

## CHAPTER ONE

## Squire Cuming

From Black Walden  
by Elise Lemire

IN THE TOWN OF LINCOLN, much of which was a part of Concord until 1754, a story has been passed down through the generations about a local white woman who, shortly before Lincoln's incorporation, journeyed to Cambridge to sell produce from her husband's farm and came home with something besides currency in her saddlebags. Although little is said in the story about anyone besides the local woman, who told her descendants only what she herself endured, the details indicate that the events of that day most likely began in one of the many lavish mansion houses that formed a distinct Cambridge neighborhood along Brattle Street. Surrounded by elegant gardens, these homes were comprised of large rooms appointed with goods from around the globe. Here was where wealthy merchants, lawyers, and owners of West Indian plantations enjoyed their fine mahogany furniture, looking glasses, and Turkish carpets, while their every need was attended to by slaves bustling to and fro.<sup>1</sup>

One of the women enslaved in Cambridge, a new mother, had recently grown anxious. Her baby boy was beginning to reach for solid food and no longer needed her breast to thrive. She knew her master was aware that her child would soon be weaned and that it was only a matter of time before he determined to give away the child or sell him. Already a well-established gentleman, her master did not need to raise an additional slave who, in the years before he could contribute to the immense job of running a large estate, would distract his mother and take up precious space in the already crowded garret. Aspirants to the rank of gentleman, in contrast, would be eager to invest in a more prosperous future by purchasing a slave child, they being less expensive than their adult counterparts, or by accepting one as a gift. Once the boy was sufficiently grown,

he could be put to work farming or performing other tasks that would free his new owner to leave his fields and pursue professional or civic goals, such as a prestigious position in town or county government, or better yet a Crown appointment. At a time when only the wealthiest, most educated men were thought fit to govern, owning a slave was a sign that his owner was able to invest his energy in other activities besides his own self-sufficiency. It was thus entirely likely the slave mother would never see her son again. The same ambition that led a man to buy or accept her slave child might very well lead him to move far away. Britain's empire was a vast one and its greatest opportunities required its population to be mobile. Not a few slave women chose infanticide over the inevitable separation from their children.<sup>2</sup>

After what must have been many sleepless hours pondering these realities, the slave mother rose from her pallet before dawn. Stopping only to gather a few articles of clothing, she took her son in her arms and quietly left the house. She made her way to the road that ran westward to Watertown, Concord, and beyond, alongside of which impoverished people were allowed to squat in makeshift huts. Leaving her son inside one of these tiny dwellings, she scanned the travelers coming into town. At this time of day, farmers from the surrounding countryside were en route to the Cambridge market, where the town's wealthy residents could be counted on to purchase their produce. She did not have to wait long before her eyes alighted on the young white woman of Lincoln lore riding into town on a horse weighted down with panniers and baskets filled with produce for sale. The woman appeared to be experienced caring for young children, having with her a girl around the age of two. She also appeared to be well off. As the slave mother knew, few in colonial Massachusetts were able to afford a horse. The story goes that the slave mother stepped boldly into the road and "begged" the white mother on horseback to "take her baby for she feared that if she kept him with her, he would be sold as a slave."

According to her descendants, Elizabeth Hoar stopped when she heard the slave mother's plea and considered the offer seriously. She and her young daughter Sarah, Elizabeth's first child, lived in precisely the circumstances the slave mother seems to have anticipated. John Hoar, Elizabeth's husband, owned a good deal of land fifteen miles west of Cambridge as well as a large house he and his wife hoped to fill with children. But concerned it would be difficult if not impossible to carry another child when her panniers and saddlebags were

already full, she informed the slave mother she would take the child on her return trip if the slave mother had not found someone else to take him in the meantime. Even as the slave mother knew she would pay dearly for her absence from her master's house, she apparently waited in the hut by the road for the hours to pass. Finally, in the afternoon, she began to watch for Elizabeth's return. Again, she stepped into the road, this time with her son and his small bundle of clothes in her arms. Elizabeth helped tuck the child into one of the now empty saddlebags, mounted her horse, and turned toward home. Years later, she would recall how she obliged the slave mother by making "a most difficult decision . . . on the spur of the moment." The story concludes by informing us that the boy, who "spent the rest of his life" with the Hoar family, "was the playmate of the Hoar children."

But rather than adopt the young boy into their family, as the story implies, John and Elizabeth Hoar were careful to give the boy a name that made clear he was their property before he was a person. They gave him only a first name, which effectively excluded him from both their family and civil society, and they chose it from the four main categories of slave names used in New England: place names, classical names, biblical slave names, and diminutive forms of these and common English names. Names drawn from these categories were intended to advertise a slave owner's values and characteristics, whether his classical education, his religiosity, or his cosmopolitanism. Popular place names, including London, Cuba, and Boston, were usually major ports in England or its colonies and thereby made clear an owner's intimate knowledge of the empire. The name the Hoars settled on was one of the more popular slave names in Massachusetts. Brister was a diminutive form of Bristol, England's gateway to Africa and the West Indies and its largest slave port. A port in Rhode Island had already been named after Bristol, England, in the hopes of garnering similar riches and had since become a major slave port itself.<sup>3</sup>

When the Hoars acquired and named Brister, John Hoar, for all his property, was not at the top of colonial society. Having to devote all his time to farming, John was not able to pursue the prestigious civic posts that cemented a man's ranking among the region's gentlemen. If the story about John's wife and the slave mother is essentially true, Elizabeth must have thought about how frustrating John's position was for him as she looked down at the slave woman pleading with her. No doubt she thought too about all the slavehold-

ers she knew and the power and prestige they enjoyed. Virtually all of the slaveholders in the Concord area and beyond had a title, whether Reverend, Doctor, Colonel, or Captain, which signaled they had a profession or were a military officer. Men freed from farm labor were more likely to earn these honorifics. And men with titles were the most likely to be elected by their townsmen to serve in local government or be appointed by the Crown to the General Assembly or to serve as justices of the peace, the latter of which earned them the particularly coveted title of Squire. Elizabeth's formerly untitled neighbor Timothy Wesson had recently accepted the gift of a slave child from Concord's most esteemed landowner, Squire Chambers Russell, whose 275-acre estate was one of Concord's largest. Indeed, if Elizabeth considered the slave mother's offer as dispassionately as her family later recalled, that was undoubtedly because she was accustomed to seeing enslaved children bought and sold or given away. After becoming a slave owner, Timothy Wesson garnered town appointments and began to be referred to as Mr. Wesson, an honorific bestowed only on those men who were not justices of the peace but who were considered local leaders all the same. Elizabeth Hoar was undoubtedly tempted to take the slave mother's child because she wanted the same status or better for her husband and she knew a slave was the means to get there. The slave boy Timothy Wesson had received from Squire Russell was himself named Brister, and the Hoars clearly hoped that in emulating Mr. Wesson on this front their fortunes would rise in the same way his had.<sup>4</sup>

Those in Lincoln who passed down the story of little Brister's arrival in Lincoln wanted to believe that slavery was not so much enforced servitude as a form of adoption. After slavery ended in Massachusetts and particularly during the Civil War period when Massachusetts fought to abolish slavery, it was easier to imagine that Brister was the Hoars' "playmate" rather than a slave torn from his mother to serve John and Elizabeth Hoar's ambition. And thus over time the story evolved into one about two mothers conferring by the road as to how to make the best of a bad situation. Of course, Brister's mother would have known from the beginning that the Hoars would take her son to be their slave, but this must have seemed a better alternative to her than allowing her master to sell or give her son away to someone who might leave the area, if in fact she did manage to give her son to the Hoars. With her son enslaved within a day's walk of Cambridge, she could at least hope to get word

of him from other slaves in the area and perhaps even visit him if her master did not sell her away on account of what would have been considered reckless disregard for his property.