

Slavery and the Sprague Family

In June 2008, a correspondent, Mary Longstreth, sent me a simple request: "I am looking for confirmation of which Captain Sprague was responsible for the transport of Native Americans prisoners from King Philip's War as slaves." I was intrigued by the possibility of a largely unrecognized part of the Sprague family history, a portion not documented in any of the huge amount of Sprague family history documented in The Sprague Database. I replied that I have evidence that seven Spragues participated in King Philip's War, but only one, John Sprague, held the rank of Captain. I attached a report on Capt. John Sprague and pointed out that it made no mention of his having a role in transporting prisoners.

Mary had found the reference in *Mayflower* by Nathaniel Philbrick as follows:

As early as the fall of 1675, they had begun to sail from the coast of New England: the slave ships. It began in September when a Captain Sprague departed from Plymouth with 78 Indians. By July of 1676, Plymouth had formalized the process of removing potentially dangerous Native men and boys.... The English were not so sure what to do with Phillip's 9 year old son.... In the end, Phillip's son, like his mother before him, was shipped off as a slave. (Philbrick 345)

The premise of the book is that the action of shipping the Native Americans as slaves initiated slavery in America. It's an interesting discourse on King Philip's War and the relationship between Atherton and Captain Benjamin Church. This information only heightened my interest in the role of the Spragues in bringing slavery to New England and to what would become the United States. My eighth great-grandfather, John Sprague, Sr., was killed in King Philip's War, so my interest in understanding the reasons for the war and the changes that resulted from the war was only natural.

Jane Sanderman Mason is one whom I've frequently asked for help in solving some mystery pertaining to the Sprague family, so when the question of Capt. Sprague and the transport of Native American slaves was presented to me, I sought guidance from Jane. After some preliminary study, Jane wrote the following:

"I found this question so interesting that I spent part of the day at the library seeing what I could find. Regrettably, I did not find a definitive answer re Captain Sprague, but I can tell you what a prominent historian wrote in 1913. I have included all my references in case there is some Sprague researcher who wants to look further.

"I first checked the book that Mary Longstreth referred to, *Mayflower* by Philbrick. I was curious if the author had indicated where he located the Captain Sprague information. He did. On page 411 he writes in his 'Notes':

'Almon Lauber in *Indian Slavery in Colonial Times* writes of the departure of Captain Sprague from Plymouth with 178 slaves, as well as the law concerning the removal of all male Indians over fourteen years of age...'

"Philbrick listed many references discussing the removal of Indians but only this one for the Captain Sprague information.

"I was fortunate that my library had a reprinted copy of the Lauber book. [*Indian Slavery In Colonial Times Within The Present Limits Of The United States* by Almon Wheeler Lauber. New York: Columbia University, 1913. Reprinted by Corner House, 1970.] It is a chilling book. I skimmed thru reading mostly about the King Phillip's War, and even that exposure was grim.

"The book is heavily footnoted. Lauber writes extensively of the practice of capturing Indians, men, women and children, for use as slaves either in the colony or shipping them off to be sold. Captain Sprague is mentioned on page 125.

"The policy followed toward the Indians captured in this war was the same as that shown in the

Pequot War. The captives were either exported for sale in the European or West Indian slave markets or were retained in servitude in the colonies. In the beginning of the war, Captain Mosely captured eighty Indians, who were retained at Plymouth. In the following September [1675], one hundred and seventy-eight were put on board a vessel commanded by Captain Sprague, who sailed from Plymouth with them for Spain.

“From this I felt that Captain Sprague did not necessarily live in Plymouth but sailed from there. The footnote for this was: ‘Williamson, *The History of the State of Maine*, Vip 531 and Drake, *The Book of the Indians*, 9th ed. viii, p. 40.’

“These would be:

Williamson, William Durkee. *The History of the State of Maine: from its first discovery, A.D. 1602, to the Separation, A.D. 1820, inclusive*. Hallowell: Glazier, Masters & Co. 1832.

Drake, Samuel Gardner. *The Book of the Indians, or, Biography and History of the Indians of North America, from its first discovery to the year 1841*. 9th ed. Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey, 1845.

“My library had the Williamson book, and I checked the reference. No mention of Sprague, just detailed information relative to the practice of capturing and selling Indians as slaves. I could not locate the Drake book, but I have a hunch it is the same.

“I then started looking at every book dealing with those earliest colonial times in hope of finding something, and I had great luck. In the reference stacks there was the following book by Charles H. Lincoln who, according to the *New York Times*, was a Senior Fellow in American History and author/editor of many books dealing with the history of the colonies:
Lincoln, Charles H. *Narratives of the Indian Wars 1675-1699*. Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913. Reprint Barnes and Noble, 1959. 21-50.

S[altonstall], N[athaniel]. *The Present State of New-England with Respect to the Indian War*. 1675.

“The Present State Of New-England With Respect To The Indian War, By N. S., 1675.
[N. S. is presumed to stand for Nathaniel Saltonstall. There were at least eight tracts written and published 1675-1677 in Boston.]

“On page 30 Saltonstall writes:

"Captain Mosely being there, and plying about, found Eighty Indians, who surrendered themselves, and were secured in a House provided for them near Plimouth: Thereupon came to Boston, to know the Pleasure of the Authority about them, and in a Days Time returned with this Order; he should kill none that he took alive, but secure them in Order to a Transportation; Wherefore afterwards there were Shipt on board Captain Sprague an Hundred seventy eight Indians on the 28th of September, bound for Cales." [Cales is Cadoz, Spain]

“Footnote by Chas. Lincoln: ‘Probably Captain Richard Sprague of Charlestown, Massachusetts.’

“Captain Sprague is also mentioned on page 34 and page 40, but the references are to this same trip.

Mr. Lincoln does not state why he felt this was Richard Sprague of Charlestown, but he did have a great deal of knowledge of the time. Looking at a listing of his books on worldcat.org it is amazing how many have been reprinted in more recent years. I think one can at least give consideration to his

opinion. I am sure he was referring to Richard Sprague, I42555 on the Sprague Website, the son of immigrant Lt. Ralph Sprague.”

No additional work has been put into pursuing this interesting topic. It is obvious that studious research could add much to the topic of Capt. Sprague and the transport of Native American Slaves.

If you have read this and would like to know more, Jane Sanderman Mason recommends the following:

The best over-all book I found (that was well footnoted) was the Lauber book. Here are some of his chapter headings:

Enslavement by the Indians themselves.

Enslavement by the Spaniards.

Enslavement by the French.

The institution as practiced by the English.

i. numbers

ii. process of enslavement: warfare, kidnapping, trade, other.

I hope by making this paper available on the Sprague Website that others will be incited to do additional research and to add details to this paper. The enslavement of Native Americans is only one facet of this topic. Largely undocumented is the role that the Spragues played at a later time in the keeping of African-born slaves. Do you have evidence of slaves kept in the homes of your Sprague ancestors? Such information could be helpful to descendants of slaves researching their family lines. If you'd like to add to this topic, please contact the Sprague Project developer at REWeber@sprague-database.org and provide the information which I will progressively add to this report.