

From Basil Dorsey: From Slave to Citizen

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Basil Dorsey was a self-emancipated slave and teamster (a person who drove a team of draft animals, like an early truck driver) born in Libertytown, in Frederick County, Maryland. His father and mother, like Dorsey, were slaves of Sabrett Sollers, though Sollers himself is several times mentioned as Dorsey's father.



Nonotuck Street, Florence, Massachusetts. Dorsey purchased Lot #12 of Bensonville Village Lots in 1849 for \$25 and built the house we see today. Though some modifications have taken place the house retains many of its original features. The house is now on the National Register of Historic Places The nomination can be found

He married another slave by the name Louisa who may also have been a slave of Sollers. Dorsey, then known as Ephraim Costly, was promised his freedom upon the death of Sabrett Sollers on 17 July 1834. The settlement of the estate, however, provided for the sale of 18 of his 23 slaves. Sollers' son Thomas acquired Dorsey for \$300 and offered him his freedom for \$350. Dorsey appealed to Richard Coale to be his bondsman (a person who helps negotiate a person's freedom from jail or slavery) for that amount but when the price was raised by Sollers to \$500. Coale encouraged Dorsey to escape, taking his own freedom, which he did according to one account, on May 14, 1836.

After avoiding capture on a number of occasions he found himself in New York City. In New York he was introduced to the abolitionist Joshua Leavitt, editor of the anti-slavery journal *Evangelist*, and David Ruggles, secretary of the New York Vigilance Committee. Leavitt set Dorsey on a course to Northampton, Massachusetts.

In 1844 Dorsey moved with his family to the village later known as Florence, Massachusetts, three miles northwest of Northampton. The Northampton Association of Education and Industry had been established there in 1842 as a community of abolitionists and radical reformers of the stripe of William Lloyd Garrison. It was Garrison's brother-in-law, George W. Benson, a founder of the NAEI, who hired Dorsey as the teamster for the Bensonville Manufacturing Company. Sojourner Truth and David Ruggles were members of the Association and Frederick Douglass visited on several occasions. Ruggles founded the Northampton Watercure there in 1845 and died in 1849.

That year, Dorsey purchased Lot #12 of Bensonville Village Lots and built his first house. In 1850, as many as 35 African Americans, along with Dorsey, were living on what later became known as Nonotuck Street. Bensonville, as Florence was then known, with a population of around 600, was just under ten percent African American as of the 1850 federal census. Dorsey, age 40 is listed with his wife Cynthia,

age 19, their first child Louisa, age four months, and two children from Dorsey's first marriage, Charles and John. On 22 October 1850 one month after passage of the Fugitive Act, Dorsey, with nine other self-proclaimed fugitives from slavery, published a call for local residents to come to their aid and resist any effort to return them to the South. Local citizens were concerned that Dorsey was at risk in his travels as teamster and raised \$150 to purchase his freedom which was affected in May 1851, fifteen years after his escape.

Bensonville was renamed Florence in 1852. Bensonville Manufacturing became Greenville Manufacturing after George W. Benson's departure, but Dorsey remained as head teamster under its president J. P. Williston, a Northampton abolitionist. Basil Dorsey died in Florence on 15 February 1872.

This article appears in an expanded version in the African American National Biography online edition.

Further Reading:

Smedley, R. C., *History of the Underground Railroad in Chester County*, (1883).

Magill, Edward H., *Friends Intelligencer* 55, "The Underground Railroad," (1898).

Hampshire Gazette (Northampton, MA), April 2, 1867.

Narrative Writing Prompt:

For this question, you will write a narrative response based on the passage(s). Your writing should:

- **Use characters, settings, events, and other details from the passage(s).**
- **Use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.**

Based on "To the Citizens of Northampton" and "Basil Dorsey- From Slave to Citizen" write a reflection from the perspective of Basil Dorsey, after publishing the announcement, as he awaits the meeting at the Northampton Town Hall. Be sure to use what you know about the characters, settings, and events from **both** passages to develop your reflection.