

An Introduction to the Guide to Manuscripts at the Rhode Island Historical Society Relating to People of Color

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Earlier versions of this guide and introductions to the guide were authored by Jennifer Galpern (2018, 2023), Rick Stattler (2002, 2004), and Robin Flynn (1998).

This is a guide to references in the manuscripts collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS) related to individuals identified as being of African, Indigenous, or Asian descent. It also includes broader topics and themes, including the enslavement of African and Indigenous persons, *de jure* (by law) and *de facto* (in fact or practice) racial discrimination, as well as other contemporary events and issues associated with these communities between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries.

While this guide strives to be as comprehensive as possible, it should be considered a working draft. It is in no way a complete listing of all of the possible resources and references in the holdings of the manuscript collections of the RIHS. It is instead intended as an entry point into our vast collections, and in particular, those that contain information about people or persons of color. Researchers are encouraged to share additional references found in other manuscript collections with library and collections staff, as this guide is a living document that will be updated regularly to reflect new research findings.

It should also be noted that the documents referred to or transcribed below may contain language, words, phrases, or racial classifications that are harmful, problematic, and today would be considered outright racist. The decision to include some of these phrases or terms was not made lightly. We encourage researchers to read and interpret these terms and phrases as historical artifacts in of themselves—verbiage commonly used at the time that these documents were created or cataloged. Please be aware that these terms do not in any way reflect the views of the Rhode Island Historical Society or its staff.

Should you have any questions or suggestions please contact reference@rihs.org.

Project History

This guide has existed in multiple iterations since the late-1980s. As he worked with the manuscript collections, former RIHS Manuscript Curator Harold Kemble began documenting every reference that he found to persons of color—both enslaved and free—that he came across in the collections. Kemble’s vision for recording references to persons of color in the collections culminated in the creation of an alphabetically organized card catalog. Kemble’s research cards included an exact citation for the manuscript collection in which said reference was found (including box, folder, and when applicable, page numbers), a brief description of the document and its content, as well as the date of the document’s creation.

After Harold Kemble's departure from the RIHS in the early-1990s, Manuscript Curator Cindy Bendroff continued his important work of gleaning what manuscript collections yielded invaluable insights into the lives of persons of color. With the assistance of John Wood Sweet, then a graduate student at Princeton University, the guide to people of color truly began to take shape. In 1992, John created an annotated guide that outlined both primary and secondary source materials in the collections pertaining to African and African Americans. The contributions of visiting researchers like John Wood Sweet, Joanne Pope Melish, Ruth Wallis Herndon, and Jane Lancaster (among countless others) throughout the late-1990s and early-2000s, each working in different collections, for different projects, in search of the lives and experiences of persons of color in early Rhode Island, emphasized the importance of the project. Between 1994 and 2004, Manuscript Curators Richard Stattler, Robin Flynn, and Karen Eberhardt delved further into the collections. As a result of their research efforts, the number of references to persons of color in our collections grew at an exponential rate. Around 2002, the first version of the guide was published on the RIHS website and a revised version was then made public in 2004.

This community-sourced document has continued to grow and expand over the last twenty years. Many of the early references located by prior manuscript curators were difficult to locate due to the fact that many documents were re-catalogued as the collections underwent improved processing. In 2018, Research Services Manager Jennifer Galpern embarked on a project to review each of the references included in the guide in an effort to standardize the formatting of the guide and to ensure that all catalog numbers reflected any changes made since the guide's initial creation. Records that could not be located in 2018 are noted in the "call number" column of the guide with an asterisk (*). With grant funding from the *Northeast Slave Records Index (NESRI)* further work was done in 2023 by Galpern and interns Courtney Garrity and Fiona O'Hare to expand on the contents of the documents. Whenever possible, Garrity transcribed many of these documents in order to add as many individual references to persons of color as possible. As Garrity transcribed these records, Galpern worked to create scans of the original documents. These scans can be found connected to records in our online catalog, The Cabinet.

Additional Resources

To learn more about researching and writing about the lives of the enslaved or other marginalized groups in American history (women, the Indigenous, the poor, etc.), please consult the following secondary sources all of which are available in the Robinson Research Center:

Boydston, Jeanne. "The Woman Who Wasn't There: Women's Market Labor and the Transition to Capitalism in the United States." *Journal of the Early Republic* vol. 16, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 183-206.

Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Foreman, P. Gabrielle et. al.. "Writing About Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might

Help.” Community-sourced document,
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/mobilebasic>, last accessed on January 31, 2024.

Hartman, Saidya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Herndon, Ruth Wallis. “On and Off the Record: Town Clerks as Interpreters of Rhode Island History.” *Rhode Island History* vol. 50, no. 4 (November 1992): 103-116.

Herndon, Ruth Wallis and Ella Wilcox Sekatau. “The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era.” *Ethnohistory* vol. 44, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 433-462.

Morgan, Jennifer L. “Accounting for ‘The Most Excruciating Torment’: Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages.” *History of the Present* vol. 6, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 184-207.

“Slavery and the Archive.” A Special Issue of *History of the Present*. Co-Edited by Marisa J. Fuentes and Brian Connolly. *History of the Present* vol. 6, no. 2 (November 2016): 105-215.

Smallwood, Stephanie. “The Politics of the Archive and History’s Accountability to the Enslaved.” *History of the Present* vol. 6, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 117-132.

Warren, Wendy A. “‘The Cause of Her Grief’: The Rape of a Slave in Early New England.” *Journal of American History* vol. 93, no. 4 (March 2007): 1031-1049.

White, Deborah Gray. “Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women’s History.” *Journal of American History* vol. 74, no. 1 (June 1987): 237-242.