

## **Past the Pamphlet: A Fictional Exploration of the Life of Phebe Ann Jacobs**

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My summer project was researching the life of Phebe Jacobs and beginning a novel that explores the life of Phebe Jacobs. Jacobs was a woman who was born into slavery in 1785. Jacobs was given to the family of John Wheelock, the founder and first president of Dartmouth college. Jacobs grew up with Wheelock's daughter, Marie. In 1812 Marie married William Allen, who went on to become the president of Bowdoin, and Jacobs joined the Allen family with Marie. Jacobs was freed sometime between 1812 and 1820, when Allen assumed the presidency of Bowdoin college. Jacobs moved to Brunswick with the Allen family in 1820 and worked as a domestic servant in their household. After Marie's unexpected death in 1828, Jacobs stayed on with the Allen family for four more years before leaving in 1834 because of a rift between her and William Allen's second wife, Sarah. After leaving the Allen family Jacobs lived independently in a small cabin near campus. Phebe earned a living doing laundry and ironing for Bowdoin students. She died in 1850 at the age of 64.

I began my project by reading as much information on the life of Phebe Jacobs as I could find and taking careful notes. Although there is not a lot of information on Jacob's life recorded, Bowdoin Special Collections has many of the sources that do exist. I was able to read these, some of them online and some in-person at Special Collections during the first few weeks of my project. I also did research into the life of various people that were adjacent to the life of Phebe Jacobs and I thought could play a role in my novel. This included people like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Franklin Pierce who were all students at Bowdoin while Jacob's was working in the Allen family, Phoebe Upham who was the wife of a Bowdoin professor and wrote a pamphlet on Jacob's life in the 1850s after Jacob's death, and Harriet Beecher Stowe who reportedly based her character Tom from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in part on Upham's story of Jacob's life. These initial research queries turned up new stories to research such as the life of pastor Adams who was the pastor at First Parish Church where Jacob's attended and his wife Sarah who became a close friend of Phebe's.

After having a solid foundation of research I began the writing portion. I chose to set my novel on the modern day Bowdoin campus and have it tell the story of a Bowdoin student who is researching the life of Jacobs. The developments and frustrations of the modern day characters and the historical characters are both a part of the novel. I sent my writing to my faculty mentor, Brock Clarke, every few weeks during the second half of the summer who would send me feedback. Along with my historical research and writing, I read a number of novels that were either related to my subject matter or were in styles that I was hoping to draw inspiration from. I started by reading *Possession* by A.S. Byatt which is a novel about a man who is researching two historical poets and is told in a fascinating parallel structure of contemporary story and historical story. I also read *Pym* by Mat Johnson and *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty. Both these novels use satire to explore issues of race and history. Finally, I read *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov which uses satire to explore questions of history and religion. Along with my independent work, I met weekly with two other Summer Fiction Research Fellows, Mei Bock and Carolina Weatherall, to talk about our writing and reading. I did not complete the entire novel over the summer but I am hoping to turn it into an honors project and complete it over the course of my senior year.

**Faculty Mentor: Brock Clarke**

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