

Migrant of Necessity

Growing up in New England thirty-odd years after the American Revolution, Holdridge Primus would have heard family stories of slavery and tales of black soldiers' battlefield heroics. More than likely, he heard the stories from his maternal grandfather, Gad Asher. The events of Asher's life embody a past that underlay the identity of many African Americans in the Northern states at the time. Jeremiah Asher, a cousin of Holdridge, preserved their grandfather's recollected experience in two memoirs.¹ Filtered by time and undoubtedly altered in its details, the story linked Holdridge and Jeremiah and all of Gad Asher's progeny to the founding of the Republic and reinforced their claim to citizenship. Later, as an activist Baptist minister, Jeremiah wrote the story of his life twice, and in both works he emphasized the importance of his grandfather's experiences as a slave, a soldier, and a free man.

According to Jeremiah, Gad Asher was born on his father's farm in Guinea, West Africa. From the age of four he was sent to the fields with an older brother, charged with scaring off the birds.² Keeping watch on their raised platform one day, the boys saw two white men approaching. Alarmed, the youngsters ran for home. The older boy got away, but his young brother did not. The kidnappers gagged the child and carried him to the coast, where he was put aboard a slave ship. Frightened and confused, he was nevertheless spared "many of the worst horrors of the middle passage."³ The crew treated him kindly—possibly out of sympathy, but also to make sure that a saleable bit of the cargo was not lost. When the ship reached its destination, the boy was put up for sale.

The destination, we are told, was Guilford in the colony of Connecticut. This would have been somewhat unusual, because slave traders generally

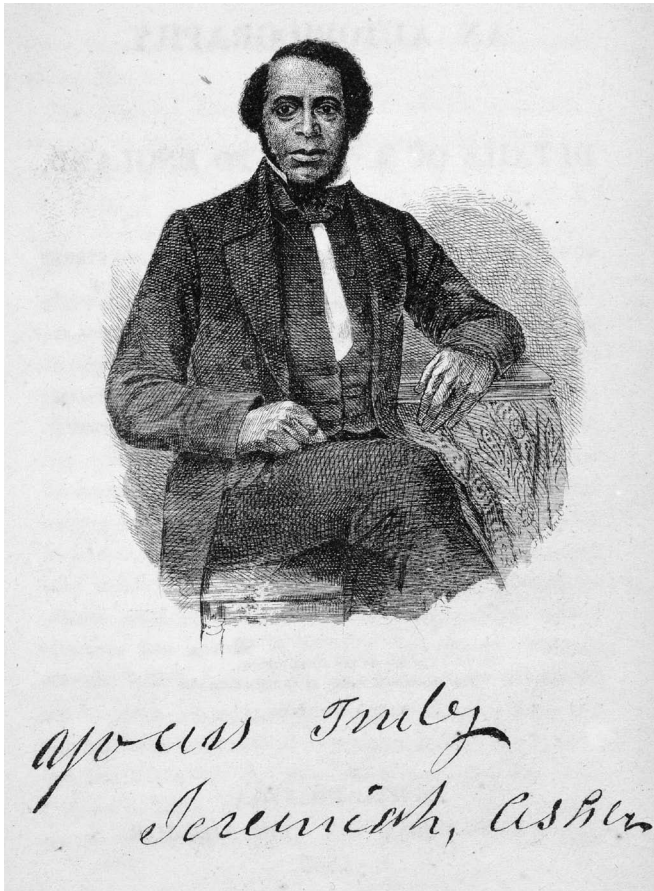
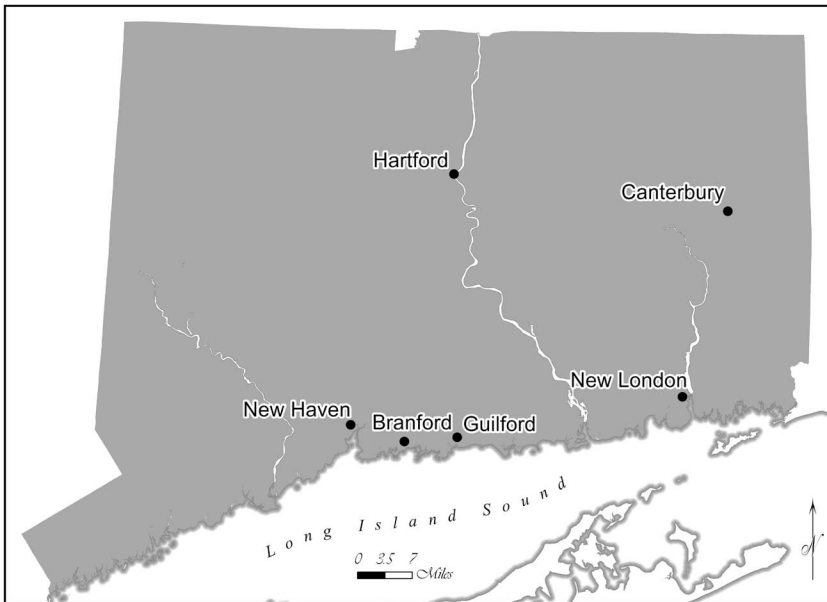


FIGURE 1.1. Jeremiah Asher, minister and memoirist. *Credit:* Jeremiah Asher portrait, from *An Autobiography*, with details of a visit to England: and some account of the history of the Meeting Street Baptist Church, Providence, RI, and of the Shiloh Baptist Church, Philadelphia, PA. BX6455.A84 A3 1862; neg. #90375d, New York Historical Society Museum Library.

made their first stop in the West Indies. Still, it was possible. In the 1740s, when Gad Asher was seized, Guilford had two harbors equipped to handle slave vessels of forty to fifty tons.⁴ The ship that carried the young African was part of the so-called “triangle trade,” a three-cornered exchange variously described but involving lumber, livestock, and farm produce from the North American colonies; sugar and molasses from the West Indies; and slaves from Africa. For the sum of forty pounds, the small captive became

the property of an East Guilford ship's carpenter named Bishop. He took the boy home, named him, and "became remarkably fond of him."⁵

Gad Asher was not the only slave in Guilford. In 1756, a report to the British crown numbers the town population at 2,322, including 59 blacks, few or none of them free.⁶ By that time, slavery in New England was a century old. In 1634, after John Winthrop's Puritans, in league with the Narragansetts, destroyed the Pequot settlement near what is now Mystic, Connecticut, the few who were not brutally slaughtered were enslaved. Seventeen were sent to the West Indies and traded for "cotton, tobacco, and a group of Africans," who were returned to Winthrop's colony.⁷ When Bishop bought the young captive, the pastor of the East Guilford Congregational Church owned eight slaves.⁸ The practice of slaveholding was not uncommon in the North, even though some New England clergymen expressed a growing unease over it.⁹



MAP 1.1. Connecticut, 1800. *Credit:* Prepared and created by Map and Geographic Information Center (MAGIC) at the University of Connecticut Libraries, Storrs, CT. University of Connecticut, 2015. Data sources: MAGIC at University of Connecticut Library, Storrs, CT. Minnesota Population Center, National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 2.0 Minneapolis, MN. University of Minnesota, 2011.

Possibly related to these doubts, the naming of slaves in both North and South betrayed some reservation about the concept of one human being owning another. Historian Ira Berlin characterizes as a “cosmic jest” the custom of assigning heroic names—Pompey, Jupiter, Cato, Hercules—to slaves, mocking their lowly status.¹⁰ Whether in this spirit or simply taking note of the boy’s forced migration, his owner chose for him the names of two of the tribes of Israel.¹¹ Gad and Asher were the sons of Jacob and Zilpah, servant of Jacob’s first wife, Leah. Young Gad Asher was somewhat unusual in having two names—the second of which came to be used as his surname.¹²

Slavery persisted in the North because of the need for workers.¹³ Unlike plantation slaves in the South, most in Connecticut were isolated, with no more than two or three in a household. As was true in the South, some were trained in specific skills, some served aboard ships, and others worked in the master’s house or in the fields.¹⁴ Venture Smith, a contemporary of Gad Asher, was also captured as a child in Guinea. His narrative details his experiences as a slave on Long Island and later in Stonington, Connecticut.¹⁵ In his youth, Venture carded wool, pounded corn, and served as waiter and “cup bearer.” As an adult, he worked at different trades: boatman, all-round farmhand, and trusted tradesman. Gad Asher may have worked as a domestic servant, or he could have served as a carpenter’s apprentice, learning the trade of his owner. What is clear in the lives of both Venture Smith and Gad Asher is that in seeking their freedom and then living as free men they embraced the ways and to some extent the ideas of white men. Whether joining a church, buying property, or naming and educating their children, both assumed that they were entitled to the opportunities available to citizens.

Jeremiah offers no details of his grandfather’s upbringing, but Gad Asher would not have been treated as a member of the Bishop family. As for claims that Northern slavery was milder than that in the South, Ira Berlin notes that masters, Northern or Southern, “treated their slaves with extreme callousness and cruelty at times because this was the way they treated all subordinates, whether indentured servants, debtors, prisoners-of-war, pawns, peasants, or simply poor folks.”¹⁶ This provides ample explanation for the fact that, however “fond” Bishop may have been of the small boy he had bought, he later treated him less than honorably.

When the Revolutionary War was going badly for the colonists, Gad’s owner was called up for military service. “Preferring the comforts of home to the dangers and hardships of a campaign,” he made use of a Connecticut

law that enabled an owner to free a slave and “allow” him to volunteer as substitute in the Army or Navy.¹⁷ Gad Asher enlisted in May 1777 for the duration of the war.¹⁸ He told Jeremiah that he “fought side by side with white men in two or three important battles.”¹⁹ When he returned to Guilford in 1783, he learned that Bishop now demanded repayment of the forty pounds Asher had cost him.²⁰

Gad had already paid a price for his freedom. The source, nature, and extent of his injury remain unknown, but the Revolution had cost him his sight. Jeremiah said the old man attributed the loss to the combination of “intense heat, and inhaling the dense smoke of gunpowder, and exposure to the dew of heaven by night.”²¹ A double-edged piece of luck, the disability qualified him for a government pension, so that he was able to save the amount necessary to buy his freedom. This experience again resembles that of Venture Smith, who was tricked into buying himself several times over.²² Both men achieved freedom through their own efforts.

Starting his life as a free man, Gad would have been at least forty years old and, according to Jeremiah, already married to a free woman named Temperance.²³ Little is recorded about Temperance—not even her maiden name—but a contemporary white man wrote that in June 1823 she was called to the bedside of a dying pastor, showing that the community recognized her as a healer.²⁴ The practice of medicine was largely in the hands of housewives in the eighteenth century. The uses and application of herbs were handed down from mother to daughter, so Temperance probably had learned from her mother, who was most likely a slave. African remedies may well have been among those she used.

Once freed, slaves tended to move away from the oversight of their former owners, and not surprisingly one of Gad’s first acts as a free man was to settle his family in the northern section of Branford, the town west of Guilford.²⁵ Because Temperance was not a slave, their children were free. Among those who lived beyond infancy, the following have been identified: Temperance (mother of Holdridge Primus), Ruel (father of Jeremiah Asher), Henrietta, Marietta, and Brunella.²⁶ Note that these are not African names. Rather, they conform to naming patterns common among white colonial New Englanders. These fell into four categories: biblical, hortatory, traditional English, and “other”—a category that reflected secularization and other influences of the Enlightenment.²⁷ Based on naming practices of the time, we might guess that young Temperance, named for her mother, was the firstborn daughter. Ruel is biblical (Moses’s father-in-law), and the others may have been named after relatives or friends. Henrietta is a feminine form

of Henry; Marietta is a diminutive of Maria; and Brunella's name could be a reminder that some of the German troops had not returned home after the Revolutionary War. These Asher names suggest a New England identity, reflecting the adoption, reluctant or willing, of the dominant culture.

If Gad Asher was trained in his youth as a carpenter, blindness made such work impossible. He turned to farming, the most common occupation of all Connecticut householders in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By 1792, no doubt with the help of his pension, he bought two and a half acres of land in North Branford.²⁸ His son Ruel and other members of the family lived and worked on the farm. Ruel's son, Jeremiah, born in 1812, became the old man's "eyes" and the audience for many repetitions of his life story. Jeremiah's autobiography emphasizes the importance of the Revolutionary cause to his generation of African Americans and ties his own lifelong quest for equality to Gad Asher's military service.

Two other black veterans who lived in North Branford often visited Gad Asher, and the three told and retold their experiences in the "terrible and never-to-be-forgotten battle for American Liberty."²⁹ Young Jeremiah "became so accustomed to hear these men talk, until I almost fancied to myself that I had more rights than any white man in the town . . . Thus, my first ideas of the right of the colored man to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, were received from those old veterans and champions for liberty." Such beliefs led him to "resist" the insults of whites as a youth, a habit that "gave my parents much trouble."³⁰ To imagine he had more rights than whites was dangerous in a black youth, although in Jeremiah's case that conviction shaped the course of his ministry in later life. Inequality, the residue of slavery, was already fixed in the culture, so that black parents had no power to protect their own. The oppression of blacks, slave or free, was well established, even as Northern states began to distance themselves from slaveholding.³¹ Connecticut, for example, passed a law abolishing slavery in 1784, just a year after the end of the Revolution. Still, as one scholar cautions, not only did it provide a gradual emancipation, it may have passed only because it was one item in a list of revised laws submitted by Roger Sherman and Richard Law. The implication is that the lawmakers, trusting their colleagues, approved the bundle of bills without discussing or perhaps even examining them.³² The law, passed on January 8, 1784, provided that all children born after March 1 of that year would be free at the age of twenty-five. Others, including Gad Asher, would have been freed only by death.

Young Holdridge must have heard Gad Asher's story any number of times, and no doubt he knew of his cousin's challenges to race prejudice

based on the conviction that those who fought with the colonists had earned rights of citizenship. In the years following the Revolution, the link between military service and full citizenship encouraged many Northern blacks to press for their rights.³³ Connecticut historian David White points out that the “children and grandchildren of the blacks of the Revolution were the first in Connecticut to make their feelings known to an apathetic white society . . . It was the James Mars, Amos Bemans, and Jeremiah Ashers who challenged Connecticut’s conscience.”³⁴ All three men later figured in the development of Hartford’s black community.

Jeremiah nowhere discussed his grandfather’s specific views with regard to rights of citizenship, but Gad Asher certainly made use of the culture in which he grew up. He may never have met Venture Smith, but both men displayed the same sense of entitlement. In spite of the duplicity of their masters, and fully aware of the racial climate around them, both accepted the ways of New England. Moreover, Gad Asher, along with many other slaves, participated in the war that promised “certain unalienable rights.” In securing his freedom, naming his children, buying land, and apprenticing his son Ruel to a skilled tradesman, Gad Asher helped himself to the opportunities available to citizens of the new Republic.³⁵

Another aspect of this acceptance is church membership. After moving to Branford as a free man, Gad Asher joined the Congregational Church and remained a member until his death—an act not wholly typical of African Americans at the time.³⁶ Aside from those who could benefit from membership, “slaves viewed Christianity with all of the suspicion and hostility due the religion of the owning class.”³⁷ How then to account for Gad’s faithful church attendance over some forty years? Recall that he came to New England and to slavery as a very young child, arriving in the 1740s along with the Great Awakening and its urgent message of salvation. In the custom of the times, he would have been taken to church along with members of the Bishop household. Certain aspects of Christianity may have appealed to him, and he could have blended it with the religion he had known in Guinea. Certainly it is possible that as a free man Gad joined the church to gain the favor of whites or at least to avoid criticism, and yet the difficulties and hardships he encountered in his life suggest the possibility that he found comfort in Christianity, or at least the prospect of a better hereafter.

In Gad’s here and now, home ownership was a step up, and he found ways to take that step. He had the help of his son Ruel, who with his wife and children lived and worked on the farm. In 1815, perhaps with more savings from Gad’s pension, father and son together purchased another ten

acres.³⁸ Was it enough to support the two families? Historian Charles Sellers estimates that in the early nineteenth century, a family could subsist on “as little as twenty improved acres, employing a labor force of father, mother, and six to eight surviving children out of eight or ten pregnancies.”³⁹ As of 1820, the two Asher households—eleven individuals—depended on the produce of twelve and a half acres.⁴⁰

In the meantime, the other children of Gad and Temperance had left home to start families of their own. In 1811, their daughter Temperance married and moved with her husband, Ham Primus, to Guilford.⁴¹ A Seaman’s Protection Certificate dated 1810, found in the Primus Papers, identifies Ham Primus as “an American seaman, aged 23 years or thereabouts, of the height of five feet eight inches and a half, being a man of color, born at Branford and . . . a citizen of the United States of America.”⁴² Seaman’s Certificates, issued beginning in 1796 to safeguard American sailors against impressment by the British Navy, also served African American sailors in Southern ports as proof of free status. They did not confirm the holder’s rights as a citizen, only his nationality. As a fugitive, Frederick Douglass escaped to freedom on the strength of a borrowed Seaman’s Certificate. The American eagle printed on the document convinced the train conductor that Douglass was a sailor and a freeman.⁴³ Ham Primus’s certificate was his own, and the fact that it was preserved shows its importance to his son, Holdridge. Throughout the antebellum period, the question of African American citizenship remained a point of contention, until in 1857 Supreme Court Chief Justice Taney declared in the *Dred Scott* decision that blacks were not citizens. Nevertheless, Ham Primus’s certificate was a family keepsake—a link to the past, a record of his occupation, and in hindsight an ironic affirmation of his own, and his children’s, citizenship.

In Guilford, Ham had access to docks where short-haul coastal runs originated.⁴⁴ W. Jeffrey Bolster writes that “coasting became the job of choice for black mariners with dependents” since such work “allowed seamen with families to stay closer to home.”⁴⁵ Ham obviously chose coastal runs since his wife, Temperance (Asher), gave birth to at least eight children between 1815 and 1827.⁴⁶ The first of these was Holdridge, born January 25, 1815. The records of Guilford’s Episcopal churches supply the dates of birth, baptism, and in some instances the deaths, of the couple’s children, evidence that this branch of the family also maintained ties to organized religion.⁴⁷ Moreover, the names of the couple’s children again suggest identification with the dominant culture. Gad Asher Primus was named for his grandfather; Marietta for an aunt, the sister of Temperance. The nonbiblical, nontraditional names given the other children—Holdridge, Nelson, Clara, Amelia,

and Margetta—come from a “vastly expanded pool of new [names]” that showed parents “rethinking their own roles and their expectations for their children.”⁴⁸ Did Ham and Temperance give some of their children “new” names in the expectation of better lives and better times in the new century?

If so, their hopes were only partially fulfilled. Eight was not an unusual number of births for the period, nor was it unusual that not all eight survived childhood. In 1822, when Holdridge was seven years old, his infant sister Amelia died within days of baptism, while her twin, Clara, survived.⁴⁹ In 1824, when he was nine, two of his brothers, twenty-two-month-old Gad Asher and seven-year-old Nelson, both died of typhus within a two-week period.⁵⁰ Years later, Holdridge named his own son Nelson in memory of the brother so near his own age, surely his companion and playmate. Lucky to survive childhood himself, he encountered grief at an early age.

For the parents, the loss of three children in two years was compounded by other problems, and by 1830 Ham and Temperance had moved their family from Guilford to Gad Asher’s farm in North Branford.⁵¹ The move inland, away from the harbors of Guilford and Branford, signals the end of Ham’s seafaring career. The change may have been forced on him, as growing racism in the antebellum years made it increasingly hard for black sailors to find work.⁵² In addition, the Panic of 1819 initiated the boom and bust cycles that became a hallmark of nineteenth-century life.⁵³ Especially for blacks, the 1820s brought not only hard times but also “hard feelings and hard money.”⁵⁴ The downturn affected the Ham Primus family and in fact the whole Asher clan. Tightened credit and the demands of the growing cash economy burdened debtors in particular—and farmers by the nature of their occupation are debtors.

Reflecting these developments, by 1828 Ham Primus was working as a farmhand. Malachi Linsley, a white Branford farmer, wrote in his diary that on December 16, “Ham and his Father [in-law] Asher come and thrashed my rye for 3 days.”⁵⁵ This was not a casual hire, for Linsley had formerly owned a slave called “Uncle Ham,” a resident of Branford.⁵⁶ Freed at the age of twenty-one, Uncle Ham had three sons, one of them named Ham—Holdridge’s father.⁵⁷ The three days’ work in December initiated a series of day jobs for Ham during the next few years: clearing stones out of Linsley’s orchard, threshing grain, and other farm chores.⁵⁸ Ham also would have helped work Gad’s farm and likely found other day jobs in the area.

However Ham and Temperance viewed their move to Gad’s farm, Holdridge and his sisters may have welcomed it, because they now had the companionship of their Asher cousins and closer contact with their venerable grandfather. Hard times notwithstanding, in 1832 Ham managed

to purchase an acre and a half of Gad Asher's land and reportedly built a house on it.⁵⁹ This purchase may reflect Ham's wish to maintain an independent household, but it also pointed to a need for additional housing. Ham's family and Ruel's, along with Gad and his wife, brought to seventeen the number of mouths to feed on some twelve acres of New England's stony soil.⁶⁰ Such doubling up was a familiar strategy for hard-pressed families, but in this case the resulting numbers still overtaxed available resources.

Combining households offered one means of coping with hard times, and another was to separate some members from the family group. A study of Appalachia at the turn of the nineteenth century found that, "[f]or Appalachians, moving into an extended family household represented an initial strategy . . . but, like New Englanders, seeking work elsewhere was an additional option that many were forced to choose."⁶¹ The Ham Primus family made that second choice in April 1829, when they took nine-year-old Clara, the surviving twin, to the Linsley farm, where she stayed for a year and a half.⁶² This arrangement, a form of apprenticeship in housekeeping, was common among both blacks and whites of the time, providing housing and meals and sometimes schooling for the child of a hard-pressed family. In later years, Holdridge and his wife would make use of the same strategy.

Sending young Clara to the Linsleys may have helped, but it hardly solved the problems facing the extended Asher family. As it happened, the two boys, Holdridge Primus and his cousin Jeremiah Asher, had reached their teen years and were able to help on the farm, but they were redundant there, because Ruel and Ham could do the work. At the same time, local jobs were scarce because of the recession, so that separation again provided a solution. Indeed, between 1750 and 1840, a combination of overpopulation, soil exhaustion, and the coming of industrialization led to a massive exodus from New England farms.⁶³ Young men—and women—left in unprecedented numbers for better opportunities in nearby cities or greener pastures in the West. The two cousins joined the migration. Jeremiah wrote that in 1828, when he was sixteen years old, he left home to look for work in Hartford.⁶⁴ Holdridge left around the same time, although the date has not been established.⁶⁵

What were the circumstances of their leaving? What arrangements were made for them in Hartford? We can only guess at answers. Families forced to send a son or daughter away would, if possible, arrange employment in the new location, or at least direct the migrant to a friend or relative.⁶⁶ What we do know is that setting out together or separately, Jeremiah and Holdridge both traveled to Hartford around 1830. They necessarily took along habits formed and lessons learned at home, memories of family life, and the story of their grandfather's journey from kidnapped child to slave,

then soldier and finally free man and landowner. Old enough to understand the need that sent them away, they were young enough to welcome the prospect of adventure in a new setting. We cannot recapture their thoughts at leaving, but we can refer to findings on the internal migrations of that time. “Americans,” we learn, “appear to have accepted with little anxiety the traumas involved in pulling up stakes and moving. Confidence in the future and their desire to share in the general improvement outweighed their local and familial attachments.”⁶⁷ In their later lives, these two migrants showed a willingness to adapt to new circumstances as both continued to value religion, family life, and education.

While Jeremiah became a Baptist minister and an outspoken advocate of black rights, Holdridge took a different path. We can trace that path over time, but all we can recapture of his journey from Branford to Hartford is how he might have traveled and what he saw when he arrived.

If he made his way east to Old Saybrook and sailed up the Connecticut River to Hartford, he would have been greeted there by a panoramic view of maritime commerce: ships coming and going and the noisy docks “smelling of molasses and Old Jamaica,” the odor of the triangle trade.⁶⁸ Steam power was coming into use, but sailing vessels still carried passengers and trade goods up the Connecticut River as far as Hartford.



FIGURE 1.2. Hartford, 1836, Lithograph. *Credit:* Frontispiece, John Warner Barber, *Connecticut Historical Collections*, 1836, reprint, Library of Congress 99-62405, Connecticut State Library.

He would have seen horses and mules “corralled on [the] wharves by the hundred awaiting shipment” to the West Indies, from which they would return with molasses, sugar, rum, and salt. By 1830, African slaves were no longer being brought legally to Hartford, but the West Indies trade remained a vital element in the city’s economy.⁶⁹ The produce and animals crowding the city docks still went to feed the slaves and maintain the sugar plantations.

Having spent his early years in Guilford as the son of a sailor, Holdridge would have recognized the sloops and schooners in the harbor, the scows and flatboats bringing lumber from northern ports, but the covered wooden toll bridge across the Connecticut River and the ferries that connected Hartford and East Hartford would have been new to him. Up from the docks, the city was a cluster of buildings forming a modest skyline that stretched perhaps three quarters of a mile along the river. Viewed from the deck of an incoming ship, the scene was punctuated by the steeples of two Congregational meetinghouses. If the boat docked at the foot of State Street, Holdridge would have looked up to see a Hartford landmark still in place, the Federal-style State House of 1796 designed by Boston’s Charles Bulfinch.

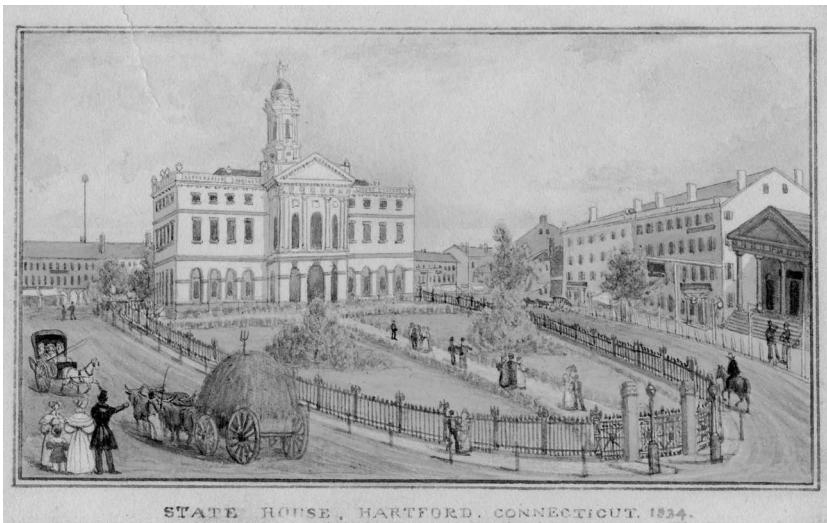


FIGURE 1.3. Hartford’s Federal Style State House, 1830s. *Credit:* The Connecticut Historical Society.

Alternatively, Holdridge could have traveled by stage overland on the New Haven and Hartford Turnpike—as of 1799 “the ultimate in intercity communication” and still in use.⁷⁰ He might have noticed the contrast between the rural vistas along the way and the relatively dense huddle of buildings that made up the city of Hartford (incorporated in 1784). In 1830, the population was just under 10,000, with 495 African Americans, all of them free. Main Street was unpaved and dusty or muddy depending on the weather; householders gathered each morning at the markets and down at the wharves to buy provisions and exchange the latest local news—daily newspapers had not yet appeared. Two watchmen patrolled the streets from 10:00 p.m. until just before sunrise.⁷¹ Even so, the interests that would make Hartford a manufacturing, publishing, and insurance center were beckoning those in search of a better life than that afforded by the grudging soil of most Connecticut farms.

The two young migrants found their opportunities limited. Young, bright, and strong, but also black, they both secured predictably menial positions, fortunately for them with prestigious white families. Jeremiah Asher “went to Hartford, where a cousin who resided there had obtained for me a situation with Henry L. Ellsworth, Esq., for ten dollars per month.”⁷² Henry Ellsworth was a son of Oliver Ellsworth, a Founding Father who had served as a Connecticut delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and later as the first chief justice of the United States Supreme Court.⁷³ The helpful cousin was probably related to Jeremiah’s mother, Jerusha Olford Asher, whom he describes as being “of the Indian extraction and . . . born in Hartford.”⁷⁴ Sharing their status as Others, Native Americans and African Americans frequently intermarried.

Holdridge Primus’s first job in Hartford was as a servant in the household of William Wolcott Ellsworth, twin brother of Jeremiah’s employer.⁷⁵ Almost certainly he also found welcome with his aunt’s Olford relatives and benefited from Jeremiah’s connection with the Ellsworth family.⁷⁶ William W., a lawyer in the family tradition and like his brother a member of Hartford’s elite, had married a daughter of Noah Webster. He served as a representative in Congress from 1829 to 1833, around the time when Primus came to Hartford.⁷⁷ Whether the young newcomer accompanied Ellsworth to Washington during legislative sessions or more likely stayed in Hartford with the family, the job gave him the opportunity to observe an educated, influential, wealthy gentleman and his family. At the same time, it gave him a chance to show his employer that he was an able and reliable worker; a serious and responsible young man. The fact that he and

Jeremiah both worked for members of the prominent Ellsworth family possibly brought them a degree of notice within the black community; at least it would have helped them get acquainted.

As a youngster, Holdridge had seen the advantages of establishing a connection with influential whites in his father's relationship with Malachi Linsley, and Jeremiah Asher had his own experience of such benefits. During his employment with Henry Ellsworth, Jeremiah contracted typhus, and Ellsworth's wife provided constant care: "My own mother could not have done more for me."⁷⁸ Such solicitude on the part of an elite white employer was not unusual. Historian Nick Salvatore, tracing the life of an African American worker in nineteenth-century Massachusetts, notes that Amos Webber's white employer provided "protection in the often hostile racial atmosphere in Worcester" and willingly accommodated his trusted employee's needs in scheduling his duties.⁷⁹ Robert Cottrol, in a study of the nineteenth-century black community in Providence, observes that "White Providence was somewhat prepared to reward the diligent black servant."⁸⁰

Overall, in spite of their having found well-disposed employers, the two newcomers found a high level of racial tension in the city. Cambridge scholar Edward Abdy, touring Hartford in 1833, asked a black gardener "how his brethren were treated in the town." He learned that "they were insulted and annoyed in a very shameful manner. Frequent broils and fights were the consequence; and the bitter feeling of animosity . . . had much increased since the Colonization Society had become more active."⁸¹ The American Colonization Society, founded in 1816, stated as its purpose the gradual emancipation of slaves, and—revealing the gap between abolition and racial equality—the subsequent "return" of the "Africans" to their "homeland." This strategy was designed to produce an all-white American citizenry, the ultimate goal of colonizationists.⁸² By 1830, black leaders had begun to agitate for the abolition of slavery, and by the middle of the decade an increasingly vociferous Anti-Slavery Society with black and white membership underscored the effort with a barrage of pamphlets, flyers, and broadsides supporting abolition and opposing colonization.⁸³ Hostility grew as anti-abolitionists in turn stepped up their efforts; Abdy's informant was describing the effects of this escalating clash. In another passage, Abdy states his own opinion:

Throughout the Union, there is, perhaps, no city, containing the same amount of population, where the blacks meet with more contumely and unkindness than at this place [Hartford,

Conn.]. Some of them told me it was hardly safe for them to be in the streets alone at night . . . To pelt them with stones, and cry out nigger! nigger! as they pass, seems to be the pastime of the place.⁸⁴

As previously noted, race prejudice was already firmly planted in the North: as a youngster, Jeremiah Asher was granted the “privilege” of attending the district school in Branford, but as soon as he had mastered the rudiments of reading and arithmetic, his father (Ruel Asher) was advised to “take me out of school and bind me out to some good master and then I would be good for something.”⁸⁵ This advice served the dual purpose of removing a black child from the schoolroom and impressing upon the family that education was of little use to African Americans. Frederick Douglass, hired as a caulker in New Bedford, quickly discovered that the skills he gained in slavery were useless, as white workers refused to work with him.⁸⁶ Hartford’s racial climate appears to have been of a piece with that of Branford and New Bedford.

As a newcomer, Primus would have spent long days with his white employer’s family, but for companionship and guidance, he turned to the black community. Raised in a churchgoing family, he would have found his way to the African Religious Society, a nondenominational meetinghouse and gathering place, where he very likely met young Mehitable Jacobs, for there or elsewhere the two, still in their teens, became acquainted. We know nothing of the growing mutual interest between the two, but as a newcomer to the city, Holdridge Primus had made fortunate connections—in his first employer and in his blossoming friendship with Mehitable, daughter of a prominent local black family.