

The Moors School and Moors Family: Confronting a Legacy of Slavery in Groton

By Joshua Vollmar, July 2021

Description: The Moors family was prominent in Groton in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and lent their name to one of the town's district schoolhouses, which sat on land now stewarded by the Groton Conservation Trust. However, two generations of the family enslaved humans. As the country grapples with racism, it is important to acknowledge and discuss local threads in the national history of racism and enslavement. Led by local historian Joshua Vollmar, this program will travel from The General Field to the Moors House and Moors School as we seek to bring light to this forgotten piece of Groton history.

Stop 1 (Meeting Place): General Field Parking Lot

We're here today to discuss the story of a school and a family and their ties to slavery in Colonial Groton. We have put together this program because it is important to be aware of and talk about these issues in our history, and we want to make sure that the meaning behind the name of the Moors School is clear.

Before we begin, we would first like to recognize that before English settlers claimed this land in 1655 as Groton Plantation, indigenous peoples made this their home. And while the idea of ownership was unknown to them, they tended and loved the land as much as we do. The Groton Conservation Trust is proud to continue the stewardship of this beautiful place.

It is appropriate that we are starting here at the General Field, because this land was part of the farm attached to the Moors family house from 1717 until 1959, and was farmed by members of the family from 1717 through 1849 -- we can also presume that the enslaved people held by the family toiled in these fields.

Before we get into the history of the family, it's useful to have a brief background of town history.

- When the town was founded in 1655, it was a border outpost -- the furthest northwest English settlement had reached at the time
- Early years defined by conflict between English settlers and Native Americans -- town is burned in 1676 during King Philip's War
- The last deaths in Groton as a result of one of these wars occurred in 1723 during Lovewell's or Dummer's War.
- Subsequently, with a sense of safety, the town grew in size and importance and was a leading town of the county for more than a century.
- The first infrastructure that the early settlers created after founding the town was roads. Roads in this area were among the first to be laid out. One, which comprised present day Farmers Row north of Groton School and Shirley Road south of there, was called the Lancaster Highway, as it led to Lancaster, which was initially Groton's closest neighbor. It was largely in place by 1662. It originally traveled diagonally over the field to the west. The southern part of Farmers Row was also laid out shortly after the town was founded. It was initially called the Nonacoicus Road, frequently shortened to Coicus, which was a Native American name for an area now in Ayer which was a large farm at the time.

The Moors family enters the picture in the late 1710s, when Abraham Moors Jr. moved to town. He was born in Andover in 1692, where his father, Abraham Sr., was an early settler. When he first moved to town, he was a weaver.

- In February of 1717, he purchased 160 acres in this area, on both sides of Farmers Row south of where we are now. It did not include a house, but it did include an "Old Saw Mill," which sat on James Brook. He purchased the property for £90.

- The pound, still used in Britain today, was the primary currency in the colony before the Revolution and even for several years after. £90 was a significant sum at the time.
 - A few months after purchasing the property, Abraham was married in November of 1717 to Elizabeth Gilson, with whom he would have ten children.
 - In the Colonial period, this was not out of the ordinary -- most families had many children.
 - Abraham likely started building a house soon after he purchased the property, and in all likelihood it was ready around the time of his marriage, or shortly thereafter.
- Transition: We are now going to head across the field and down Farmers Row to take a look at that house.

Stop 2: In front of the Moors House

Although remodeled in 1826, much of this structure is original to Abraham Moors, who, as we said, likely had it built in 1717. This includes the chimney, the window placement, and the type of siding and windows, if not the actual articles. Also, much of the interior finishes are original as well. The wings on both sides were added in the twentieth century.

- This would have been considered a large house, a “mansion house,” in the words of the time, when first completed, and it sat on one of the most productive farms in town. At this time, farming could still be quite profitable, meaning that Abraham Moors was quickly becoming one of the wealthiest members of the community.
- In addition to farming, Moors opened this house as an inn, which was commonly done at the time for an extra source of income. All that was required was to get a liquor license, which had to be renewed yearly. Moors was first granted a license in 1739, and was repeatedly granted them through the 1740s and 1750s.
- However, Moors’ rising prosperity allowed him to become a slaveholder. In the town vital records, the following is recorded: “Titus, a molato [mulatto] boy born of Zebinah [also spelled Zebina], a negro slave to Mr. Abraham Moors, March, 1751.” These are the two enslaved people -- Titus and Zebinah -- that we know were held by the Moors family.
- But who was the father of Titus? This question cannot be answered with certainty.
 - It could possibly be another enslaved person in Groton by the name of Bode (pronounced bo-day). This hypothesis is based on a notation in the Groton church marriage records from February 5, 1750, a little over a year before Titus was born, which simply states “Bode to By.” Both are noted as being residents of Groton. Could “By” be short for Zebinah? It depends on how that name is pronounced. It can be pronounced as Zeb-in-ah and Zeb-bye-nah, and the latter pronunciation makes By a possible nickname. Groton historian Dr. Green, writing in 1909, opined that he thought this was probable.
 - However, even if this was the case, it doesn’t guarantee that Bode was the father of Titus. Titus was described as a ‘mulatto,’ rather than a ‘negro,’ as Zebinah and Bode both were. This indicates his skin was lighter in color, which could possibly mean his father was white. While there is no further proof of it, there are innumerable stories of slaveholders fathering children, and that could possibly be the case here.
- To provide some more background, from a 1755 count of the enslaved people in the colony, we know that Groton had fourteen enslaved residents above the age of sixteen in that year, seven men and seven women. In all likelihood, Zebinah was one of the women included in this count, and Bode was certainly one of the seven men, but Titus was too young to be included.

- To put this number in context, here are some additional statistics from the count. Boston had the most enslaved residents by far with 989, but many towns had none. Generally, the farther away from the coast a community was, the less enslaved people resided there. For a town so far from the coast, fourteen is a large number of enslaved people. Only three towns further west in the state than Groton had more enslaved people (Springfield, Hadley, and Westfield). In Middlesex County, the town with the highest number was Cambridge, with 56. Groton was tied with Sudbury for the tenth highest number of enslaved residents in the county, out of 36 towns. However, of the towns that had more enslaved people, the closest was Concord, with 15, only one more. All the rest were closer to Boston, and even several close to Boston, like Newton, Watertown, Waltham, and Stoneham, had less. (see pg. 95-96:
<https://archive.org/details/collectionsmass35socigoog/page/n106/mode/2up>)
- We do not have any details about what life would have been like for Zebinah and Titus. What we can say is that they both would have almost certainly performed farm labor and house chores.

We will return to their story in a bit, but first some more information on the Moors family.

- Abraham Moors conveyed much of his property to his youngest son Joseph -- this was a form of ultimogeniture, where the youngest son received the majority of the inheritance. Although uncommon in the English speaking world generally, it happened frequently in the interior regions of Massachusetts -- the rationale was that the youngest son would have the least time to get set up in a profession before his father's death. Joseph Moors was therefore conveyed half-interest in this property in 1761, with the remainder to follow on his father's death.
- Abraham died in 1780, and his estate, which did not include any real estate as he had already distributed it to his children, was worth nearly £2,500 -- to put this in perspective, remember that he had purchased this property for £90 in 1717. Although there had been inflation since, it is still clear to see that he was very wealthy. He is buried in the Old Burying Ground, and the epitaph on his gravestone reads: "A mild, humane, and honest man, a peaceable and regular citizen; an affectionate and tender husband and parent; eminent for piety, industry, and frugality." Contrast this description with the fact that he was a slaveholder.

This property then passed fully to Joseph Moors. Born in 1738, he would be the wealthiest member of this family to live in Groton.

- He was a military man from an early age. He served in the French and Indian War, in the campaign of 1758, and was present at siege and capture of Louisbourg, Cape Breton, French Canada. He later commanded a company at the Battle of Bunker Hill, and on January 1, 1776, he was commissioned by the Continental Congress a Captain in Col. William Prescott's regiment. He went with the army to New York, but it is unknown how long he remained in the service. He subsequently attained the rank of Major in the militia, and was afterwards known by that title.
- Major Moors was not only prominent militarily, but also in local politics. He was a constable and selectman in Groton, and a Deputy Sheriff and Justice of the Peace for Middlesex County. He was also elected nine times as a Representative of Groton to the General Court, first in 1805 and last in 1814. Groton historian Caleb Butler, who knew him, writes "Such was the confidence placed in him by his fellow townsmen, for his integrity and abilities, that he was constantly in offices of trust, of a civil and municipal nature."
- Major Moors was married first to Lucy Stone, and after her death to Sarah Ward. He had eight children with his first wife, and nine more with his second, for a total of seventeen.

- Major Moors' wealth came mostly from the farming he engaged in on this property. His agricultural pursuits are described in a letter dated January 1, 1803, written by John Farrar, who was boarding in the house while teaching at District School No. 2, later called the Moors School, that we will discuss later. Farrar writes to his father: "I live with one of the first farmers in the County of Middlesex. Maj. Moors, the gentleman's name, keeps about forty head of cattle besides sheep, horses, turkeys, hogs, & c. & c. He sometimes raises seven or eight hundred bushels of rye, nearly as much corn, and between ten and fifteen thousand weight of hops. His hops this last season brought him in upwards of one thousand dollars but they cost him more labor to prepare for the market than to get his hay. Last year they were cut off together with large fields of rye, and apples in all probability sufficient for one hundred & fifty [barrels] of cyder."
- From this description, it is clear that Joseph Moors' most profitable product was hops. This was a trade both he and his son would engage in on this property, and was a mainstay of Groton farming until the temperance movement.

Now that we have reviewed these descriptions, it becomes clear that this property was the closest thing Groton ever had to a plantation. It was home to a slaveholding family of large wealth and prominence who profited from a cash crop: hops. Now to return to the story of the enslaved residents.

- Abraham Moors, in addition to conveying this property to Joseph, also conveyed Titus. There is one remarkable primary source document which sheds light on the story. An advertisement was posted by Joseph in *The Boston Gazette and Country Journal* of June 13, 1774, which reads, in part: "Ran away from the subscriber, Joseph Moors, ... a Molatto Man Servant, named Titus, about 20 Years of Age, of a middling Stature, wears short curl'd Hair, has one of his Fore-Teeth broke out ... Whoever will take up said Servant and confine him in any of his Majesty's [prisons], so that the Owner may have him again, shall have Ten Dollars Reward and all necessary Changes paid."
- Unfortunately, no further information on Titus has been found, and so this is the end of the story of the enslaved people held by the Moors family.
- Slavery in Massachusetts came to an end officially in 1783, when the Supreme Judicial Court decided that certain provisions in the State Constitution which was adopted in 1780 outlawed it. However, indentured servitude still existed, and there are many cases where slavery was carried on illegally or in all but name.

Major Joseph Moors died in 1820, and this property was left to his youngest son Benjamin, who continued to grow hops here, and was also prominent in the community, serving as a selectman and Master of St. Paul's Masonic Lodge of Groton.

- Benjamin also renovated this house in 1826. He likely added to the rear of the main block, and he certainly rebuilt the roof to the present hipped form, giving the building more of a Federal style character.
- He was later described by neighborhood chronicler Edward Adams Richardson as "a venerable old man who used to ride around in a yellow chaise."
- Benjamin retired from farming in 1849, selling this property and moving to the center of town. This brought an end to over 132 years of Moors family ownership of the property. He realized a large amount of money from the sale -- \$7,500, to be exact, one of the largest sums in any property transaction in Groton up to this point. The land he sold totaled 282 acres, and represented generations of acquisitions by the family.
- The place was purchased by Aaron Mason, a prosperous wheelwright and carriage maker. He purchased this property because he was a Millerite. The Millerites, named for the founder of the movement William Miller, were a group of Second Adventists who believed that the second coming of Christ and with it the end of the world was imminent. Miller claimed to have calculated the period in which this would occur, and eventually October 22, 1844 was chosen as the so-called Ascension day. Mason had held Millerite gatherings in his house in the center of town, but the movement was set back after

nothing happened on Ascension day. The Groton Millerites, led by Benjamin Hall, decided they needed to live near each other to carry on the movement, and so, in 1847, Hall asked them to move near his farm on Shirley Road. Mason was a little late in doing so, but that is why he moved here. Like most of the Millerites, Mason was temperate, and so, after purchasing this property, he promptly disposed of the hops, had the hops house moved away, cut up the hops poles for firewood, and “planted the fields with crops that did not enter into malted liquors.” He remained here until 1854.

Transition: We will now move to the site of the Moors School, to hear how its story intersects with that of the Moors family.

Stop 3: Site of the Moors School

This is the site of one of Groton’s twelve original district schoolhouses. Before we get to its history, we’ll have a brief overview of early education in Groton.

- The Massachusetts Bay Colony was the first colony to mandate public schools, doing so in 1642, thirteen years before the town was founded, and the year after the colony had become the first British North American colony to recognize slavery as a legal institution. The colony’s school law was later updated to require that towns over a certain population keep a grammar school, providing basic secondary education, as well as a primary school. One of the key goals of the grammar schools was to teach Latin, which was a prerequisite to admission at colleges in the early period. Initially, Harvard was the only college around, and its only program of study was for ministers. Young men would typically enter at age 14 and graduate at 18.
- Education did not initially take off in Groton, as it was very much on the frontier, and the topic is rarely mentioned in the early records.
- The town’s first schoolhouse was located where Legion Hall is now, in the former second meeting house, or church. After the town outgrew that meeting house, they had a new one built on the site of the present First Parish Church in 1715, and over the next couple years, remodeled the old one to be a schoolhouse.
- As the 18th century progressed, the town was indicted several times for not keeping a grammar school as required by law. In 1742, seven school locations were designated in town. Those in outlying sections were frequently held in people’s homes. Soon thereafter the town was informally divided into districts, which were called angles or squadrons at the time -- the number slowly grew over time.

By 1789, one of these districts was referred to as “Major Moors’ District,” and in the following year, it was noted that there were 66 children of school age within it. Also in 1790, it was voted to keep the town’s grammar school for two months of the year at the schoolhouse in this district.

- Thus we can see that the district had a schoolhouse by this early period, which was likely on this site, but not the same one that later stood here. This early schoolhouse, as well as the subsequent structure, stood on land that belonged to Joseph Moors. The triangle of land, about three acres, between Moors Road, Culver Street, and Farmers Row had been part of the Moors farm for a while. When schoolhouses were being built, the town did not purchase the land. Instead, the landowner allowed the town to build one there, and early deeds show that the landowner retained the ability to have the town remove the schoolhouse, although later the landowner only had rights to the land if the schoolhouse ceased to be used as such. Thus, Major Moors allowed the schoolhouse to be built on his land, tying it to the history of enslavement.

A new school law was passed by the state in 1789, which led to subsequent changes and formalizations in the town’s school districts.

- In 1792, the town asked all school districts to build a new schoolhouse at the town’s expense. While several were subsequently constructed, town meeting in March of 1793 excused District No. 2 from building a schoolhouse.

- There is no record of when the brick schoolhouse that later stood here was actually built, but it was voted that the selectmen should determine what repairs should be made to the existing structure in 1806. We know that the brick structure existed by 1817, as in that year, Joshua Green, father of Groton historian Samuel Green, taught here, and later often reminded his son of this fact. It is possible, and even likely considering that no other reference to the construction is found in the town records, that the “repairs” of 1806 became a rebuilding at the direction of the selectmen.
- Another significant change to the town school system occurred in 1805, when, following a number of false starts, the town’s school districts were finally formalized. The boundaries of the twelve districts then in existence were described, and each district was given a number. Majors Moors’ District became District No. 2.
- The schoolhouse of circa 1806 was largely remodeled in 1857. At that time, the roof, which was originally a low-pitched hipped roof, was replaced by the front-gabled form seen in pictures of the building, requiring new brickwork, which explains the expenditure for “brick for dist. No. 2” recorded in that year, as well as for “shingles for dist. No. 2.”

The school became disassociated with the Moors family when Benjamin Moors sold the farm in 1849.

- However, about twenty-five years later, the school would take the family’s name. In 1873, the town decided to replace the district numbers with names for the schoolhouses. Many names were taken from early ministers and residents, and the report at town meeting on April 7 on that year states, “No. 2 -- Moors School in honor of the name of a large family by that name who resided in that section of the town, and whose descendants continue to do so.”
- Thus, in 1873, the school took its final name -- the Moors School -- after the family generally, rather than any specific member.
- It should be noted that the family went from being slaveholders to fighting for abolition in three generations. John Farwell Moors, a son of Benjamin Moors, the last member of the family to own the Moors House, and the grandson and great-grandson of slaveholders, was a graduate of District School No. 2, Lawrence Academy, and Harvard. He became a Unitarian minister first in Deerfield, and later in Greenfield, and was an ardent abolitionist. Later called the “Bishop of Western Massachusetts,” Rev. Moors’ last position was Superintendent of Missionary Work for the American Unitarian Association of New England.

The Moors School, after 1915, was one of the last two one-room schoolhouses operating in Groton (other was Trowbridge or Rocky Hill School). Soon after that, these last two schools were also closed -- in 1955 it was said that the old Moors School had been closed for nearly forty years. It was not long afterward that the old building was taken down. Wealthy and blue-blooded Grotonians Stephen Webb Sabine and his wife Mary Lawrence Sabine conveyed the property to the Groton Conservation Trust in 1968. They had also owned the old Moors House, then called Pinecrest Orchards, but lived up the street at Westfield Farm.

Conclusion: History is never straightforward. However innocuous a name can seem, it can carry heavy baggage. The best thing that we can do is acknowledge and discuss this background, both good and bad. As we have seen, the Moors School existed in part because of the patronage of a multi-generational slaveholding family that owned the closest thing Groton ever had to a plantation. But while it the site bears their name, it did not until long after the end of slavery, and was named not for one member of the family, but the family as a whole, most of whom were not slaveholders and some of whom, such as Rev. John Farwell Moors, were abolitionists. As the site continues to bear the Moors name, I hope that this program has given you a deeper sense of what this name means, and that the next time you see the name of a historic site, you ask what’s behind it.