0"
	Mother Teresa	5' 0"
	Deng Xiaoping	5' 0"
	Dred Scott	5' 0" (±)
	Captain William Bligh of HMS <i>Bounty</i>	5' 0" (±)
	Harriet Tubman	5' 0" (±)
	Mary Moody Emerson per FBS (2)	5' 0" (±)
	John Brown of Providence, Rhode Island	5' 0" (+)
	Bette Midler	5' 1"

Jemmy Button	5'2"
Margaret Mead	5'2"
R. Buckminster "Bucky" Fuller	5'2"
Yuri Gagarin the astronaut	5'2"
William Walker	5'2"
Horatio Alger, Jr.	5'2"
length of older military musket	5'2"
the artist formerly known as Prince	5'2½"
typical female of Thoreau's period	5'2½"
Francis of Assisi	5'3"
Voltaire	5'3"
Mohandas Gandhi	5'3"
Sammy Davis, Jr.	5'3"
Kahlil Gibran	5'3"
Friend Daniel Ricketson	5'3"
The Reverend Gilbert White	5'3"
Nikita Khrushchev	5'3"
Sammy Davis, Jr.	5'3"
Truman Capote	5'3"
Kim Jong Il (North Korea)	5'3"
Stephen A. "Little Giant" Douglas	5'4"
Francisco Franco	5'4"
President James Madison	5'4"
Iosef Vissarionovich Dzugashvili "Stalin"	5'4"
Alan Ladd	5'4"
Pablo Picasso	5'4"
Truman Capote	5'4"
Queen Elizabeth	5'4"
Ludwig van Beethoven	5'4"
Typical Homo Erectus	5'4"
typical Neanderthal adult male	5'4½"
Alan Ladd	5'4½"
<i>comte de Buffon</i>	5'5" (-)
Captain Nathaniel Gordon	5'5"
Charles Manson	5'5"
Audie Murphy	5'5"
Harry Houdini	5'5"
Hung Hsiu-ch'üan 洪秀全	5'5"
Marilyn Monroe	5'5½"
T.E. Lawrence "of Arabia"	5'5½"

average runaway male American slave	5' 5-6"
President Benjamin Harrison	5' 6"
President Martin Van Buren	5' 6"
James Smithson	5' 6"
Louisa May Alcott	5' 6"
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe	5' 6 ¹ / ₂ "
Napoleon Bonaparte	5' 6 ¹ / ₂ "
Emily Brontë	5' 6-7"
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	5' ?"
average height, seaman of 1812	5' 6.85"
minimum height, British soldier	5' 7"
President John Adams	5' 7"
President John Quincy Adams	5' 7"
President William McKinley	5' 7"
“Charley” Parkhurst (a female)	5' 7"
Henry Thoreau	5' 7"
the average male of Thoreau's period	5' 7 ¹ / ₂ "
Edgar Allan Poe	5' 8"
President Ulysses S. Grant	5' 8"
President William H. Harrison	5' 8"
President James Polk	5' 8"
President Zachary Taylor	5' 8"
average height, soldier of 1812	5' 8.35"
President Rutherford B. Hayes	5' 8 ¹ / ₂ "
President Millard Fillmore	5' 9"
President Harry S Truman	5' 9"
President Jimmy Carter	5' 9 ¹ / ₂ "
Herman Melville	5' 9 ³ / ₄ "
Calvin Coolidge	5' 10"
Andrew Johnson	5' 10"
Theodore Roosevelt	5' 10"
Thomas Paine	5' 10"
Franklin Pierce	5' 10"
Abby May Alcott	5' 10"
Reverend Henry C. Wright	5' 10"
Nathaniel Hawthorne	5' 10 ¹ / ₂ "
Louis “Deerfoot” Bennett	5' 10 ¹ / ₂ "
Friend John Greenleaf Whittier	5' 10 ¹ / ₂ "
President Dwight D. Eisenhower	5' 10 ¹ / ₂ "
Sojourner Truth	5' 11"
President Grover Cleveland	5' 11"





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President Herbert Hoover	5' 11"
President Woodrow Wilson	5' 11"
President Jefferson Davis	5' 11"
President Richard M. Nixon	5' 11½"
Robert Voorhis the hermit of Rhode Island	< 6'
Frederick Douglass	6' (-)
Anthony Burns	6' 0"
<u>Waldo Emerson</u>	6' 0"
Joseph Smith	6' 0"
David Walker	6' 0"
Sarah F. Wakefield	6' 0"
Thomas Wentworth Higginson	6' 0"
President James Buchanan	6' 0"
President Gerald R. Ford	6' 0"
President James Garfield	6' 0"
President Warren Harding	6' 0"
President John F. Kennedy	6' 0"
President James Monroe	6' 0"
President William H. Taft	6' 0"
President John Tyler	6' 0"
John Brown	6' 0 (+)"
President Andrew Jackson	6' 1"
Alfred Russel Wallace	6' 1"
President Ronald Reagan	6' 1"
Venture Smith	6' 1½"
Crispus Attucks	6' 2"
President Chester A. Arthur	6' 2"
President George Bush, Senior	6' 2"
<u>President Franklin D. Roosevelt</u>	6' 2"
President George Washington	6' 2"

Gabriel Prosser	6' 2 "
Dangerfield Newby	6' 2 "
Charles Augustus Lindbergh	6' 2 "
President Bill Clinton	6' 2 1/2"
President Thomas Jefferson	6' 2 1/2"
President Lyndon B. Johnson	6' 3 "
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.	6' 3 "
Richard "King Dick" Seaver	6' 3 1/4"
President Abraham Lincoln	6' 4 "
Marion Morrison (AKA John Wayne)	6' 4 "
Elisha Reynolds Potter, Senior	6' 4 "
Thomas Cholmondeley	6' 4 " (?)
Franklin Benjamin Sanborn	6' 5 "
Peter the Great of Russia	6' 7 "
Giovanni Battista Belzoni	6' 7 "
Thomas Jefferson (the statue)	7' 6"
Jefferson Davis (the statue)	7' 7"
Martin Van Buren Bates	7' 11 1/2"
M. Bihin, a Belgian exhibited in Boston in 1840	8'
Anna Haining Swan	8' 1"



1817

→ After his bad experience of trying to pray aboard ship and being flogged with a rope end over the windlass, [Cato Pearce](#) had left the service of James Rhodes and hired out as a farm hand in [Westerly, Rhode Island](#). At about this point he sought work aboard a sloop in nearby New London, [Connecticut](#). The captain of the vessel, learning that most of Cato's work experience was agricultural, got him into his small carriage and took him out to the plantation in [Little Rest](#) (now [Kingston](#)) of Representative Elisha Reynolds Potter, Senior, one of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations's wealthiest plantation masters, who would soon be running for governor. He was hired by these Seventh Day [Baptists](#) and would have "a pretty good time with them," except that they would be urging him to "keep the Seventh Day," that is, to observe the Lord's Day on a Saturday. Mistress Mary (Perkins? Mawney?) Potter, a lady from East Greenwich married to Elisha Reynolds Potter, Senior, encouraged any religious observance even if it was not on the 7th day of the week, and so Cato requested of her that he be allowed to keep the Sabbath on a 1st Day, at a Sunday church service three miles away. She said that she would permit this, conditional on his having done his chores. At this worship service, with a congregation that apparently was made up mostly of white people, he was asked to speak, and did so, and was well received. He then asked if he could preach again, at their next worship service, and this offer was

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accepted.



Overjoyed, back at his duties at the farm, Cato informed Mistress Potter that he "had got meetin' 'pointed to preach," and she expressed her approval of this religiosity. That week he would go "into the woods to study what I should say, and sound it out there; and swing my hands." Then, at the next Sunday worship, his preaching engagement was a resounding success, and he was asked to preach again. He used some farm wages to purchase white gloves, white stockings, and a breast pin, to improve his appearance while preaching, and Mistress Potter volunteered to tack some ruffles onto his white shirt. Elisha Reynolds Potter, Sr. himself drove Cato in a wagon to the service in Groton, Connecticut. However, when they arrived, some white men outside the meetinghouse did not recognize him as the expected preacher, and told him to go away. Managing to make his way into the building, he made contact with his waiting host, and his preaching was again a success.

Perhaps at this point Cato was overwhelmed, for he did not preach again for awhile. Then, one day, Mistress Potter, being aware that there was a service planned at her father's house in East Greenwich, sent him on an errand there. Arriving, he was invited by the worshipers to say a few words, and did so. However, he did not feel called to continue this preaching, so he went to pray by himself to the Lord.

At this point, as Cato describes in detail, he was visited by the Lord and suddenly found himself able to read the Bible even though he was illiterate. The Lord had forgiven his sins.

I felt so happy I shouted; I couldn't lay a-bed; and I got up and told Mrs. Potter, and she got up and called the folks; and we had a wonderful time. I felt so happy in the mornin' I couldn't work that day; and I went round and told the neighbors – and in the evening we had a meetin', and had a wonderful time. Then we had meetin's every night; and the Lord was with us and begun a good work, and many souls were converted to God.

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[Cato](#) determined that he needed to be baptized, but could not decide which church to join. At this point his work on the Potter plantation ended and he sought work in Windham County, Connecticut, near the [Rhode Island](#) border. One time, at Killingly, his employer and other whites took him to a Congregational meetinghouse for a Sunday service, so that he could try it out and see if it was congenial to him. His white employer ushered him to the separate box for black attendees, but this was so far away from the pulpit that he found he could hardly hear the preacher, who was in any event preaching not spontaneously from the spirit, but from written notes. He was offended at this segregated seating and referred to it as the “nigger pews.”



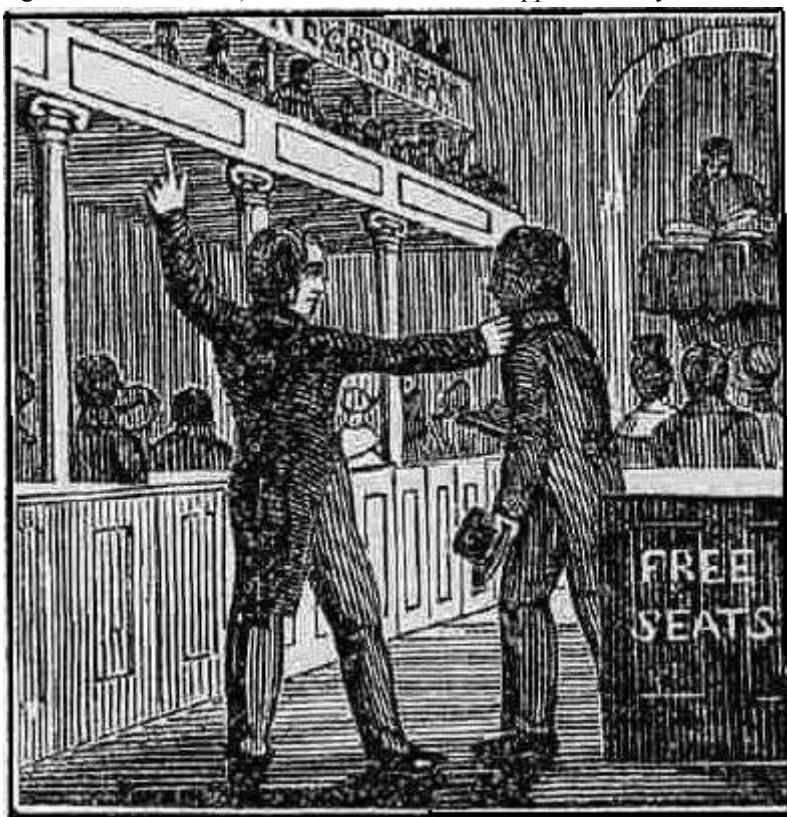
Above, “The Negro Pew, or ‘Free’ Seats for black Christians,” in the AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY ALMANAC FOR 1840 (New-York, 1840). In the North in the 1st part of the 19th Century, in Protestant churches, African-Americans were often relegated to segregated, inferior seating (unlike Catholic churches, where they were not even permitted inside the building).

Finally, [Cato](#) got himself baptized by the Chestnut Hill [Baptist](#) Church in Killingly, Connecticut. He preached “both nights and Sundays” at various meetings in the area, including several at his white employer’s house. In the spring, however, he had to stop his preaching and obtain new employment.

1820



The African Freedmen's Society of [Providence](#), [Rhode Island](#) had become the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. At first the Bethel group had met in the homes of members and in the meetinghouse of the [Religious Society of Friends](#) at the corner of North Main Street and Meeting Street (when the white [Quakers](#) were not in the building, the black folks were of course allowed to sit anywhere they pleased, even downstairs rather than in the building's dilapidated "pigeon loft"; the unused segregated seats would be torn out in a building renovation in 1822). Such churches were disapproved of by the white community, but as one



meeting place had been removed by the authorities, it had been replaced by another, and sometimes two or three. In the previous year members of the local black community had met at the 1st [Baptist](#) Church, the nation's oldest Baptist church, to discuss their need for an African Meeting House. In this year the African Union Meeting and School House Society's new facility was erected at Meeting Street and Congdon Street (this currently houses the Congdon Street Baptist Church). At this point the congregation purchased a lot on top of College Hill on Meeting Street, and they would be constructing a building on this lot in 1866. (In 1961 the building would have become so shaky that the congregation would sell the plot to Brown University in order to purchase their current Bethel Church on Hope Street at the intersection of Rochambeau Avenue.)

Early in this decade [Rhode Island](#)'s black citizens would be being stripped of their hard-won voting rights, and segregated in the public schools. White rioters would be destroying property in [Providence](#)'s "Hard-Scrabble," the 1st separate black neighborhood, off what is now North Main Street near University Heights.

At about this point, down in [Little Rest](#) (now [Kingston](#)), [Rhode Island](#), [Cato Pearce](#) was being hired as a farm

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worker by Elisha Reynolds Potter, Senior, at his farm homestead. (Potter was a state Representative who had recently run unsuccessfully for Governor, and his political attitudes might be said to be somewhat to the right of unreconstructed since he favored, for instance, that the bankrupt be thrown in debtors' prison; the son Potter, Junior would attempt to follow in his father's political footprints, with a more liberal bent, but would have his greatest success as a scholar.⁴⁾



The efforts of [Cato](#) to make a personal contribution were being supported by, among others, two white men, elders in the Quidnessett [Baptist](#) Church of [North Kingstown](#), William Northrop and Thomas Cole.

(It seems clear that there was a reason why Cato could not affiliate with the Quakers of North Kingstown, in his desire to preach. Although Quaker practice would have allowed him to rise during silent worship and speak, in fact it seems there were only a couple of men attending the Quaker meeting in that town at that time, and they weren't offering words to each other but simply sitting in silence.)

It was in about this year that the significant event occurred, which would cause us to retitle Cato Pearce's 1842 autobiography, when it eventually came to be republished, as "JAILED FOR PREACHING." The event is of significance to us not so that we can experience a sense of outrage, senses of outrage being easy enough to arrange, but so that we can get an approximation of what real human life amounted to in southern Rhode Island during the early years of the 19th Century. It is noteworthy, for instance, that despite the fact that Joshua Pearce, Cato's former master, had beaten him as a child, and despite the fact that as a young man he had had the first mate of Captain Rogers's schooner lay him over the capstan and go after him with the end of a rope, in these goings-on in about 1820 the plantation manager Elisha Potter did not actually put into play the horse-

4. For instance, EARLY HISTORY OF NARRAGANSETT WITH AN APPENDIX OF ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS MANY OF WHICH ARE NOW FOR THE FIRST TIME PUBLISHED. Providence RI, 1935

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whip he held in his hand. It had been used as a prop, to threaten but not to inflict injury. Most likely, by this point in time the tenor of life on the former slave plantations of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations had changed somewhat. It had become socially unacceptable for a white man to thus administer lashes to a now-“free” person of color. The reason why Cato was put in jail was, Potter needed to resolve upon some alternative punishment. Thus it was that, rather than risk social disapprobation by whipping Cato, Potter “got the officer — the jailer — and put [Cato] in jail.” Cato had committed no crime and Potter held no official town or state government post such as sheriff or judge, that would legally permit him to commit a person to incarceration; nevertheless, Potter’s informal power in the community was so great that he could use it to have the local jailer take a free man into the jailhouse merely for having failed to abide by his wishes. And Potter felt no inhibitions about treating a free black man the way Cato’s slave parents would have been treated by their white masters.

When Mr. Potter had done his breakfast he come out with his horse-whip in his hand. Says he, “Why wa’nt you here last night to do the chores.” I told him I hired some body. He said he wouldn’t have him on his place. He said he hired me. He said he didn’t understand why I went away to preach. Says he, “I won’t have no nigger preachers — I’ll horse-whip you;” and he swore. Says I, “Don’t strike me, Mr. Potter....” Well he said they had a good minister there, and they wouldn’t have no nigger preachers, and said he would put me where he could find me. So he went and got the officer — the jailer — and put me into jail.

Cato was incarcerated in the jail for “two nights and parts of two days....” Fortunately, the county court was in session.

Sheriff Allen and a number of the great men came in to visit them that was in prison, and asked me what I was put in for. I told ‘em for preachin’ — but yet I couldn’t help weepin’. [One of the visitors] said, “You won’t stay here but a few minutes — he had done perfectly wrong — we will have you out in a few minutes.” Then they gave me some money and went out and told Elisha Potter they would give so long to take me out [or] they was goin’ to prosecute him if he didn’t. About half an hour after that, I could see Elisha Potter through the grate, comin’ up the back side and in the back way, and [he] got the jailer to talk with me while he stood down to the bottom of the stairs. And the jailer took me in another room and told me that Mr. Potter said I might go every Saturday night and stay till Monday mornin’ and have meetins where I was a mind to. I told the jailer I had nothin to do with Elisha Potter. “If he had put me in here, amen — if I have got to stay here and die, amen to it: I have nothin’ to do with him. I never have stole nor cheated nor done any thing wrong to him.... I said I hadn’t nothin’ ‘gainst Elisha Potter: I loved him as well as ever. At that Elisha Potter come up stairs and said I had better go to work — he liked me well, and I might go to meetin’ when I was a mind to. I told him I didn’t calculate to work for him any more. Then he told me to go and git my things, and I come out.

We notice that the situation in Rhode Island had even changed to such a degree by this point in time that once prominent whites visiting Little Rest learned of Potter jailing Cato, they became so upset that they threatened to prosecute Potter, the most important personage by far in that entire district. Then, it was an act of repentance and humility for Potter to invite Cato to continue to work for him and to offer that in the future he would have the weekend off to attend Sunday services. Then, it was an act of dignity as well as independence, that Cato rejected the offer, wanting “nothin’ to do” with Elisha Potter in the future.

1824



The drummer known as “King Charley” or “Carolus Africanus Rex” or “Charley of the Pinkster Hill,” who once presided over Pinkster Day in New York, died at a reputed age of 125 years.

Negro Election Day would, until 1841, be an annual event in Rhode Island. In the document below, we see that the Rhode Island politician Elisha Reynolds Potter, Senior of Little Rest (now Kingston), who in 1818 had made an unsuccessful bid for state governor and was at this point serving in the state House of Representatives, involved himself to a degree in this celebration.

This reminiscence by Jonathan P. Helme is from the Providence Journal for October 31, 1874 and is headlined “Recollections of Little Rest (Now Kingston) Hill, and its Surroundings Some Fifty Years Ago”:

Among the servants of the late E.R. Potter, was one by the name of John Potter. In those days it was the custom of the colored population of the State to elect each year a governor, and on one occasion John was the elect. The governor was installed in June and the headquarters were at Fulling Mills, as it was then called, now Apponaug. On the occasion of his installation, Mr. Potter told his servant John to take the best horse in his stable, as he had a number, among them a fine span of large bays, for his journey to Apponaug, about twenty miles. He selected one of the span, a noble large horse, and with the assistance of Mr. John T. Nichols [sadler in Little Rest], his horse was beautifully caparisoned. Early on the morning of the day, the governor elect, mounted on his splendid steed, dressed in fine style, viz., blue coat, short waist, swallow tail, with a profusion of gilt [sic] buttons, red sash, black pants, put inside of a pair of boots, with white tops, and a handsome pair of silver-mounted spurs, together with a white hat, a large black plume with a red top, completed his regalia. There were quite a number of our citizens assembled to see the governor elect start for the capital. He was met by a very large delegation of his colored fellow citizens about half way between Greenwich and Apponaug, with a band of music, consisting of three drums and two fifes (in those days the French horns, key bugles, etc..., were not known.) As soon as his appearance was noted, the band struck up “Hail to the Chief;” both sides of the road were lined with spectators, the ladies waving their ‘kerchiefs, and the gentlemen their hats, while the governor with hat in hand bowed to the populace, his head nearly touching his horse’s head. On his entrance to the village, the band played “Washington’s March.” If any one had told the governor on this occasion, as a slave once told a heroic Roman general, that with all this pomp and show he “was nothing but a man,” he would have spurned him from his sight.

...About this time Mr. E.R. Potter was urgently solicited to accept the nomination for Governor of this State. He declined, stating as one of his reasons, that one Governor in a family was sufficient.

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We remember this Elisha Reynolds Potter, Senior of Little Rest, don't we? He was the guy who, some four years earlier, back in about 1820, had made the serious error of having his employee [Cato Pearce](#), a black Rhode Islander, thrown in the local jail merely for going off on a Sunday to preach — an error for which he needed to apologize, and for which he did in fact attempt to apologize. So, what do we have here, in about 1824, when we see this guy helping another of his black employees, John Potter, prepare for the important local Pinkster event?

Was this brass-balled, bull-necked politico still, in 1824, trying to make amends? Was he trying to make himself more racially sensitive? Was he learning to “go along and get along”? (It does warm one’s heart, to hear of this sort of thing.)

1827

→ October 12, Friday: Daniel Stedman of [South Kingstown](#), a neighbor of “Nailer Tom” Hazard, recorded in his journal that “a black man by the [name] of [Cato Pearce](#) in Evening had a meeting at Wakefield to Mr. Ray Allen’s.” (Ray Allen was a white man, a [Baptist](#), residing in Wakefield/South Kingstown/Peace Dale, [Rhode Island](#)).⁵ It is known that [Cato](#) preached at evangelical meetings not only in Wakefield but also in [Newport](#) and Hopkinton, and on [Block Island](#).

1835

→ September 26, Saturday: Elisha Reynolds Potter, Senior died in [South Kingstown, Rhode Island](#). His grave is in the Potter family burial ground in Washington County.

(This datapoint helps us understand how [Cato Pearce](#)’s book A BRIEF MEMOIR OF THE LIFE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF CATO PEARCE, A MAN OF COLOR: TAKEN VERBATIM FROM HIS LIPS AND PUBLISHED FOR HIS BENEFIT could be printed in [Pawtucket](#). By the point at which this small book describing the misconduct was put into circulation, 1842, the important citizen had been out of circulation for at least six years.)

In the Teatro San Carlo of [Naples](#), Lucia di Lammermoor, a dramma tragico by Gaetano Donizetti to words of Cammarano after Scott, was performed for the initial time. The composer reported that “It has pleased, and pleased very much.”

5. DANIEL STEDMAN’S JOURNAL, introduced and transcribed by Henry Clay Oatley, Jr., ed. by Cherry Fletcher Bamberg (Greenville RI: Rhode Island Genealogical Society, 2003).

1840

The 6th national census.⁶ Black Americans were becoming more numerous, in Mississippi at this point, than white Americans. In Massachusetts, the average free black able-bodied workingman was receiving one dollar per day for a laboring year of 260 working days, or a total of \$260 annual income.

In the [Rhode Island](#) census, [Cato Pearce](#) was listed as an agricultural laborer living alone in [Cranston](#), with Thomas Cole as a neighbor. Cato indicates in his 1842 narrative that for many years he lived in Cranston with Deacon Thomas Cole and Mrs. Cole. Deacon Cole was a white man, a [Baptist](#), and had assisted Cato even before the 1820 incident with Potter Senior.

[Edward Jarvis](#) uncovered serious errors in the Massachusetts census of this year, and [Lemuel Shattuck](#) uncovered serious errors in the [Boston](#) census.

It having become abundantly clear that the new American Statistical Society had been poorly named, its initialism being ASS, the name was corrected to a less undignified American Statistical Association. (It's obvious that these were high-minded gentlemen — or they would have seen this one coming.)

As of 1790 the center of the human population of the USA had been a little town just about a day's travel inland

6. The rise in [manumissions](#) in the post-Revolutionary period had increased the proportion of free black Americans from about 8% to about 13.5%, where it had been holding steady. A decline in manumissions in the late antebellum period, combined with the lesser fecundity of free black Americans, would move the free-to-enslaved proportion back down to about 11% as we arrived at our [Civil War](#).

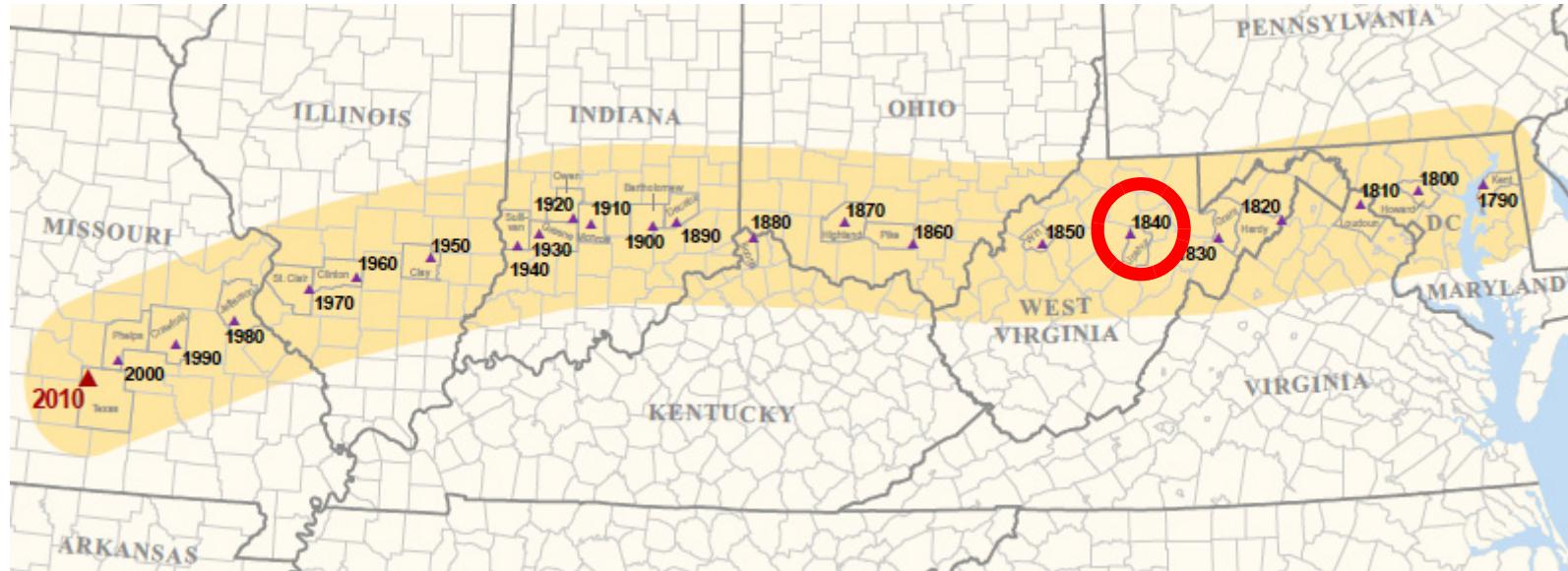
Census	% in Population
1790	8%
1810	13.5%
1840	13.5%
1861	11%

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from [Baltimore](#). By this period the center of population had relocated.



(Nowadays, of course, we've all been coming from one or another center in Missouri.)

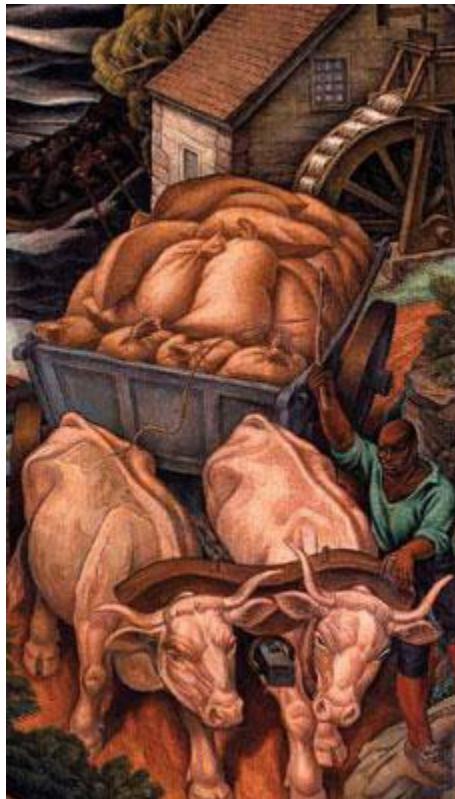


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1842

A minister in [Pawtucket, Rhode Island](#) put out a 36-page, illustrated publication entitled A BRIEF MEMOIR OF THE LIFE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF [CATO PEARCE](#), A MAN OF COLOR: TAKEN VERBATIM FROM HIS LIPS AND PUBLISHED FOR HIS BENEFIT.



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1939

Ernest Hamlin Baker's mural about the slavery-intensive economic activities of the white "Narragansett Planters" of the southwestern region of the state of [Rhode Island](#) and Providence Plantations:



(The mural reminds us that there were more black [slaves](#) in Rhode Island at one time, than in the remainder of the states of New England put together. — I mean, how **dare** this artist remind us of something like that!)

2006

JAILED FOR PREACHING / THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF [CATO PEARCE](#), A FREED SLAVE FROM WASHINGTON COUNTY, RHODE ISLAND / *WITH AN HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION BY CHRISTIAN M. MCBURNEY*. Pettaquamscutt Historical Society, [Kingston, Rhode Island](#), 2006.

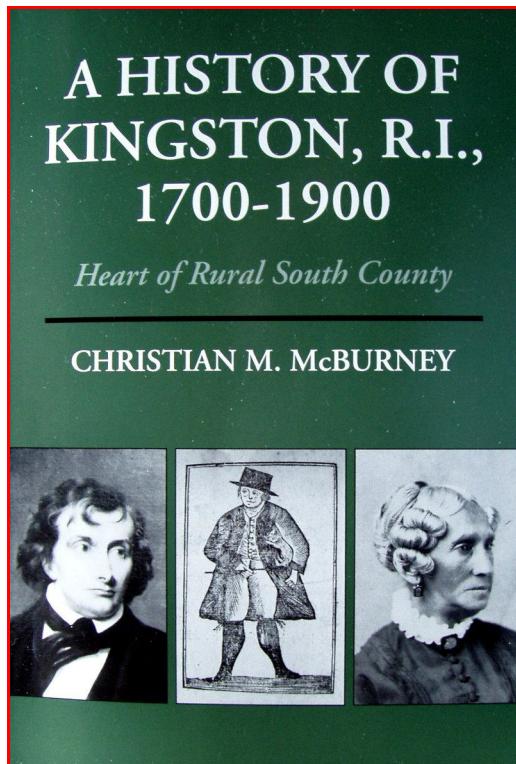


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2007

March 4, Sunday, 2PM: Christian M. McBurney, author of A HISTORY OF KINGSTON, R.I., 1700-1900:
HEART OF RURAL SOUTH COUNTY (Kingston, Rhode Island: Pettaquamscutt Historical Society, 2004),



offered a free lecture entitled “Jailed for Preaching: The Autobiography of [Cato Pearce](#), A Freed Slave” at the old Washington County Jail structure at 2636 Kingstown Road (Route 138), Kingstown, Rhode Island

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(telephone 783-1328).



Also presenting was Professor Joanne Pope Melish of the University of Kentucky.

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