

**Calvin T. Swan, African American Carpenter
in Rural Massachusetts**

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At Center Cemetery in the small Franklin County town of Northfield, Massachusetts, the nine foot monument of the Calvin T. Swan family rises above nearby graves. The monument's inscriptions tell a typical nineteenth century tale of the untimely death of loved ones but give no hint of the Swans' lives as freeborn African Americans in the state's least populated county. Many period studies of the African American experience have dealt primarily with urban settings; this paper focuses on the lives of one man and his family in the antebellum countryside.¹

There were ninety-eight people of color in Franklin County in 1850. For much of the 1800s, however, the Swans were the only family of African descent in Northfield and in their mountaintop neighborhood.² Calvin Swan was a leader in this community at a time when African Americans generally did not receive the acceptance and respect he was accorded. His career was remarkable for what he achieved as a craftsman and

¹ For Franklin as the state's "most sparsely settled county" in 1841, see J. Ritchie Garrison, *Landscape and Material Life in Franklin County, Massachusetts, 1770-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), p.1; among works on urban African Americans are James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, rev. ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1999); Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850 – Massachusetts, Franklin County*, reels 316 and 317; 1800-1870 censuses listed single African Americans in white Northfield households in 1800, 1810, 1840, 1860, and 1870. One or two families besides the Swans were in town ca. 1820-1830.

landowner, and the business ventures he dared to try. The attitudes of his community also played a significant role in what he and his family could accomplish.

Calvin Swan's abandoned neighborhood is barely mentioned in town histories and he left no diary. His story is revealed in primary sources: the account books of the Northfield builder who trained him in carpentry, wills, deeds, obituaries, records of organizations, day books of a neighbor, and Northfield's extensive town resources such as school and tax records.

Identified in census records as both black and mulatto, Calvin Swan was born in Northfield on 27 January 1799, probably into a family named Boston. What became of his father is unknown, but on Calvin's sixth birthday in 1805, his mother Polly A. Boston, a "free colored" person residing in Northfield, married a "transient person" named Samuel Swan. Calvin did not formally adopt the surname of Swan until after he married in 1824; until then he was known as Calvin Boston. His older brother Jacob never abandoned his birth name as Calvin did. Samuel Swan died by 1810, the year his widow paid \$20 for their one acre homestead.³

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census, 1850 – Massachusetts*, microfilm reel 317, p. 640 lists Calvin Swan as mulatto; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census, 1860 – Massachusetts*, reel 501, p. 146 lists Swan as black; for Calvin's birth see Northfield, Massachusetts, Town Clerk's Office [hereafter NTCO], Records of Births, Marriages and Deaths [hereafter RBMD], Deaths, Calvin Swan, 25 March 1875, bk. B-2, p. 23. Also see Swan Family Bible, property of Potsdam Public Museum, Potsdam, New York; NTCO, RBMD, Marriages, Polly A. Boston and Samuel Swan, 27 January 1805, bk. B, p. 231. Records of Calvin Swan's death and second marriage (see footnote 28) list Samuel Swan as his sole parent. However, the Town Clerk commonly gave only a father's name, probably even if he was a stepfather. That Calvin was known by the surname "Boston" into his twenties makes it more likely Polly Boston Swan was his mother and Samuel Swan his stepfather. See footnotes 5 and 11 for evidence Calvin used both surnames; for Polly Swan's race and the age and sex of her children see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourth Census, 1820 – Massachusetts*, microfilm reel 50, p. 76; Jacob Boston is identified as Polly Boston Swan's son in Franklin County Probate Court, Greenfield, Massachusetts, Inventory, Jacob Boston, Probate Records case no. 469; Calvin's sister was probably Hannah. See NTCO, RBMD, Marriages, Hannah Swan and Exeter Woodard, 9 March 1822, bk. B, p. 232; Franklin County Register of Deeds [hereafter FCRD], Greenfield, Massachusetts, Deed, Elisha Hunt to Polly Swan, 1 June 1810, bk. 29, p. 361.

Northfield was first settled in 1673, and like other early Connecticut River towns, its broad main street runs straight for several miles down the valley.⁴ Northfield master carpenter Calvin Stearns designed and built many of the fine nineteenth century homes lining Main Street. In his 1816 accounts, Stearns recorded a contract with the seventeen year old “widow Swan’s boy Calvin” to work for him until the age of twenty-one.

Becoming a skilled artisan was one of the best roads open to a young African American for economic advancement. It was an opportunity denied to many urban people of color. Town papers contain no record that Calvin was bound out to Stearns, but there might have been a private indenture arranged by his mother, or a straight labor contract, or even an apprenticeship, less common for an African American. Whatever the nature of their agreement, Calvin received thorough training, culminating in his turning columns for the bases of three light stands he was crafting when the contract ended in early 1820.⁵

⁴ Josiah G. Holland, *History of Western Massachusetts* (Springfield, Mass.: Samuel Bowles & Co., 1855), vol. II, pp. 405-406; Joseph S. Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 60, 119.

⁵ Garrison, J. Ritchie. (1991). Carpentry in Northfield, Massachusetts: The Domestic Architecture of Calvin Stearns and Sons, 1799-1856. In T. Carter and B. Herman (Ed.). *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, IV*. Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, pp. 9-22; for Stearns’ contract with “the widow Swan’s boy” see Calvin Stearns, Account Book, p. 79. The Calvin Stearns account book and day books (1799-1860) belong to the Northfield Historical Society, Northfield, Massachusetts. Microfilm copies are in the Dickinson Memorial Library, Northfield, Massachusetts; for the chances of advancement offered by artisanship and lack of such positions for African Americans in northern cities see Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America*, pp. 19-21, 25, 258-266. Also see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 48n; for rarer apprenticeships among African Americans see W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice from Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp.181-182; for Calvin crafting light stands see Calvin Stearns, Day Book (1813-1854), ca. February 1820. Because Stearns made account and day book entries for both “Calvin Swan” and “Calvin Boston,” (almost exclusively the latter through 1822), modern readers might assume they were two different men. Clearly they were the same person in a contract relationship with Stearns, who charged “Calvin Boston,” or “the Widow & C. Boston,” twenty times between September 1816 and the end of March 1820 for the clothing or yard goods specified in their contract. When they “reckoned” their account at the end of the contract these charges would have been subtracted from Calvin’s pay, as in the record of Ella Lyman in Stearns, Account Book, p. 110.

Later that year an extraordinary event occurred in the lives of Calvin's family. Subsequently the event would be recorded in a pamphlet titled *Remarkable Visionary Dreams of a Mulatto Boy, in Northfield, Mass., By the Name of Frederic W. Swan, Aged Thirteen Years, Together With a Sketch of His Life, Sickness, Conversion, and Triumphant Death: Taken from the mouth of his mother, his father being dead.*⁶ That Frederic was the half brother of Calvin Swan has been forgotten, but many congruent details confirm my thesis that the pamphlet is about their family. Born about 1807, Frederic was clearly the son of Polly and her deceased husband Samuel, the only local Swans of color in 1820. In the three months before his death Frederic had a series of dreams, copied down by his mother and others when he awoke. The visions were full of devils, "black pitchy smoke," and angels in dazzling white showing great concern about his older brothers, identified as Calvin and Jacob. A huge angel warned Calvin to "read more, and try to be more faithful, and do his duty at every opportunity" if he wanted to be saved. The spiritual authority of this directive probably had a significant impact on Calvin's life. He would later name his own son Frederic W. Swan.⁷

⁶ [Frederic W. Swan], *Remarkable Visionary Dreams of a Mulatto Boy, in Northfield, Mass., By the Name of Frederic W. Swan, Aged Thirteen Years, Together With a Sketch of His Life, Sickness, Conversion, and Triumphant Death*, [ed. Polly A. Swan and Joseph Meriam] (Chesterfield, N.H.: Joseph Meriam, 1822). I am indebted to John Saillant, who brought this work to modern attention although he did not associate it with the family of Calvin T. Swan. It is in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

⁷ Calvin Stearns, *Day Book (1813-1854)*, August 1820. The year of Frederic Swan's birth was determined to be 1807 because he probably died in August 1820, when Calvin Stearns's day book shows a charge of \$3.00 to "C. Boston... [for] a coffin for Brother." According to *Remarkable Visionary Dreams*, Frederic was thirteen when he died; for dreams copied down by his mother and others see Swan, *Remarkable Visionary Dreams*, p. 4; for identification of Frederic's brothers as Calvin and Jacob see *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 16; for angel's warning to Calvin see *Ibid.*, p. 14. When not using their names, Frederic designated Calvin as "my brother" and Jacob as "my elder brother."

In 1821, now a journeyman carpenter, Swan earned the money to buy his first piece of land, on the east side of Crag Mountain. He paid eight dollars for two acres adjoining a farm his brother Jacob owned in this mountainous southeastern corner of Northfield. By the late 1700s the town's fertile bottomland was priced beyond the reach of most young men. Only steep, stony fields at higher elevations were affordable to those of modest means. Sparsely settled mountains throughout Franklin County were likewise attracting new landowners following the Revolutionary War.⁸

Calvin's land was just north of the schoolhouse in District Number Six, the oldest of three school districts east of Crag Mountain. Each school district, or neighborhood, included those eight to eighteen families most closely connected. Calvin Swan lived out his life in the Number Six School neighborhood, at the center of this rather isolated mountain community. The extent to which his family was integrated among the otherwise white residents east of Crag Mountain was remarkable.⁹

On 12 February 1824, well launched in his career, Calvin Swan married Rhoda Brown from the small northeast Connecticut town of Ashford. The same month, he joined the Methodist Episcopal church formed on the mountain in 1810. 1820s records show approximately half of those in the three neighborhoods east of Crag Mountain were

⁸ For Calvin (Boston) working for Stearns after their contract ended see Calvin Stearns, *Day Book* (1813-1854), 18 May – 30 June 1821; FCRD, Deed, Sardis Brigham to Calvin T. Swan, 31 December 1821, bk. 51, p. 10; J. Ritchie Garrison, *Landscape and Material Life in Franklin County*, pp. 11-15, 30-32, 96-97.

⁹ For locations of the Swan farm and Schools Six, Ten and Eleven see F. W. Beers, *Atlas of Franklin County, Massachusetts* (New York: F. W. Beers and Company, 1871), map of Northfield; for No. Six as oldest of the three districts see J. H. Temple and George Sheldon, *History of the Town of Northfield, Massachusetts* (Albany: Joel Munsell, 1875), pp. 355-356; for school districts following "neighborhood social boundaries" see Hubka, Thomas C. (1988). *Farm Family Mutuality: the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Maine Farm Neighborhood*. In P. Benes (Ed.) *The Farm*. Boston: Boston University, pp. 15-16.

Methodists. The marriages occurring between the neighborhoods must have strengthened the community through bonds of blood and belief.¹⁰

In 1824 Calvin formally adopted the surname of Swan and in November purchased his brother Jacob's forty acre farm for \$400. Jacob's health may already have been failing; he died less than two years later. Swan took out a \$450 mortgage on the farm in 1825, but he had repaid it in three years while also buying several parcels of land from neighbors.¹¹

As both a carpenter and farmer, Swan's financial status was stronger than some of his neighbors. Construction was booming and his taxable income rose to \$100 in 1828, when that of his mentor Calvin Stearns was only fifty dollars more.¹² His earnings enabled him to buy more land for a dollar or two an acre, perhaps planning to market its standing timber. The average real estate holding east of Crag Mountain was seventy

¹⁰ Ashford, Connecticut, Town Clerk's Office, Vital Records, 1710-1851, Marriage, Rhoda Brown and Calvin Swan, 12 February 1824, vol. 6, p. 12; NTCO, RBMD, Calvin Swan recorded as a Methodist, 28 February 1824, bk. B, p. 241; for local Methodist church formed see Temple and Sheldon, *History of the Town of Northfield*, p. 355; for names of those recorded as Northfield Methodists see NTCO, RBMD, 14 January 1812 – 9 June 1827, bk. B, pp. 238-242; for heads of households listed by school district see NTCO, Item 1.8, School Tax Money Accounts, 1816-1843; Herbert C. Parsons, *A Puritan Outpost* (New York, MacMillan Company, 1937), p. 252. Parsons wrote that Northfield Methodism "established itself on the 'mountain,' as the easterly part of town was designated... It gathered into its fold hardly more than its hilltop neighborhood." A few Methodists lived further away in School District No. Five, in the hills west of Crag Mountain; for examples of marriages between the three neighborhoods east of Crag Mountain see NTCO, RBMD, Marriages, Chapin Holden and Harriet Dike, 30 November 1815, bk. B, p. 229; Hezekiah B. Collier and Rhoda Robbins, 21 May 1818, bk. B, p. 230; Reuel Collier and Hannah Chapin, 20 April 1825, bk. B, p. 234; also Marriage Intentions, Asa Robbins and Esther Stratton, 8 September 1831, bk. B, p. 257.

¹¹ NTCO, Item 1.8, School Tax Money Accounts, 1816-1843. In 1824 Jacob Boston's name appears first on the list of men supporting the No. Six school district, followed by "Calvin T. Boston." In 1825 and subsequently, Calvin Boston is no longer listed but Calvin Swan is; the change in surname can also be seen in NTCO, Item 2.13, Tax Valuation Lists, 1822-1824; FCRD, Deed, Jacob Boston to Calvin T. Swan, 29 November 1824, bk. 57, p. 380; Franklin County Probate Court, Inventory, Jacob Boston, 14 March 1826, Probate Records case 469; FCRD, Deed, Calvin T. Swan to Isaac Prior [mortgage], 1 October 1825, bk. 60, p. 91; *Ibid.*, Isaac Prior to Calvin T. Swan [discharge of mortgage], 6 September 1828, bk. 68, p. 222; *Ibid.*, James Reed to Calvin Swan, 7 May 1827, bk. 68, p. 53; *Ibid.*, Nathaniel Stratton to Calvin Swan, 9 August 1828, bk. 68, p. 221.

¹² Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*, pp. 57-58, 60; NTCO, Tax Valuation Lists, 1828.

acres in 1834; Swan owned 185 acres. Only five other neighbors held 100 acres or more. Swan was forced to take out a mortgage on most of his property in January 1834, likely due to the erratic demand for carpentry and its seasonal nature.¹³ From July to December of 1834, however, he and his mountain neighbor Samuel Dike undertook an impressive construction project fifteen miles south of Northfield: the “Unitarian and Episcopal Meeting House” on the Montague village green. Swan and Dike shared \$830.67 for building the elegant Greek Revival church with its pointed Gothic windows, as Swan’s aspirations continued to unfold.¹⁴

The Swans were valued members of their close-knit Northfield neighborhood. The 1860s day books of Watson Coller, a young Methodist living near the Swans, described a small upland society maintaining the ancient ethic of “farm family mutuality” that was also common elsewhere in New England. Mutual aid originating in the intense seasonal labor needs of agriculture had grown to include all kinds of “neighborly cooperation” from barn raising, to running the district schools, to watching through the night with a sick neighbor. Neighbors kept records of work exchanged, so they put in

¹³ FCRD, Deed, Erastus Graves to Calvin Swan, 20 February 1829, bk. 70, p. 154; *Ibid.*, Warren Stratton to Calvin Swan, 10 November 1831, bk. 80, p. 168; *Ibid.*, Andrew Beard to Calvin Swan, 31 December 1833, bk. 87, p. 205; for acres held by Swan and his neighbors in 1834 see NTCO, Tax Valuation Lists and School Tax Money Accounts (residents by school district); FCRD, Deed, Calvin T. Swan to The Massachusetts Hospital Life Insurance Company [mortgage], 21 January 1834, bk. 72, p. 288; for carpentry work as erratic and seasonal see Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Unitarian and Episcopal Societies, Montague, Massachusetts, Minutes (1834-1844), Accounts, Dike & Swan, 8 July – 22 December 1834, p. 31. The minutes are held by the First Congregational Church, Montague, Massachusetts. The church Swan and Dike built is now the Montague Grange hall; Stearns, Account Book, p. 166 and Stearns, Day Book (1813-1854), 9, 16 and 23 August 1834, 8 and 15 September 1834. Calvin Stearns’s 15 September 1834 account book entry charges “Mr. Samuel Dike and C.T. Swan” \$32.50 for “work done on the Meetinghouse... thirty two ½ [sic] days of myself.” Clearly, Calvin Stearns must have worked for Swan and Dike on the Montague meeting house in 1834.

equal time. Calvin Swan's status as a respected member of this mountain community is clear from his neighbor's reference to him as "Mr. Swan."¹⁵

Rhoda Swan bore six children between 1825 and 1834, but two named for their father died young.¹⁶ At a time when African American children in Boston did not receive equal access to public education, the Swan children attended the one-room District Number Six School, one child by 1830 and four by 1836.¹⁷ Moreover, Calvin Swan was chosen at various times as clerk of the district to keep its minutes, showing he was considered well educated. The male inhabitants of school districts met regularly to allocate district funds and hire teachers. They also elected members to the town Prudential School Committee, on which Swan served in at least 1831 and 1840.¹⁸ Swan and his neighbors placed a high value on education, as observed in this 1845 report on the Number Six School by the town Superintending Committee:

Considering its advantages, not so great as in many districts, this school may be said to be the first in town. There is more interest manifested by parents and children, by regularity in attendance and by visiting the school than in any other district.¹⁹

¹⁵ Watson G. Coller, Day Books, in private collection of his great-granddaughter; see the home of Watson's family, the Ansel Collers, south of Calvin Swan's farm on the F. W. Beers 1871 map; Hubka, Farm Family Mutuality, pp. 13-23.

¹⁶ Inscriptions on the Swan family monument, Center Cemetery, Northfield, Massachusetts give information on Rhoda and Calvin Swans' children Calvin Harrison, Rhoda Cornelia, Frederic William, and Calvin Truman; for their children George Brown and Hannah Adeline see Franklin County Probate Court, Will, Calvin T. Swan, Probate Records case 7536. Also see Swan Family Bible, Potsdam Public Museum, Potsdam, New York.

¹⁷ Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: the Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 113-152; Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, pp. 73, 77-81; for the number of scholars in each family after 1830, see NTCO, School Tax Money Accounts.

¹⁸ NTCO, Item 8.4, Certificates of School District Meeting Votes, 1803-1862. Calvin Swan signs as Clerk in District No. Six minutes, 26 March 1831, 21 March 1832, 25 February 1835, and 28 February 1836; *Ibid.*, Swan elected to the town Prudential Committee, 26 March 1831; for Swan as a member of the Prudential Committee in 1840 see NTCO, Item 8.3, School Committee Meeting Records, 1837-1841. He may have been a member at other times: records are incomplete.

¹⁹ NTCO, Item 8.1, School Committee Annual Reports, March 1845.

That Swan was so active in the cooperative unit of his neighborhood school shows he was probably participating in a web of mutual support in other spheres of life among the same ten or so families. Help from neighbors probably was particularly important to people on the mountain, whose financial status was less secure than those from wealthier backgrounds or owning farms in less marginal areas. The average land valuation in the three mountain neighborhoods in 1828 was only 44 percent of that in the rest of town.²⁰

It seems likely the acceptance of the Swans in the strongly Methodist area east of Crag Mountain was due especially to the egalitarian principles of Methodism. With other evangelicals, Methodists in the northeast became passionately involved in nineteenth century reform movements like abolition, and welcomed thousands of church members of African descent. In places like Philadelphia and Boston, however, African American Methodists faced discrimination from their white brethren, such as segregated church seating, that was in stark contrast to Calvin Swan's experience.²¹

In Northfield the number of Methodists grew until they could no longer meet in private homes; in 1830, five trustees acting for the group bought land just south of the Swan farm "for the purpose of erecting a house of worship." Calvin Swan was one of the

²⁰ NTCO, Tax Valuation Lists, 1828.

²¹ John R. McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 19-25; James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 133, 136-138, 142, 144; Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 9-14.

church trustees named on the deed, a compelling indication of his position of respect in the community.²²

The attitudes of local Methodists are further illustrated in late 1830 minutes of their circuit. They belonged to a group of area churches that was one of many circuits comprising the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Increasing numbers of local churches were seceding from Methodist conferences because national leaders of the denomination turned a blind eye to its slaveholding members to keep the church together. Northfield's circuit minutes recorded impassioned resolutions against slavery: "the Sum of all villinies [sic], an outrage on humanity & a violation of the law of God." The Northfield town history states that Swan's congregation "seceded from the Conference" in 1844; given the anti-slavery ferment in their circuit and the membership of the Swans, it is likely their strong abolitionist sentiment was the cause for secession. As shown by their neighbor's diary, they continued to function as Methodists.²³

It is clear what Swan's own attitudes were on slavery. The 1838 Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society Report lists Calvin Swan as secretary of the mountain chapter of that organization. It had forty-nine members in 1838, nine more than a second chapter for all the rest of Northfield. Swan was also a charter member of the Franklin County Anti-Slavery Society, present at its first meeting in Greenfield on 8 December 1836. At

²² FCRD, Harvey Stratton to Calvin T. Swan *et al.*, 31 May 1830, bk. 80, p. 174; for location of the Methodist meeting house in Northfield's southeastern hills see Arthur W. Hoyt, A Plan of the Town of Northfield in the County of Franklin, 1830, in the Massachusetts Archives. Schools Six and Ten also show.

²³ "A Periodical Book for Northfield Circuit (Methodist Episcopal Church)," Minutes (1836-66), 11 July 1839. The book of minutes is in the collection of the Boston University Theological School; McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion*, pp. 29-35, 74-87; Temple and Sheldon, *History of the Town of Northfield*, p. 355; Watson G. Collier, Day Books, 25 September 1864, 12 July 1868.

that time the group produced a constitution; Swan's name appears among "subscribers," or signers, of the document, as the only signer from the Northfield mountain.²⁴

During his middle years Swan entered a new economic world, beyond that of a country carpenter. In 1835 he bought half an acre near Greenfield's bustling Main Street and erected buildings on it. Most probably, because of its distance from his farm, it was an investment rental property. Swan's venture was ill-timed. In 1837 the country was engulfed in a financial panic lasting into the 1840s, and depressing the building trades. Despite his own troubles, Swan loaned fifty-eight dollars to his Northfield neighbor Wright Wotton in March of 1841. Soon afterward he had to sell the mortgaged Greenfield property, but remained willing to take risks to achieve success.²⁵ In three years he owned a small sawmill on Millers Brook, downhill from his farm. Meanwhile he continued to buy and sell land during the 1840s. He kept the mill running for almost a decade but sold it and another mortgaged holding in 1853.²⁶

Besides the depressed economy and general decline of small local mills, family afflictions may have contributed to Swan's lack of ongoing success in expanding his

²⁴ *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), p. xli; Franklin County Anti-Slavery Society, Greenfield, Massachusetts, Minutes (1836-1842), 8 December 1836. The book of minutes is in the collection of the Greenfield Historical Society.

²⁵ FCRD, Deed, Ambrose Ames to Calvin Swan, 13 October 1835, bk. 92, p. 210; for the financial panic of 1837, see Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*, p. 60; see Calvin Swan's loan to Wright Wotton in NTCO, Item 4.7, Personal Property Mortgages, 3 March 1841, bk. B, p. 41; FCRD, Deed, Calvin Swan to Ambrose Ames [mortgage], 7 March 1838, bk. 100, p. 382; *Ibid.*, Calvin Swan to Levi Jones, 31 March 1841, bk. 113, p. 267.

²⁶ Swan first taxed on the sawmill in NTCO, Tax Valuation Lists, 1844; for sawmill purchase see FCRD, Deed, Phineas Field to Calvin Swan, 11 August 1845, bk. 95, p. 17; *Ibid.*, James Reed to Calvin Swan, 14 February 1842, bk. 117, p. 119; *Ibid.*, Calvin Swan to Shepherd Holden, 20 April 1845, bk. 127, p. 78; *Ibid.*, Elisha Nash to Calvin Swan, 4 May 1845, bk. 136, p. 52; *Ibid.*, Calvin Swan to Phineas Battles and Ephraim Murdock, 26 June 1848, bk. 143, p. 281; *Ibid.*, Charles Devens, Jr. to Calvin Swan, 26 August 1848, bk. 152, p. 200; *Ibid.*, Calvin Swan to Hiram Akeley, 7 April 1853, bk. 176, p. 419.

business beyond carpentry and his farm. In 1849, his son Frederic, a twenty-one-year-old jeweler named for Swan's brother of the visionary dreams, died during a dysentery outbreak. Swan's wife Rhoda died of consumption in March 1853, a month before he gave up the mill. Paying for her medical care may have strained his resources, perhaps further depleted if he bought the family cemetery monument at this time.²⁷

Later in the year Rhoda died, Calvin Swan married Sarah Knight, a white woman from coastal Salem, Massachusetts. This union would have been illegal just over a decade earlier. The Massachusetts law against interracial marriage was repealed in 1843; by the 1850 census, 3 percent of Boston's black and mulatto men had white wives.²⁸

In 1854, Swan's daughter Cornelia died of consumption at twenty-eight.²⁹ Of his six children, only two survived: George and Ada. As was the case for their rural contemporaries with limited local opportunities, the lure of urban life or moving west proved irresistible. Ada and George left the farm in the 1850s, but like their father built lives atypical for African Americans of their generation. George became a well regarded sash and door manufacturer and property owner in the northern New York town of Potsdam. At one time he employed seventy-five to 100 workers and made "heavy

²⁷ Crawford Lincoln, *Preserving a Priceless Heritage at Old Sturbridge Village* (New York: The Newcomen Society of the United States, 1984), p.22; NTCO, RBMD, Deaths, Frederic W. Swan, 8 November 1849, bk. A (1843-1854), p. 51; *Ibid.*, Deaths, Rhoda Swan, 6 March 1853, bk. A, p. 56.

²⁸ NTCO, RBMD, Marriage Intentions, Calvin T. Swan and Sarah Knight, 28 November 1853, bk. C (after April 1842), p. 49. According to the Swan Family Bible, they were married 6 December 1853. Sarah was then age forty-two and they had no children together; Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, pp. 22, 76.

²⁹ NTCO, RBMD, Deaths, [Rhoda] Cornelia Swan, 21 December 1854, bk. A, p. 44.

shipments to foreign countries.”³⁰ Ada Swan lived in Boston until her death thirty-five years later. According to her obituary in the *Boston Evening Transcript* she was an “artist of rare natural gifts.” One of the earliest students at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, she opened a commercial art studio with another woman.³¹

It is puzzling to learn that Calvin Swan joined the Evangelical Congregational Church in the next town of Erving in 1867. He was an active member of that church which, in 1874, chose “Brother Calvin Swan” to represent them at a Warwick installation and the two day Franklin County Conference. Among reasons why he abandoned his Methodist roots may have been the changes occurring east of Crag Mountain. Dwindling numbers of children in the three schools, and the eventual closing of two, shows there were fewer young families on the mountain as George and Ada Swan’s contemporaries also moved away. As in other non-industrialized upland areas in Franklin County and elsewhere in northern New England, there were few opportunities to attract new citizens. While strong ties kept Swan and his aging peers on the mountain, many early Methodists had died by 1867. Community change must already have been at work, culminating in the 1937 Northfield history’s assertion that “population has all but deserted the eastern

³⁰ Obituary of George B. Swan, *Courier-Freeman*, Potsdam, New York, 16 April 1884, [p. 3]. George’s son Frederic T. Swan, Calvin Swan’s only grandchild to reach adulthood, earned a Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. Owner and editor of a Potsdam newspaper and trustee of the Methodist church, Frederic died without issue. See “Man of the Week,” *Potsdam Herald Recorder*, Potsdam, New York, 4 May 1949, p. 5. Articles are in the Potsdam Public Museum, which has additional information on the George Swan family.

³¹ Obituary of H. Adeline Swan, *Boston Evening Transcript*, Boston, Massachusetts, 12 May 1890, p. 5, col. 2; at the Boston Public Library, see H. Winthrop Pierce, *Early Days of The Copley Society, Formerly the Boston Art Students’ Association, 1879-1891* (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill Press, 1903), pp. 12-14; also in the Boston Public Library, see *Constitution and By-Laws of the Boston Art Students’ Association, 1884* (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Sons, 1884), Article IV: “Any person shall be eligible for membership who is, or has been, a student in the School of Drawing and Painting at the Museum of Fine Arts.” Miss H.A. Swan was among 151 members in 1884; for the studio of Miss H.A. Swan and Ophelia J. Critcherson see *The Boston Directory, No. LXVII, 1871-1872* (Boston: Sampson, Davenport & Co., 1872), p. 667.

hills of town.” Possessing the wider world view suggested by his Greenfield activities, Swan may have sought a more vital church in growing, industrialized Erving.³²

For the rest of his life, Calvin Swan continued to work as a carpenter and farm his remaining 100 Northfield acres. The federal census valued his real estate at \$1200 in 1860 and \$2500 in 1870. His 1860 valuation was above average for those in his neighborhood and higher than any of the other eleven African American landholders in Franklin County. There were sixty-six people of color enumerated in the county that year. Their lower skilled occupations underscore the significance of Swan’s accomplishment. Seven were female domestics living in white households. The rest worked as: farm laborer and laborer (6), farmer (3), barber (3), basket maker (2), blacksmith (1), carpenter (1, Swan), servant (1), and washerwoman (1). More people of color than may be realized lived in rural areas in the 1800s; they deserve further study. Small town records can facilitate such research, since they may be more complete than in cities, where African Americans of modest means were often invisible.³³

³² Evangelical Congregational Church, Erving, Massachusetts, Minutes, 17 October 1867, 12 April 1873 [Swan listed second among pew holders], 12 and 14 June 1874. The minutes are held by the Erving Historical Society; Garrison, *Landscape and Material Life in Franklin County*, pp. 98-99, 111-112; Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *Annual Report of the Town of Northfield for the Year Ending Feb. 24th, 1883* (Turners Falls, Mass.: Turners Falls Reporter Steam Printing House, 1883), p. 21. With only eight or nine scholars remaining in each of the three school districts east of Crag Mountain, and after a number of years when some of the schools were combined, the School Committee recommended closing all but the No. Six School, which all children east of Crag would attend; for examples of deaths of early Methodists, leading up to 1867, see NTCO, RBMD, Deaths, Jonathan Robbins, 18 February 1853, bk. B, p. 156; Leonard Collier, 15 July 1860, bk. B-2, p. 8; Daniel Chapin, 1 August 1863, bk. B-2, p. 11; John Holden, 12 July 1865, bk. B-2, p. 13; Daniel Collier, 8 October 1866, bk. B-2, p. 14; Parsons, *A Puritan Outpost*, p. 482.

³³ For the 100 acres owned by Swan, 1853-1875, and an 1861 list of School District No. Six residents and tax valuations (average valuation \$9.06; Swan’s valuation \$10.92), see NTCO, Tax Valuation Lists; for 1860 and 1870 occupations and real estate valuations of Swan, other Franklin County people of color, and residents of School District No. Six, Northfield, Massachusetts see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census, 1860 – Massachusetts, Franklin County*, microfilm reel 501 and *Ibid.*, *Ninth Census, 1870 – Massachusetts, Franklin County*, reel 615.

At seventy Swan wrote out his will, dividing his real estate between his wife and two surviving children. He left each child a cow and one third of his library, apparently his most cherished possession. Near the end of his life he gave money toward publication of the 1875 Northfield history, showing his regard for books and his town. Swan died of a stroke at the age of seventy-six, on 25 March 1875. His obituary in *The Greenfield Courier*, excerpted below, was longer than usual in those days and makes clear he followed the angelic admonition to be “faithful and do his duty at every opportunity.”

... He was an industrious and useful citizen. He had great energy of character and great firmness of Christian principles and fidelity and boldness in advocating what he considered to be gospel truth in its application to personal duty. His faith sustained him in the trials of life. ...His loss is keenly felt by a beloved wife and two dear children and a bereaved church and community.³⁴

Calvin T. Swan was an exemplary individual whose strength of character and education made him a respected community leader. At a time when doors were closed to African Americans, he became a church trustee, significant landowner, elected officer of the school and anti-slavery group, and trusted neighbor. He was fortunate to be trained by a master carpenter and have his career well underway before the depression of the 1830s, advantages that might not have been available in the city. The Swans' lives would have been quite different had they lived in Boston. The nature of their rural community was a determining factor in their acceptance and what they could achieve.

³⁴ Franklin County Probate Court, Will, Calvin T. Swan, Probate Records case no. 7536; see list of subscribers in Temple and Sheldon, *History of Northfield*, p. 635; NTCO, RBMD, Deaths, Calvin T. Swan, 25 March 1875, bk. B-2, p. 23; Swan, *Remarkable Visionary Dreams*, p. 14; Obituary of Calvin T. Swan, *The Greenfield Courier*, Greenfield, Massachusetts, 29 March 1875, p. 3.

(Photo Captions):

Figure 1. In 1834, Calvin Swan and Samuel Dike built the Unitarian and Episcopal Meeting House on the common in Montague, Massachusetts. It is now the Montague Grange hall. Courtesy, First Congregational Church, Montague.

Figure 2. Swan family monument, Center Cemetery, Northfield, Massachusetts. Photograph by the author.

(Notes on Contributors):

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