



PROJECT MUSE®

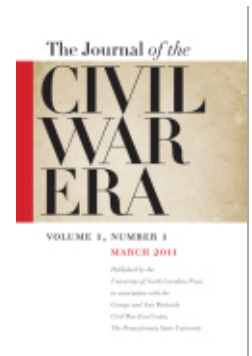
*Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord,  
Massachusetts (review)*

Joanne Pope Melish

The Journal of the Civil War Era, Volume 1, Number 1, March 2011, pp.  
98-100 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwe.2011.0007>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/417315>

to each other, rude and refined masculinities were (and indeed still are) at the core of mainstream American culture, attitudes and behaviors that white American men use to cultivate and maintain power.

BRIAN P. LUSKEY

BRIAN P. LUSKEY is assistant professor of history at West Virginia University. He is the author of *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (2010).

---

***Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts.*** By Elise Lemire. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. Pp. 248. Cloth, \$29.95.)

Near the beginning of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau expresses wonder that so much attention is being paid to the “somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery” when “there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south.” A northern overseer is worse than a southern one, although worst of all is “when you are the slave-driver of yourself,” he observes. “Self emancipation even in the West Indian provinces of the fancy and imagination,—what Wilberforce is there to bring that about?” By “foreign,” Thoreau meant alien to white people, not foreign to New England; he knew very well that “Negro Slavery” was once a common practice in his beloved Concord, and he tells the stories of Cato Ingraham, Zilpha (Zilpah White), and Brister Freeman and his wife Fenda, former slaves who had occupied Walden Woods within the memory of the oldest Concord residents living in the 1840s.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the popularity of *Walden* since the 1890s, the sections invoking the history of these local New England slaves seem not to have registered with many readers. Elise Lemire, who grew up two miles from Walden Pond, finally read *Walden* in graduate school, discovered the former slaves of Walden Woods, and decided to write the history of slavery in “the nation’s birthplace” by exploring the lives of both the African Americans invoked by Thoreau and the Concord families who once owned them (9). The result is *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*, a rich and absorbing account that seems to confirm Thoreau’s notion that northern overseers were worse than southern ones and raises interesting questions about “self-emancipation.”

Lemire’s book is one of a growing number of efforts to excavate the history of slavery hiding in plain sight in the towns and cities of New England.

While many earlier studies foregrounded blacks, a number of scholars in the 1990s began to bring whites back into the story, reorienting their investigations toward the *engagement* of blacks and whites in slavery and freedom, and its ideological implications. While her title might suggest otherwise, Lemire's fascinating study focuses on such engagement.

Lemire has unearthed an astonishing amount of detailed information about more than a dozen African and African American slaves and the interconnected white families who built their fortunes and genteel reputations on their backs. The Concord slaveholders were part of a web of commercial and social relations and family alliances stretching across Massachusetts to London and the Caribbean, and these relations were conduits for acquiring and passing along slaves. She follows the life stories and interrelationships of the slaves in the context of the vicissitudes of their owners' fortunes, and then traces their subsequent struggles as free people of color in the enclave they created in Walden Woods.

Lemire has made a number of choices here, one stated in her introduction and others implicit in her approach, that bear mention. She has elected to use only first names for members of white slave-owning families and of Thoreau himself in order "not to continue to accord him [and them] more authority and respect" than the enslaved men and women, most of whom started life with only one name (14). This is an admirable notion that occasionally makes for some confusion, although a concluding section entitled "Dramatis Personae," which gives everyone, black and white, a last name and places slaves and slaveholders together in family groupings, is helpful (177–82).

Lemire's interpretation of the worldview of colonial New England slaveholders raises some questions. The overwhelming motivation for obtaining slaves appears to be an obsession with obtaining genteel status. This is especially evident in the first chapter, where she introduces two couples, John and Elizabeth Hoar and John and Abigail Cuming, whose parallel acquisition of slaves named Brister begins the long chain of family connections and land purchases that peoples Concord with slaveholders and slaves. Elizabeth acquires Brister for John to advance his career, just as the gift of another Brister from Chambers Russell to Timothy Wesson had advanced the latter's career. Wesson, in turn, gives his Brister to John Cuming, soon to marry his daughter Abigail, for the same reason: "Like the slave he received from his father-in-law, the desk John received from his father was also a status symbol" (21). Although Lemire does make clear that slaves performed the hard labor necessary to free their elite owners for more gentlemanly pursuits, she seems nonetheless to emphasize the status value of Concord slaves over their labor value, which threatens to

rejuvenate the old argument that rendered New England slavery economically unimportant.

*Black Walden* raises a second issue about colonial slaveholders' worldview that harks back to Thoreau. As Lemire sees them, "northern overseers" were indeed terrible people. In her telling, Concord slaveholders always acted out of the very basest motives; negative results were always the consequence of deliberation. Slaveholders "typically" underfed their child slaves (19); freeing slaves was always an act of "abandonment" (28, 108, 125, 128), and testamentary arrangements to keep them together were intended primarily to ensure "continued compliance" and white family "safety" (94). All slaves aggressively resisted their enslavement and seized their freedom unless they were coerced to do otherwise, and slaveholders purposefully redefined their freedom as a negative prize in any case; in the end there were only two kinds of former slaves—those who "had succeeded in getting themselves abandoned to their freedom" and those who "felt compelled to stay" (111). These stark characterizations threaten to leach the variety and complexity—and yes, humanity—out of the relations of slavery. Walter Johnson warns that historians' desire "to label slaveholders' behavior 'inhuman'" should not lead historians to misunderstand "slaveholders' goals . . . as a loosely intentioned or even flatly functionalist desire to 'dehumanize' the slaves," and that "any notion of 'agency' that conflates activity with 'resistance' is politically empty."<sup>2</sup> Although many slaveholders certainly acted toward their slaves in self-consciously cruel ways, many did not; while many slaves struggled mightily to emancipate themselves, others lacked Thoreau's internal "Wilberforce" and sought merely to survive or collaborated with their enslavers. It was the ideological environment of slavery as an institution—the set of assumptions that undergirded it—that poisoned the effects and the very meaning of both slaveholders' actions and slaves' responses; it did not fatally corrupt intention so much as it rendered it meaningless.

In sum, *Black Walden* is a beautifully written, fascinating, and challenging piece of historical detective work.

JOANNE POPE MELISH

#### NOTES

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 4.

2. Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 116.

JOANNE POPE MELISH, associate professor of history at the University of Kentucky, is the author of *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (1998).