



Dorcas the Blackamoor (1640s-1650s)

Dorcas was an enslaved African (“Blackamoor”) who was brought to Massachusetts, probably after having been in Providence Island, a Puritan colony in the Caribbean. What little is known about her today comes mostly from church records, including the two texts presented below. Dorcas was, so far as is known, the first black person to be accepted as a church member in New England, meaning that she persuaded the congregation she had had what Puritans regarded as an authentic born-again experience. Twelve years later, white members of her congregation resolved to obtain Dorcas’s freedom for her. They intended to accomplish that either through an intervention of the courts—since the man who owned Dorcas had died without specifying in his will what should become of her—or by raising the funds necessary to purchase her freedom. It is unknown if Dorcas was, in fact, freed.

1. Dorcas is admitted to church membership (1641)

There is also a Blackamoor maid that hath long lived at Dorchester in New England, unto whom God hath so blessed the public and private means of grace that she is not only endowed with a competent measure of knowledge in the mysteries of God and conviction of her miserable state by sin, but hath also experience of the saving work of grace in her heart and a sweet savor of Christ breathing in her, insomuch that her soul hath longed to enjoy church fellowship with the saints there.

And having propounded her desire to the elders of the church, after some trial of her, taken in private, she was called before the whole church and there did make confession of her knowledge in the mysteries of Christ and of the work of conversion upon her soul. And after that, there was such a testimony given of her blameless and godly conversation that she was admitted a member by the joint consent of the church, with great joy to all their hearts. Since which time, we have heard her much admiring God’s free grace to such a poor wretch as she was—that God, leaving all her friends and kindred still in their sins, should cast an eye upon her to make her a member of Christ and of his church also—and hath with tears exhorted some other of the Indians that live with us to embrace Jesus Christ, declaring how willing he would be to receive them, even as he had received her.

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2. Dorcas’s congregation resolves to purchase her freedom (1653)

At a church meeting, December 19, 1653, where were present these brethren

Mr. Mather	Captain Atherton
Elder Withington	Ensign Foster
Richard Baker	Robert Howard
Richard Leeds	Thomas Wiswall
John Gornhill	Joseph Farnworth
Henry Cundliffe	

Lawrence Smith
William Triscot
Thomas Swift

William Ware
Thomas Burd
John Wiswall

the vote was whether they were all willing that Dorcas was to be redeemed, and that Ensign Foster and the two deacons should go to Boston to inquire, first, what the magistrate could do by power, and after to go and compound with Lieutenant Cooke or any other for her redemption, and to engage an ox and a cow in Mr. Howard's hands for part of payment. And in case themselves engage for the rest, the brethren above named do promise to lay down for the present among them the sum until it can be had again from the whole church, by contribution or otherwise. The vote was affirmative and the promise full: her redemption was to be free.

Sources:

1. *New England[']s First Fruits* (London: Printed by R. O. and G. D. for Henry Overton, 1643), rpt. as *Sabin's Reprints, Quarto Series*, no. 7 (New York: Joseph Sabin, 1865), 10-11, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044042747444>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

2. *Records of the First Church at Dorchester in New England, 1636-1734* (Boston: George H. Ellis, 1891), 7, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t0ht2t00d>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. An additional sentence break and paragraph break inserted for readability. Spelling, grammar, capitalization, punctuation, typography (italics), and date format modernized. Abbreviations spelled out.

The capitalizing of *Blackamoor* reproduces the usage of the source publication. However, the source capitalizes a number of other terms, mostly religious, that have been converted here to lowercase for the sake of modernization and readability, including *grace*, *church*, *saints*, *elders*, *mysteries*, *conversion*, *conversation*, and *kindred*.

These edited excerpts are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publications listed above.

See also: Deborah Colleen McNally, "To Secure Her Freedom: 'Dorcas ye Blackmore,' Race, Redemption, and the Dorchester First Church," *New England Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (December 2016): 533-555.



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