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4. Understanding Free Blacks' Clothing: A Photo & Print Study

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Using Civil War era photographs and prints, this lecture examines the clothing worn by self-emancipated slaves, revealing the variety of garments they wore in bondage. Also discussed are the efforts of the federal government, the Freedmen's Bureau and other charitable societies to provide clothing for them once they had achieved freedom.

Slaves often took advantage of sudden opportunities presented during the chaos of war to seek freedom. Thus, they often escaped in whatever clothes they were wearing at the time. In order to understand the garments that are seen in photographs and prints of self-emancipated slaves, it is important first to understand the clothing they wore while enslaved, including the fabrics that made up those clothes. Enslaved people generally wore various coarse, plain, and inexpensive fabrics that were categorized as "slave" cloth (also called "Negro" cloth or "plantation" cloth), including osnaburg, linsey-woolsey, lowells, jean, plains, kersey, and shirting. Cotton calico and cotton or wool plaids were also commonly worn. Field hands, especially, suffered the discomfort of these coarse cloths made up into simple garments without fit or fashion.

House slaves tended to fare better, being provided with higher quality clothes in more fashionable styles. Livery suits worn by men are documented both in antebellum prints, and in two mid-19th-century suit coats made by Brooks Brothers and worn by a New Orleans house slave (collection of Historic New Orleans). Such fashionably cut suit coats appear in both print and photographic images of self-emancipated slaves. Women house slaves often dressed in simple work dresses of calico or plaid, with aprons and neckerchiefs. Colorful head wraps made from printed, plain, or plaid kerchiefs allowed for individual expression and connection to their African heritage.

Several photographs from the Historic Northampton (Massachusetts) collection are the special focus of this lecture. Two men from the Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts—Marshall Stearns of Northfield, and Henry Gere of Northampton—served in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, during the Civil War. Their photographs and letters have been preserved, providing information about the contraband camp run by Stearns with the assistance of self-emancipated slave, Maria Cline. Gere and Stearns are responsible for the distribution of the famous photograph, "The Scourged Back" that helped turn the tide of public opinion in the North in support of the war and emancipation for the slaves.[1]

Gere's and Stearn's reports are consistent in their description of self-emancipated slaves showing up hungry, half-naked (or even completely so), and sick in their camp. Photographs show men wearing layers of pants and coats so ragged that only through the layering is a complete cover accomplished. The federal government supplied food, clothing, and paid employment for thousands of these self-emancipated slaves. Maria Cline worked to teach the

female contrabands how to sew clothes for all of these people, using fabric and thread supplied by the government.

By 1862, Freedmen's Societies began to be established to provide charitable support for ex-slaves. The donated clothing shipped to the Freedmen Bureau's sites was sometimes very worn and dirty, dismaying the white northern volunteers who had come to help. Fresh fabric and thread for the making of new garments was highly valued.

Ridding themselves of the coarse, ugly work garments that were the "badge of slavery" and being able to dress nicely in fresh, fashionable, comfortable clothes was extremely important to former slaves.[2] But those who wished not to provoke scorn from white people had to be moderate in their clothing choices, as racist ridicule was commonly showered on African-Americans for dressing in up-to-date styles. Freedom called for careful navigation in the arena of fashion—to look as "pretty as possible," but also to be very modest, eschewing the latest fashions.[3]

The inspiration for this lecture came from my consultation with an exhibition project, "Chaotic Freedom," at Historic Northampton. I am indebted to guest curator, Prof. Bruce Laurie of UMass-Amherst, and Marie Panik, Elizabeth Sharpe, and Stan Sherer of Historic Northampton for their generous assistance.

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[1] Bruce Laurie, "'Chaotic Freedom' in Civil War Louisiana: The Origins of an Iconic Image," *Massachusetts Review*, November 2016, vol. 2, no. 1.

[2] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), 20.

[3] Clinton Bowen Fisk, *Plain Counsels for Freedmen in Sixteen Brief Lectures* (Boston: American Tract Society, 1866), 21.