

History Tidbits

Eunice Russ Ames Davis

Activist, Abolitionist, Dedham Resident

Part 1

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Originally published in the Dedham Times, November 13, 2020

On October 26, 1900, Eunice Russ Ames Davis celebrated her 100th birthday in her home at 125 Washington Street in Dedham, Massachusetts. Davis, the oldest resident of the town, was celebrated by close friends and family as well as town officials, members of the Dedham Historical Society, and representatives from the Old South Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution of which Davis was a “Real Daughter” and honorary member (“She Was Born in 1800,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, Friday, October 26, 1900). Throughout the 1880s until her death in 1901 newspapers throughout North America published, and republished, Davis’ biography, often in celebration of Dedham’s oldest resident becoming another year older.

Davis garnered national attention for more reasons than her longevity. By the late nineteenth century, Davis was known as the “oldest living female Abolitionist” and the “only surviving member of the Woman’s Anti-Slavery Board of Boston” (“She Was Born in 1800”). Nineteenth-century journalists also emphasized Davis’ supposed Narragansett ancestry while simultaneously ignoring her Black and Penobscot heritages. Eunice Russ Ames Davis’ experiences as a mixed-race woman of color, abolitionist, and resident of Dedham in the late nineteenth century are extraordinary, yet reflective of the experiences of Afro-Indigenous people living in Massachusetts throughout the nineteenth century.



Drawing of Eunice Russ Ames Davis as a young woman (*Boston Post*, 27 October 1896, page 8; newspapers.com).

Eunice Russ Ames Davis was born in Andover, Massachusetts, on October 22nd or 26th, 1800 to Prince Ames and Eunice Russ. Prince Ames, despite often being described as a white man of possible Penobscot descent, was born enslaved to the Ames family of Andover. He fought at the battle of Bunker Hill as a slave to Captain Timothy Ames. He later served as a substitute for Benjamin Ames and fought along the east coast (“Descendants of Prince Ames of Andover, Massachusetts,” Franklin A. Dormin). Ames was personally commended by George Washington for his service during the war (“She was Born in 1800”). Ames’ wife, Eunice Russ, was born in 1766. Nineteenth-century articles claim that Russ was either “full-blooded” or “half” Narragansett although she was likely also Penobscot. Russ, like her daughter, was an abolitionist. Prince Ames and Eunice Russ had eight children, of which their daughter Eunice was the seventh (“Descendants of Prince Ames of Andover, Massachusetts”).

Eunice Russ Ames Davis spent the majority of her life in Andover and Boston. On the 1810 Massachusetts state census, the members of the Ames family were listed as “Free Colored Persons” in a predominantly white community in Andover. On September 28, 1819, Davis married her first husband, Robert Amos. Together they had three children, a daughter, Dorcas, and two sons: Charles and George. Robert Amos died in Dracut, Massachusetts, in 1825 (“Descendants of Prince Ames”). On January 18, 1854, she married her second husband, Reverend John Davis, who was originally from Toronto, Canada. They were married in Boston (The *Liberator*, Boston, Massachusetts, January 27, 1854). Their marriage record lists John Davis’ profession as a tailor, but he was also a Baptist preacher. Eunice Davis worked as a tailoress. The family set their roots in Boston, most notably in the neighborhoods of Jamaica Plain and West Roxbury. It’s unclear when Davis moved to Dedham, but various newspaper sources from 1900 state she had been residing in the town a “dozen or so years.”

Although Eunice Russ Ames Davis lived in Dedham for the last years of her life, her connections to the town date back much further. Davis’ brother and son, Charles B. Amos, both married into the Gerrish family of Dedham, an Afro-Narragansett family who could also trace their lineage to seventeenth-century white residents of Dedham. Relatives of Davis appear on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century censuses as living in Dedham. Their race is most often described as mixed-race and occasionally as Black, “Indian,” or white. Davis’ son Charles lived in Jamaica Plain but his obituary stated that he was well known in Dedham due to his relatives who lived in the town (“Charles Bradley Amos Obituary,” The *Dedham Transcript*, March 9, 1901).

Journalists who witnessed Eunice Russ Ames Davis’ 100th birthday said that she spoke fondly of her abolitionist work and proudly of her family’s military service during the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. On April 26, 1901, Eunice Russ Ames Davis passed away following a few months of illness (“Eunice Russ Ames Davis Obituary,” *Dedham Transcript*, May 4, 1901). Her obituary was published in newspapers throughout the country.

Part II of Davis’ life will discuss her work as an abolitionist and her mixed race identity. To read previous History Tidbits, visit www.dedhamhistorical.org/history.