

## Object Lesson: Pompe Stevens, Enslaved Artisan



At Christmastime in 1768, a slave named Cuffe Gibbs died in Newport, Rhode Island. He was buried in the Newport Common Burying Ground beneath an inconspicuous gravestone carved from dingy, low-quality slate (figs. 1, 1a). A casual visitor might never notice his monument, which is ordinary in size, shape, and iconography. It is competently executed, but notable only as a sturdy example of the conventions of New England stone carving from the middle of the eighteenth century.

And yet, it is a treasure. Or, rather, the key to a trove of treasures. Alongside the ordinary iconography, the carver etched an extraordinary epitaph:

This Stone was  
cut by Pompe  
Stevens in Memo  
ry of his brother  
Cuffe Gibbs, who  
died Decr. 27<sup>th</sup>. 1768,  
Aged 40 Years.

Pompe Stevens and Cuffe Gibbs were slaves, as were over a thousand other Newporters on the eve of the American Revolution. They were also brothers, a relationship obscured by paper documents, but preserved by Pompe Stevens's own hand. As a trained stone carver, Stevens was able to create an enduring monument to his brother and to himself. By emblazoning his own name across his brother's epitaph, Pompe Stevens claimed both his family and his craft. Stevens's work was a challenge to his contemporaries, prodding them to acknowledge black families that existed in fact, if not in law. It is no less a challenge to modern scholars, collectors, and curators. At a time when museums and other cultural institutions are devoting tremendous resources to making their collections more inclusive, Pompe Stevens's work offers a valuable starting point for reimagining early American decorative arts. Surviving objects like silver, furniture, and gravestones were rarely the work of lone geniuses working in isolation. Rather, they were commercial goods made in workshops where artisans and laborers with varying degrees of skill and freedom worked side by side. In every colony, from New Hampshire to Georgia, some of these skilled craftsmen were slaves. This historical reality complicates narratives that link artisanship with independence and juxtapose the purported modernity of Northern cities with the supposed backwardness of slavery. But it also provides a tremendous opportunity to collectors and curators willing to look at early American decorative arts with fresh eyes.



1. Gravestone cut by Pompe Stevens in memory of his brother, Cuffe Gibbs. Photograph courtesy of the author.



1a. "This Stone was cut by Pompe Stevens in Memory of his brother..." Rubbing by Sue Kelly and Anne Williams (photo No. 1240). Courtesy of the Farber Gravestone Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Any signed work by an African American artisan from the colonial era is a rare object. Skilled slaves, North and South, worked in nearly every craft, from building houses to stitching silk dresses, but the fruits of their labor are often unmarked or uncritically attributed to their masters. Some sculptures and ornaments have been recovered archaeologically at sites like the [African Burial Ground](#) in Manhattan, but scholars, museums, and private collectors hoping to tell the history of African American art have struggled to identify works by nameable artists that predate the Civil War. The few signed works that do exist have become highly coveted pieces. Heavy, earthenware jars inscribed with short poems by [potter Dave Drake](#) (c.1801-c.1870s) of Edgefield, South Carolina, sell for tens of thousands of dollars at auction and are exhibited in major art museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Furniture made by the free North Carolinian joiner Thomas Day (c.1801-c.1861) and vessels by free New York potter Thomas Commeraw (active c.1796-c.1819) are similarly sought after. These pieces are often classified as "folk art" or "rural art" and exhibited separately from "fine art" furniture and tableware.

The acquisition of pieces like Dave Drake's jars is a good step toward diversifying museum collections. But, in searching out previously unknown works, American art museums overlook a rich, untapped reserve of slave-made objects: their own collections of decorative arts.

The Cuffe Gibbs stone provides a useful lesson in recontextualizing Euro-American crafts as slave-made objects. As a conventional gravestone, formally indistinguishable from a thousand of its neighbors, the monument is hidden in plain sight. Without Pompe Stevens's explicit claim of authorship, gravestone scholars would have few qualms about numbering Cuffe Gibbs's stone among the

works of Pompe's owner, William Stevens. Some might note the slightly erratic alignment of the letters, but the stone's commonplace border and conventional winged effigy are utterly ordinary. Unsigned, it is just another product of William Stevens's workshop.

How many other slave-made objects survive, overlooked, in our museums and private collections? If slaves worked as skilled stonecutters and silversmiths, joiners and engravers, pewterers and jewelers, surely they made spoons, chairs, woodcuts, plates, and rings. A close look at Pompe Stevens's signed work can reveal a great deal about his training and the probable extent of his unsigned work. The implications for other decorative arts are clear. If Pompe Stevens's work is included in the larger body of work attributed to his master, the same is probably true of objects made by slaves trained in other Euro-American crafts.

Little is known about Pompe Stevens's life other than what can be inferred from his work. Given the long odds against families surviving the Middle Passage intact, he and his brother were probably born in Newport. Whether they arrived in Newport by ship or by birth, Pompe and Cuffe were separated at some point. Their different surnames derive from the paternalistic idea that slaves were junior members of their masters' households, not heads or members of their own families. Other gravestones in the Newport Common Burying Ground testify to the rhetorical impossibility of black families by memorializing "Flora Coggeshall, wife of Mark Tillinghast" or "Pompe Rogers Son of Prince Sanford." Stevens's young son, Princ[e], is buried next to Cuffe Gibbs, under an epitaph identifying him as the "Son of Pompe Stevens and Silva Gould." When he named their fraternal relationship on Cuffe Gibbs's gravestone, Pompe Stevens exposed the lie in their names. It is the only gravestone among thousands in the burying ground that defines an adult black man in terms of his relationship to a relative, rather than an owner.



2. "In Memory of Pompey [Lyndon] (a beloved Servant of Jonas Lyndon) who died Sept. 11, 1765. Aged 28 Mo. and 19 Days." Initialed as cut by P.S. Newport, Rhode Island, 1765. Rubbing by Sue Kelly and Anne Williams (photo No. 2087). Courtesy of the Farber Gravestone Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Pompe Stevens trod lightly on the page of history. Luckily, he left eloquent material evidence in the form of two signed gravestones—the Cuffe Gibbs stone (1768) and the Pompey Lyndon stone (1765) (fig. 2)—to fill in some of the gaps in the paper record. The stylistic evidence of his signed carvings indicates that he was trained and owned by William Stevens, rather than William's brother, John Stevens II. For example, the Pompey Lyndon stone uses design elements, like its thistle border, that were unique to William's shop. Other similarities are subtle, like the rounded base of the numeral 5 that approximates William's work rather than John's distinctive, open-bottom 5, or the sensual curve of the winged effigy's mouth, where John's mouths were always flat-bottomed. Vincent Luti, the author of an exhaustive study of the lettering styles and design elements of Newport's stone carvers, has determined that "the two stones cut by Pompey Stevens and signed are identical to the enormous body of work by William Stevens." What little documentary evidence we have supports the material evidence: in a 1774 census, William Stevens's household included four anonymous adult slaves, where John Stevens's household included only one.



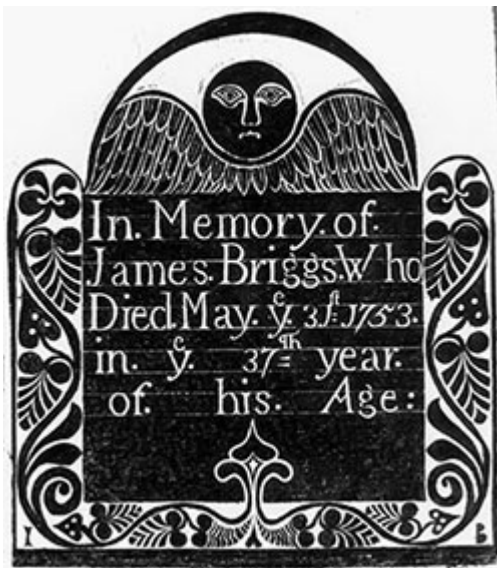
3. Gravestone of Phebe, the wife of Joseph Seabury, Little Compton, Rhode Island (1715). Photograph courtesy of the author.

John Stevens's lone slave was a man named Zingo. Some historians have avowed that "Pompe" is actually the "slave name" that Zingo Stevens abandoned after his emancipation in 1781, but there is little evidence to support this claim. While some black Newporters did go by dual names, the chronology of Zingo's supposed name change is implausible. Zingo appears as "Zingo" in several records written by both black and white authors as early as 1766, including the journal of his friend and fellow slave, Caesar Lyndon, the diary of Reverend Ezra Stiles, and, most importantly, the 1774 will in which John Stevens II set out the terms of Zingo's eventual emancipation. If Zingo was known by that name to both his pastor and his master while still a slave, it seems odd that he would call himself "Pompe" when he had the greatest freedom to do so: on the stone he carved for his brother in 1768. In the 1780s, Zingo Stevens joined the Free African Union Society, a fraternal organization that assiduously noted the dual names of other members, including "Mr. Ocrmar Mirycoo, or Newport Gardner," but always referred to Zingo Stevens by a single name. The story of Pompe changing his name to Zingo is satisfying to a modern audience hungry for African cultural survivals, but there is a simpler explanation that better fits the evidence. As was mentioned above, the 1774 census of Newport shows that John Stevens II owned one slave—Zingo Stevens, a stonemason whose possible skill as a carver is unproven—and William Stevens owned four, including the trained carver Pompe Stevens.

There should be little doubt that Pompe Stevens was a skilled artisan. When he claimed that he "cut" his signed stones, Stevens meant that he carved the delicate features, not that he hewed the stone from a larger block. In eighteenth-century New England, the skilled work of carving letters and detailed designs was called "cutting," while the task of preparing stone for carving was called "shaping" or "rubbing." White carvers in Newport charged two pence apiece for "cutting letters" in epitaphs and called themselves "STONE CUTTER[s]" in the advertisements they took out in the *Newport Mercury*. Several of the most impressive stones in the Newport Common Burying Ground are signed, "Cut by John Stevens, junr." or "cutt by J[ohn] Bull." The signatures

demonstrate the carvers' pride in their work while simultaneously advertising their skill to potential customers.

Pompe Stevens's two signed stones imply a vast body of unsigned work. The graceful, symmetrical curves of the floral borders and the delicate flourishes of the letters that adorn his signed pieces are the work of a competent craftsman who wielded a chisel with confidence and skill. Detailed stone carving is no easy task. For proof, look no further than the work of William Stevens's own father, John Stevens I. John, originally a mason, began carving gravestones around 1705. Over a decade into his career, he was still producing sketchy, linear designs that were scratched into the surface of his stones, rather than deeply carved (fig. 3). If Pompe Stevens did "cut" the Cuffe Gibbs stone, as he claimed, he was no novice. Even if he carved some parts of the signed stones, but not others, the quality of each individual element—the borders, the letters, and the winged soul effigy—displays the proficiency of a carver with years of training and practice.



4. Rubbing of the James Briggs gravestone, carved by John Bull (1753) (photo No. 3815). Courtesy of the Farber Gravestone Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Luckily, history provides an ideal comparison by which to measure Pompe Stevens' skill and training. Between 1747 and 1752, his master, William Stevens, taught a brilliant young apprentice named John Bull, who would grow up to be one of the most gifted carvers working anywhere in British North America. During his five-year apprenticeship (truncated when Bull ran away to sea at age 17), Bull learned to carve letters, borders, and winged effigies very similar to those found on Pompe Stevens's signed work. These years of training represented a substantial investment for William Stevens, who later sued his

young protégé for absconding just when he had learned enough to start earning his keep. Bull spent much of the next decade at sea, but he carved a few stones here and there. Like Pompe Stevens's signed stones, John Bull's early stones reproduce the basic stylistic elements common to the William Stevens shop, but the imagery is clumsy and the letters leaden (fig. 4). When Bull founded his own carving shop in 1764, he embarked on a wild career of innovation that eventually produced some of the most beautiful and ambitious stones in New England. His mature work is recognized among gravestone scholars for its fluid, painterly lines, exquisite detail, and fearless disregard for convention. Bull's genius as a carver is beyond dispute; the point here is that after five years of study under William Stevens's tutelage, this undeniably talented carver produced nothing that surpassed the Cuffe Gibbs stone in elegance or technique. Only after an additional decade of practice and experimentation as master of his own shop could Bull demonstrate such dazzling skill.



5. Collage showcasing details of several stones in Newport showing the work of William Stevens's workshop. Photograph courtesy of the author.

The quality of Pompe Stevens's signed work indicates that his training was at least as extensive as John Bull's. If so, William Stevens devoted substantial time and effort to teaching Pompe, presumably as an investment that would pay off over many years of forced labor in the stonecutting shop. There is little reason to suppose that Pompe Stevens spent most of his time cutting stones for black Newporters, who represented a small percentage of the overall market. Given the discrepancy between the wobbly letters and flawless border decorations of Cuffe Gibbs' stone, it is more likely that Pompe spent his days toiling away at the endless procession of leafy borders common to stones from the Stevens workshops (fig. 5). Unless his master squandered the asset of his skill, Pompe Stevens's work is present, unrecognized, on unsigned stones dedicated to blacks and whites alike.

William Stevens was a businessman, and he did not waste his investment. In the decades before the American Revolution, his shop was the most prolific stonecutting workshop in Newport, overshadowing the work of his older brother, John Stevens II. Like many of his fellow master craftsmen, William Stevens's investment in slave labor placed him in the top third of Newport slaveowners. About a third of all white householders in Newport owned slaves, but most of



these (67 percent) owned only one or two adults. Those who owned three or more adult slaves were generally wealthy merchants or master craftsmen like William Stevens or the famed furniture makers John and Edmund Townsend. It is impossible to know the exact skills of all slaves owned by artisans. Nevertheless, all artisan-owned slaves supported the productivity of their masters' shops, whether by feeding the workers, performing heavy labor, or making the final products themselves. A few, like Pompe Stevens, were artisans in their own right.

Many Newport slaves were engaged in heavy trades such as blacksmithing, sail making, and carpentry. Their labor was essential to the maritime industry that made Newport such an important cog in the machinery of Atlantic slavery. Others, like Pompe Stevens, practiced trades that transformed Newport's wealth into luxury goods. In 1749, Newport goldsmith Isaac Anthony advertised a reward of five pounds for the return of a runaway slave named Newport who was "by trade a Goldsmith." Colonial artisans used the terms "goldsmith" and "silversmith" interchangeably, but both designations were reserved for highly skilled workers. Four years later, the son of Newport goldsmith Samuel Vernon placed an advertisement in a Boston newspaper indicating that he wanted to sell an unnamed 35-year-old man, possibly the same Newport, who had "wrought at the Gold Smith's Trade ever since he was fourteen Years of Age." What objects might a trained goldsmith have made during a career that spanned at least 21 years? Spoons? Cups? Tankards? Mourning rings? Surely, someone who "wrought at" a trade for more than two decades made *something*. It's even possible that these works survive, identified as the work of Samuel Vernon or Isaac Anthony, in one of the many museum collections that include Newport silver.

Curators and scholars of decorative arts have long known that master artisans employed journeymen and short-term contractors called "jobbers" in their workshops. Yet it remains extremely rare for art museum catalogues and exhibits to identify the journeymen or jobbers who made or contributed to individual pieces. Even when the journeyman can be identified by name, objects are generally exhibited as the sole work of the master. In Boston, some immigrant silversmiths, like the Dutch journeyman William Rouse, worked for multiple shops, meaning that the impressive engravings on silver "by" makers like John Coney or Jeremiah Dummer are sometimes the work of a single journeyman's hand, even though the objects bear various masters' marks. Like other journeymen who had trained in Europe, Rouse was especially prized in the colonies because he brought the latest techniques and stylish patterns to America. Patricia E. Kane, author of one of the standard reference works on colonial American silver, has made a strong case for identifying Rouse's work, but exhibits of Coney's and Dummer's silver routinely omit any reference to Rouse, even when giving his work pride of place.



6. "The Prodigal Daughter Revived," Peter Fleet, woodcut, 1736. Courtesy Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Rona Schneider, M23577. Photograph: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Perhaps it is not urgent for museum visitors to know the names of the apprentices and journeymen who chiseled Renaissance sculpture and painted backgrounds and silk gowns for Georgian portraits. But, in the context of early American decorative arts, common collecting and curatorial practice leads to exhibits that badly misrepresent labor history. It is true that art museums are not history museums. Nevertheless, they do make historical arguments. When artisan-made objects are attributed to a single, exemplary craftsman, rather than to a workshop, exhibits cement the dubious connection between artisanship and political independence, rather than subverting it. In truth, not all American-made objects were crafted by free, self-supporting artisans, nor even by the wage-paid European journeymen they employed or the white apprentices bound to them by indenture. Some luxury goods were made by slaves.

Major collections of American silver at museums like the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Philadelphia Art Museum, and the Winterthur Museum in Delaware include many pieces attributed to master craftsmen who employed highly skilled slaves. Noted New York silversmith [Thomas Hammersley](#) owned a slave named Duke who worked "at the goldsmith's business" before he ran away in 1756. Duke was recaptured, but escaped again in 1764. He may have been the unnamed "NEGRO MAN ... a Silver-Smith by trade" sold in New York in September 1764. In Philadelphia, a 36-year-old man named Tom, "by trade a silversmith," escaped from master craftsman [William Ball](#) in 1778, seeking refuge with the British army. Ball valued Tom's labor enough to offer a reward of 100 dollars for his return. In 1770, Annapolis clockmaker William Faris advertised the sale of an equally valuable slave, who was "by trade a Silversmith, Jeweller and Lapidary," adding that "there is very few, if any

better workmen in America." Sometimes, artisans in various cities worked together to capture and detain the enslaved craftsmen who were so valuable to their shops. When 40-year-old John Frances, "by trade a goldsmith," escaped from [Ephraim Brasher](#)'s New York shop in 1784, advertisements in Philadelphia newspapers encouraged bounty hunters to deliver the fugitive slave to Brasher's fellow goldsmiths John Le Telier or Benjamin Halsted. None of these slaves' names appear in any museum catalogue, but all of their masters' do.

These enslaved craftsmen are known to history because their skills were described in notices of their escape or sale. Others remain unknown because, like Pompe Stevens, their names are absent from the paper record. Tax lists and probate records show that many white craftsmen owned slaves, but rarely include details of those slaves' specific skills. Without direct testimony, it is impossible to know whether the slaves owned by prominent Boston silversmiths like Samuel Minott, John Dixwell, Daniel Henschman, and John Edwards worked in their shops, either as trained craftsmen or as laborers. What is certain is that these slaves made their masters' work possible, whether by direct labor or by serving as assets that could be liquidated to pay debts and purchase raw materials.

Sometimes, tantalizing hints survive. In 1737, a slave named Cuffee escaped from Boston painter John Smibert while wearing "a pair of Leather Breeches stain'd with divers sorts of Paints." The surviving evidence does not allow us to call Cuffee a painter. Perhaps he scrubbed floors or mixed pigments or delivered his master's portraits to elite clients around Boston. Perhaps he painted, but we will probably never know. The paint that made it onto John Smibert's canvases is on view museum galleries, but the paint on Cuffee's pants is long gone.

Not every enslaved artisan toiled in obscurity. In 1773, Boston newspapers carried advertisements for the work of Scipio Moorhead, an enslaved portrait painter of "extraordinary genius" who "takes Faces at the lowest Rates." Phillis Wheatley honored Moorhead in her poem, "To S.M., A Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works" (1773):

How did these prospects give my soul delight,  
A new creation rushing on my sight!  
... Still may the painter's and the poet's fire,  
To aid thy pencil and thy verse conspire!

Moorhead was neither the first nor the only visual artist among Boston's slaves. Peter Fleet, a slave owned by prosperous printer Thomas Fleet, was an experienced woodcut illustrator. According to Isaiah Thomas, a fellow printer (and later founder of the American Antiquarian Society), Peter Fleet cut "all the pictures which decorated the ballads and small books of his master." Fleet even signed one of his illustrations, carving his initials into the frontispiece of a chapbook called *The Prodigal Daughter* (1742) (fig. 6).

Collections of American ephemera preserve many other woodcuts by Peter Fleet, but their catalogues attribute most of his work to Thomas Fleet. A similar fate has befallen the hollow-cut silhouettes made by Moses Williams, a slave owned by the famed Philadelphia artist Charles Willson Peale. Williams's silhouettes were popular souvenirs of Peale's Philadelphia Museum, generating so much revenue that Peale rewarded Williams by freeing him a year earlier than required by Pennsylvania law. Some museums, like the Philadelphia Museum of Art, have corrected their catalogues to attribute these silhouettes to Williams, but most have not.

The challenge posed by artists and artisans like Pompe Stevens, Peter Fleet, and Moses Williams is not merely a matter of correcting museum catalogues. It requires a fundamental re-imagining of the aesthetics of slave-made objects. When museums in Northern cities display Dave Drake's clay jars amid collections that otherwise specialize in the decorative arts of Boston, New York, or Philadelphia, they heighten visitors' preconceived understanding of American slavery as rural, agrarian, and Southern. Why not display Peter Fleet's woodcuts or Moses Williams's silhouettes? Or, better yet, juxtapose Dave Drake's jars with salvers attributed to Thomas Hammersley or spoons supposedly made by Isaac Anthony? Such an exhibit would spur conversations about artisanal attribution, the ubiquity of slavery in the urban North during the colonial era, and the recurring figure of the virtuous, independent craftsman in American political and artistic movements.

Few American institutions want to find slaves in their attics. Projects like Brown University's [Committee on Slavery and Justice](#) are rare, and often meet with resistance from donors or alumni. Ideally, cultural institutions in Northern cities should see new research on enslaved craftsmen as an opportunity to reinterpret existing collections, rather than as an indictment. Instead of diversifying their collections by looking outward, they should look inward. In doing so, they may find early African American art at the center, rather than the margins.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thanks to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Early America Workshop at Harvard, and to Gloria McCahon Whiting, whose pioneering work on the life and work of Peter Fleet, woodcut illustrator, has informed and enriched my own research.

## **Further Reading**

For an in-depth exploration of Newport's gravestones and their carvers, see Vincent Luti, *Mallet and Chisel: Gravestone Carvers of Newport, Rhode Island in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Boston, 2002). Luti's biographies of the Newport carvers have been indispensable to my work. Ann and Dickran Tashjian investigate the gravestones of black Newporters in their essay, "The Afro-American Section of Newport, Rhode Island's Common Burying Ground" in *Cemeteries & Gravemarkers:*

*Voices of American Culture*, edited by Richard E. Meyer (Logan, Utah, 1992). For a broader history of racial identity and acculturation in the Northern colonies, see John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore, 2003). In the realm of art history, Patricia E. Kane's *Colonial Massachusetts Silversmiths and Jewelers* (New Haven, Conn., 1998) provides an excellent introduction to early American silver, particularly in its introductory essays. Celeste-Marie Bernier's *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008) offers useful suggestions for expanding the definition of African American art. See also Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle, 2006) for a discussion of African American visual artists (both enslaved and free) in the early republic.

References to enslaved artisans can be found in many early American newspapers. Quotations in this article come from the *Boston Post Boy* (Feb. 6, 1749), the *Boston Evening Post* (May 7, 1753), the *New York Mercury*, (Aug. 30, 1756), the *Pennsylvania Packet* (Sept. 8, 1778; 5/4/1784), the *Pennsylvania Journal* (July 5, 1770), the *New England Weekly Journal* (Oct. 18, 1737), and *Boston News-Letter* (March 25, 1773). Isaiah Thomas's recollections of Peter Fleet and his work can be found in Thomas's *A History of Printing in America* (1810).

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