

# Fading records: Clues to slave life

Peggy's existence is surmised from 1731 baptism

By Jean G. Downey

Special to Eagle

**P**eggy, a woman slave in colonial Westford, has been commemorated by resident Phyllis Schmeichel in the Westford Women Remembered doll series. Peggy's biography is, of necessity, one of probabilities since the only record of her life is found in the handwriting of Rev. Willard Hall, first minister of the Westford parish.

In the original leather-bound record book of the First Church of Westford, he has written under the heading of baptisms: "June 24, 1731: Peggy, Servant of Joseph Hildreth Jr." She was the first of 14 slaves baptized by Hall between 1732 and 1761.

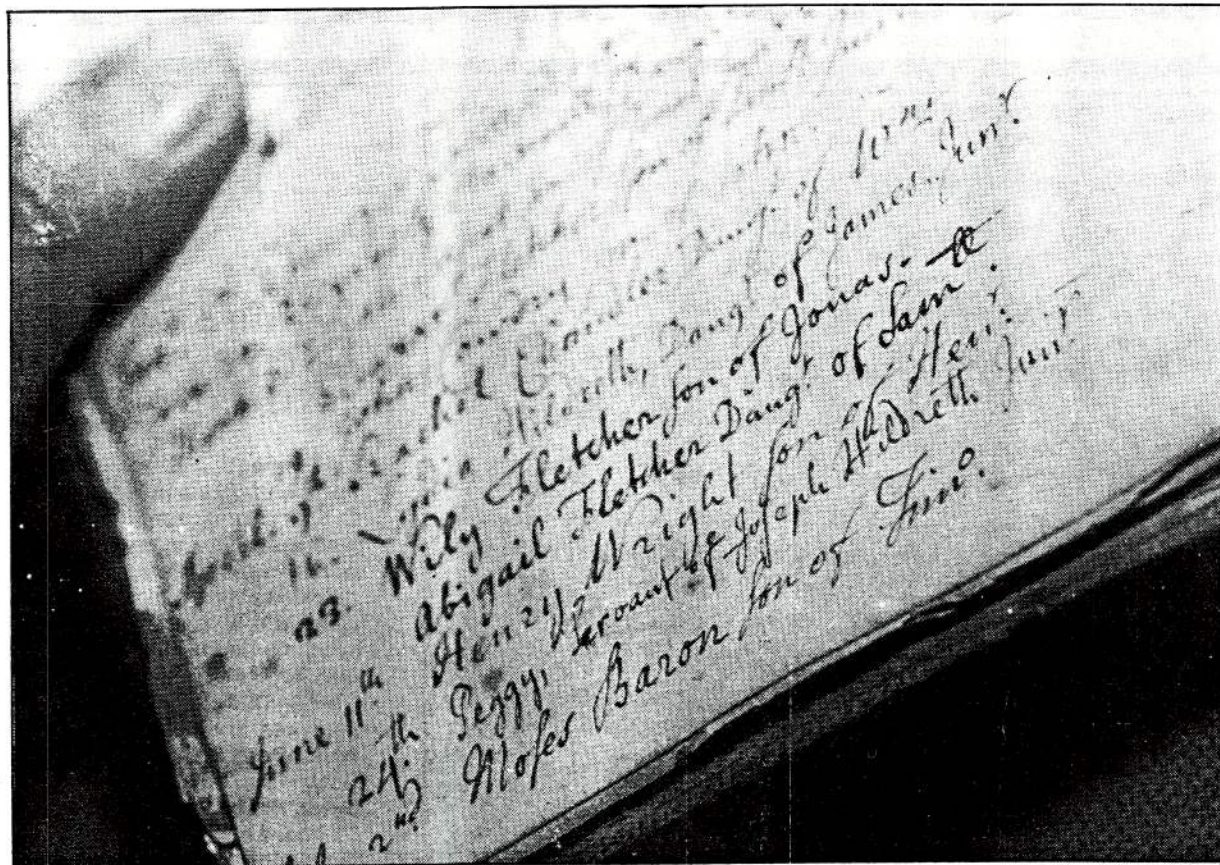
The fact that Peggy was baptized means Joseph Hildreth was willing for her to take time to receive Christian instruction and attend church services on Sundays.

It is believed that the first Westford Meeting House had a gallery, and there Peggy was surely assigned a seat. There is no record that she "owned the covenant" or was admitted to the Lord's Table.

Apparently Hildreth, unlike many New England slave masters, did not fear that conversion and baptism would give Peggy the notion of equality. Over and over, acts of the grate reaffirmed in Massachusetts, that baptism did not confer enfranchisement on men slaves as it did on white males.

Like other persons in bondage, Peggy was referred to as "servant", rarely as "slave".

The late Lorenzo Green and others who have studied slavery agree that the New England colonies were the greatest slave trading section of 18th century America. Peggy was probably purchased with rum in Africa by a New England slave trader and



Staff photo by Marc Holland

The title page from the leather-bound, hand-penned church book of the Second Church of Chelmsford (First Church of Westford) dates from Willard Hall's ordination in 1727 (at right). In photo above, an early page shows the actual penned account of slave Peggy's baptism by Reverend Hall. The book is such a valuable antiquity that it is kept in a bank safe deposit box.

packed with other slaves, teaspoon fashion, into a cramped space between decks.

On the return trip slaves were traded in the West Indies for sugar and molasses, necessary commodities to the 63 distilleries in the far-flung Massachusetts Colony of the mid-18th century. Peggy brought 30 or 40 pound sterling on the Boston auction block if she had first served a master in West Indies or a Southern colony in America.

C. Duncan Rice in "The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery" makes the understatement of the century when he suggests that Peggy knew overwhelming "cultural loneliness" in a Northern colony.

In 1735 the Massachusetts census shows 2600 Negroes out of a total population of 144,000. A 1754 chart lists Negroes by towns in Massachusetts: Chelmsford, 8; Wastford (sic), 5; Littleton, 8.

Wearing the cast-off clothing of Mrs. Hildreth, Peggy would become a member of the Puritan household, helping with all related tasks including the care of the many young Hildreth children. A 1730 map places this home in the vicinity of 58 Hildreth Street.

Rev. Edwin Hodgman, historian and descendant of Joseph Hildreth Jr., places them later at Minot's Corner. Generations of Hildreths farmed the acreage around Minot's Corner and northward of Prospect Hill.

Although some Quakers held slaves, they were the only religious group to protest this institution. The Puritans deluded themselves that in slavery they saved Indians and Africans from a life of savagery.

While most New England families had nothing to do with slavery, the Puritan love of money clouded any thoughts of human

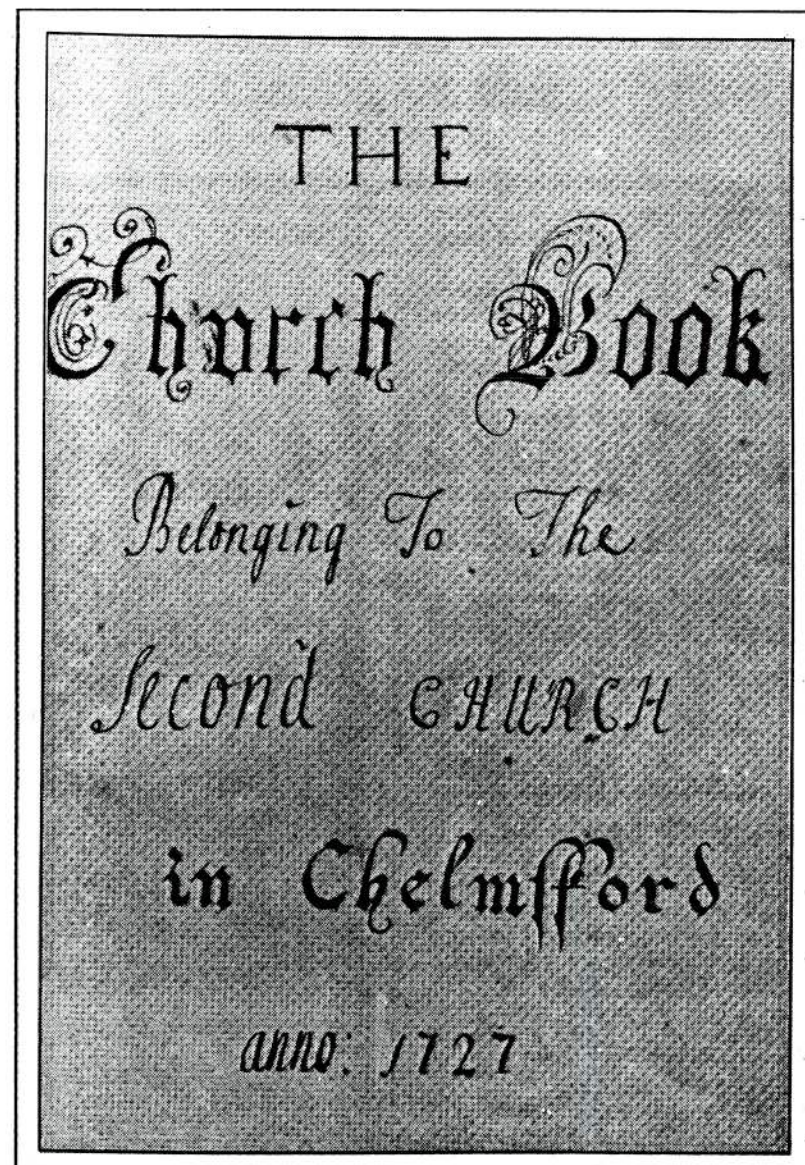
rights and proved stronger than their respect for domestic ties.

If Peggy married, she and her intended had to post banns and later go before the local magistrate for a valid marriage contract, as did all Massachusetts colonists. Yet if she bore children, they legally could have been sold away from her. She could have been sold to another master at any time.

Judge Samuel Sewall tried in vain to prevent Indians and Negroes from being rated with livestock as taxable estate. Joseph Hildreth Jr., among other Westford men, was assessed taxes for livestock and slaves as personal property.

John and Samuel Adams crusaded against slavery. Abigail Adams wrote that she wished "there was not a slave in the province."

No legend nor Westford record has been found of the usual des-



ignated area for the burial of African-Americans. If Peggy died in Westford, she may have been buried in the corner of an orchard or along a stone wall on the farm where she lived.

The baptism of slaves declined markedly in Massachusetts towns after 1760. In 1774 Boston Harbor was blockaded; as the Revolutionary War ensued the British bribed slaves to murder their masters. Probably colonists could foresee the end of

slavery in New England. In 1783 it was outlawed by the Massachusetts Supreme Court.

Rest in peace, Peggy.

Jean Downey is a Westford resident and an avid historian. Her research on "Peggy, the slave" will be included in the "Westford Recollections" series, a collection of historical vignettes and photos by June W. Kennedy.